

Barriers to Escaping Poverty: A Qualitative Analysis

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Poverty rates in the United States rose from 11.7% in 2001 to 12.1% of the current population in 2002; in 2002, 34.6 million Americans were below the standard poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). According to previous research, many of those who are living in poverty or are unemployed would prefer to work rather than rely on state and government benefits (Halter, 1996; Taylor, 2001). Although earning money through work is obviously an important consequence of employment, it certainly is not the only benefit; community psychologists (e.g., Klein & D'Aunno, 1986) have also noted that it is often through the employment setting that people derive a positive sense of self and are able to meet others with similar values and beliefs. Many low-income individuals believe they will increase their quality of life through obtaining jobs (Jean, Tempier, Mercier, & Leouffre, 1998).

One of the key problems experienced by low income persons is that it is often difficult to find employment, and this is not a new problem; many of the barriers that impoverished people face today are similar to those faced 20 years ago. The most frequently reported barriers to employment have been lack of education and job training, lack of transportation, and lack of childcare services (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Halter, 1996; Miller & Oetting, 1977; Popkin, 1990; Taylor, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceived barriers to employment, self-sufficiency, and life quality among low-income individuals in a small city in the Intermountain West. It was hypothesized that, consistent with the findings of other researchers, lack of education, job training, and transportation, and childcare would be the most frequently reported barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, as well as high life quality, among the individuals in our sample.

## Method

Community researchers from an Intermountain West university, working in conjunction with staff of a two-county community action agency, collected data through a survey distributed to homeless and housed poor persons who had utilized one or more of the agency's services. The survey's primary objective was to evaluate the agency's programs and personnel. The secondary purpose was to gather information regarding the experience of living in poverty. By investigating the barriers that impoverished persons felt influenced their ability to gain employment, self-sufficiency, and a better quality of life, it was hoped that recommendations could be made to both the agency and policy makers to improve the aid to those living in poverty. Fifty-four respondents completed the anonymous surveys, which were either collected immediately by the researchers or were placed in a sealed box at the agency for later retrieval. Of the respondents who completed the demographic items on the survey, approximately 57% were women, and 97% reported being White. The median age of the respondents was 47 years. Nearly half of the respondents who completed an item regarding annual household income reported an annual income of less than \$6,000, and over 80% reported annual incomes of less than \$10,000.

## Results

Three open-ended questions on the survey asked the respondents to list the barriers they perceived to gaining employment, self-sufficiency, and a better quality of life, respectively. The written answers were subjected to a content analysis procedure to isolate common themes among the responses. Regarding perceived barriers to employment, we found the four most common themes were: 1) lack of job training and work-related skills; 2) lack of transportation; 3) lack of available jobs; and 4) overall attitudes (see Table 1). Regarding perceived barriers to self-sufficiency, we found the three most common themes to be: 1) lack of good jobs; 2) lack of transportation; and 3) lack of quality job training (see Table 2). Regarding perceived barriers to a

quality life, we found the three most common themes to be: 1) lack of good jobs; 2) lack of affordable living accommodations; and 3) lack of affordable health care for the respondent or his or her family (see Table 3).

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated perceived barriers to employment, self-sufficiency, and life quality in low-income residents of a small city. We expected that a lack of education, job training, transportation, and childcare would be the most frequently reported barriers to attaining these goals. Each of these expectations was confirmed, with the exception of lack of childcare, which was mentioned by only one respondent. Lack of good jobs was also found to be a barrier, both to attaining self-sufficiency and a quality life.

Lack of job training emerged as the most commonly reported barrier to employment and the third-most commonly reported barrier to self-sufficiency. Clearly, focusing on job training and education appears important in the target area. In the state where this research was conducted, over 10% of the adult population has been reported to have no high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This result is troubling, and suggests that more emphasis on job training and education may be needed to help eligible workers to be competitive in a currently depressed economy where job competition is fierce.

Transportation also emerged as an important barrier, to both employment and self-sufficiency. Although this finding, like other findings, is similar to those reported by other researchers (Halter, 1996; Kalil, Born, Kunz, & Caudill, 2001; Miller, & Oetting, 1977; Taylor, 2001), it is perhaps not surprising in the local area where the research was conducted. According to a survey conducted for the transportation department in the target state (Elway Research, Inc., 2003), nearly three in four respondents reported that a member of their household commutes to work, and the average commute was over 35 miles roundtrip. Many poor persons, who cannot

afford transportation to commute to more distant jobs, immediately become ineligible to compete for a number of jobs in the local area.

We were surprised to find that lack of childcare was not a perceived barrier to employment, self-sufficiency, or life quality in our sample. Perhaps this difference between the results of our study and the results of other studies on the same topics was found because many studies on impoverished persons has focused directly on women generally and on single mothers in particular, and our sample included men as well as women. It is also possible that childcare is more available and/or affordable in the area in which the research was conducted, compared to the settings for other studies.

Our findings suggest that if local service providers and public policymakers are truly interested in helping poor persons access employment and become self-sufficient, there are avenues that can be taken. The poor persons in our sample clearly felt that the provision of job training and transportation would help them to find employment and to become self-sufficient. They also felt that there are relatively few quality, available jobs (addressing this problem is more complex, and may require stronger efforts to lure manufacturing and other non-service related jobs to the target area). Finally, if service providers and policymakers wish to help improve the life quality of local poor persons, it would seem advantageous to not only attempt to lure quality jobs to the area, but also to address a perceived lack of affordable housing and health care. These efforts would likely help the currently poor respondents become happier, healthier, more productive members of society.

## References

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*Barriers to employment: Most common themes*

Barrier	Percentage Making Response
Lack of job training/skills	28%
Lack of transportation	28%
Lack of available jobs	17%
Overall attitudes	14%

*Note.* Percentages reported are valid percentages, and are calculated out of the number of respondents who completed the item.

Table 2

*Barriers to self-sufficiency: Most common themes*

Barrier	Percentage Making Response
Lack of good jobs	83%
Lack of transportation	50%
Lack of quality job training	28%

*Note.* Percentages reported are valid percentages, and are calculated out of the number of respondents who completed the item.

Table 3

*Barriers to life quality: Most common themes*

Barrier	Percentage Making Response
Lack of good jobs	56%
Lack of affordable living accommodations	28%
Lack of affordable health care for self/family	20%

*Note.* Percentages reported are valid percentages, and are calculated out of the number of respondents who completed the item.