

The SAGE Encyclopedia of World Poverty

Nonworking Poor

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Nonworking Poor

In general terms, the nonworking poor are people who are not actively working or engaged in a specific labor activity. There are several attributes that characterize the nonworking poor, [p. 1161 ↓] such as low income, which is usually below the poverty line, or having a household with dependents in which the combined family income is not sufficient to lift the members from their current economic state. The lack of economic activity or participation in the job market draws the thin line that differentiates the nonworking poor from the working poor. Several theories try to determine the social forces and economic conditions that shape the life chances of the nonworking poor, but more nuanced discourses continue to emerge as variations in life conditions and society in general continue to influence how these people live, survive, and live with and in poverty.

The condition of the nonworking poor is a social reality that confronts both the developed world and the developing nations. According to Lawrence Mead, the state of Massachusetts had the lowest unemployment rate in the United States, with unemployment falling to less than 3 percent in the 1980s; however, the population of nonworking adults in the state rose from 10 to 20 million, and these people remained poor over a considerable period of time. This social problem was directly proportional to the increase in the application for welfare benefits from the government. Similarly, in upstate New York, then Senator Daniel Moynihan identified 64,000 adults living on welfare in 1988, a major increase from the 318,000 people on welfare in the 1970s. This implies that the increase in welfare recipients is almost always a direct result of the increase in the number of nonworking poor. Why has this problem become perennial despite the creation of jobs and services in a globalized world order?

Two Main Themes

While several theories try to characterize the conditions of the nonworking poor, two main themes recur throughout the different discourses and debates. Most theories offer

structuralist explanations that point to the inefficiency of structures and institutions. Welfare dependency theories point to the unsystematic and ineffective use of benefits that results in the emergence of people who have become constant recipients of aid in the guise of unemployment. Other explanations are derived from the economic view that a government chooses to adopt. Liberal policies cite barriers that nonworking poor encounter in the job market, while conservative groups look at the indulgence of welfare benefits that result in the rising percentage of the nonworking poor.

While society is, at most times, often identified as the propagator of both development and poverty, individualist theories tend to underscore the role of choice in a person's poverty. Family conditions, neighborhood culture, and the belief in the inevitability of a predestined choice of destitution are factors that propagate the "helplessness" attitude. According to Mead, the nonworking poor's passivity in obtaining work and their psychic inner barriers contribute to the "culture of poverty," which seems to imply that it is not the absence of jobs or opportunities that contributes to their condition but their character and disposition. According to William Julius Wilson, the American society tends to attribute poverty to individualistic explanations more than structural factors. For example, among ghetto youth, it is their propensity to seek easier means of getting money that renders them susceptible to collecting welfare benefits instead of actively seeking a job. Wilson also found that the perceptions of Americans toward poverty and work contrast with the widely accepted beliefs in Europe. Based on a similar survey, two-thirds of Europeans associated poverty with socially driven factors, and only 17 percent felt that poverty is due to the individual's character or disposition, such as laziness or lack of willpower.

The existence of the nonworking poor in a society poses a detriment to the effectiveness of any social policy. Despite the explanations offered by many theories, it is still difficult to rely on one school of thought or a specific perspective alone. The phenomenon of poverty and unemployment is characterized by an interplay of factors that are not isolated and do not come from one common cause. There is difficulty in precisely determining the real reasons behind unemployment or "not working" at the moment. Some nonworking poor attribute their condition to the government and the institutions that are expected to create jobs and opportunities; on the other hand, some of them admit that they are partly to blame for not actively seeking jobs or taking the

time to look for one. As work becomes more specialized and degree-driven, most nonworking poor people struggle to find jobs that fit their profiles and capacities.

[p. 1162 ↓] The evolution of economies around the world is a strong factor in employment. As more countries aim to be knowledge economies, educational requisites, professional certification, and skills development have become norms for entry to most jobs. The poor are the most affected, as they cannot compete with others for high-paying jobs. Even if they possess the minimum requirements, they remain poor because of the kind of jobs they are capable or entitled to have; thus, their social mobility is affected.

According to Marlene Kim, the working poor remain poor despite having worked for 52 weeks out of the year and 40 hours per week simply because their wages are too low. In some places, inefficient wage-setting and taxation and the demand for higher educational attainment in the job market might result in the inevitable conversion of the working poor to the nonworking poor as their salaries cannot cope with the rising price of commodities, reinforced by the high requirements for jobs they are limited to handle.

The case of the nonworking poor is a daunting problem that directly challenges social policy. How should governments address the problem of unemployment of the able and capable poor? How should welfare benefits be allocated so as not to encourage dependency among the nonworking poor? Job creation, welfare benefits provision, higher minimum wages, and poverty reduction strategies are a few of the many social reforms and policies that have been in place to effect change in the general situation of the poor. With the nonworking poor, however, the first strategic move is to push them to get into the job market and become part of the labor force.

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See Also: Basic Income; Destitution; Employment; Nonincome Poverty; Poverty, Culture of; Structural Dependency; Unemployment; Welfare Dependence; Working Poor.

Further Readings

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