

ADVOCATE INTERVIEWS

Findings and Analysis

During March 2014, I conducted one-on-one conversations with a host of CCC stakeholders including Board Members, staff and key partners. Each of these interviews delved into people's unconscious assumptions around the nature of, causes for and solutions to poverty in our country. In addition to generating new language to consider for our upcoming quantitative message testing, these conversations also served as a check on findings from the analysis of written language and of the listening sessions.

As may be obvious, spoken language tends to differ significantly from written – especially among professionals dedicated to constructing arguments meant to persuade or engender greater enthusiasm among stakeholders. Where written language is more constructed, spoken responses – especially given the unusual and abstract questions asked – are more indicative of true feelings. As such, elicitations offer a window into how people who live and breathe economic justice come to judgments. Not surprisingly, these conclusions differ significantly from the produced language of writing – even from the same sources – who unwittingly parrot dominant tropes in the hopes of sounding convincing.

While every individual had their own unique language and even policy objectives, what follows is a summary of the salient ideas and conceptual anchors that emerged among many, if not most, of the speakers. This sample is too small to draw meaningful inferences about differences correlated to gender, race or geography. Ideological or partisan differences were essentially non-existent, given the shared orientation toward progressive policy goals and beliefs.

1. Pronounced tendency to characterize poverty as social isolation

In contrast to written accounts that tend to highlight and prioritize *material* deprivation, respondents echoed a theme of not being able to fully participate in society:

“Poverty includes persistent problems, not having enough food, not meeting basic needs, but there’s also a component that’s not material. **Being isolated** from what I would consider to be mainstream in our culture, society and political life. They miss out, their families **miss out on connections and participation**, civic and cultural life of the bulk of population, social and political problems, people don’t feel, aren’t

connected to most of the rest of us.”

“It’s about being **isolated**, not having friends or families. There aren’t pathways to get assistance.”

“Poverty is conditions in which people live that really **disperse people** based on class, access to basic services.”

“Poverty is relative. When people are poor, they’re **not able to fully participate** in society. Societies have different standards of living. Poverty in America is not being able to have a full table on Thanksgiving — to **not do what other Americans are doing**.”

This notion of relativity – of defining poverty not in some absolute quantity but rather a lack as compared to what others have or what’s deemed common by the host society – came up frequently. For example, “I think it’s not having whatever the particular society you live in believes is sustainable, what an average person in society would need being poor.”

This serves as a rejoinder to the known favored opposition trope that poverty in America doesn’t exist because almost everyone can purchase goods like cell phones and televisions.

2. Use of *poverty as container* metaphor

As noted in the listening sessions as well, the array of metaphors present to describe poverty were limited, almost without exception, to one: poverty as container. This is closely related to ideas of barriers and impeding movement on our journey through life, itself a metaphorical idea:

“To some degree [poverty] is subjective, comparative. I view myself as having grown up poor, corrugated tin roof, tar paper on walls, **being on edge** financially most of edge, stuck out like sore thumb.”

“Poverty is having a great big barrier in front of what you want to be in the world.”

“For adults — sense of **being trapped**, not having sense of **way forward**, a struggle to get what you need.”

“Those who don’t have money because of their history and family lives are stuck, society is structured in such a way in terms of government policy but also the whole way that the economy is organized so **you’re stuck where you are and very few can get out**.”

3. Theme of power

In contrast to written sources and also not very common in the listening sessions, most interviewees independently brought up differential power as the root of economic injustice, poverty and inequality. The presence of this analysis isn't surprising, of course, but the tendency to speak in these terms, given how infrequently we write in them is worth noting.

"We live in an unfair and unequal, money gives you access to power and people with money are able to wield influence on the political system that allows them to increase their wealth at expense of others."

"[Wealth comes from] power to write rules of game and you decide that what you produce is worth more than what someone else produces."

"[Unequal resources due to] differing amounts of power — some of it is historic, they inherited money or color of skin or gender."

"For the most part it's because some people have more power, power to get a better seat at the table when resources are distributed."

4. Critique of capitalism

In a similar vein, the ready critique of capitalism from most participants isn't unexpected. It does, however, stand out as a talking point when considered relative to how infrequently we attempt to reference capitalism as a system and source of inequality.

"Capitalism. Our society has grown and become a way of being that gets lots and lots of money to very few people and has structures and reinforce that."

"I think poverty comes from an unfair distribution of resources in society. And in a capitalist system, the whole concept of private ownership is supreme. In this society we've drifted way too far toward individual rights. Water has been privatized, which is outrageous. Privatization of things that are elemental and basic to life, rather than publicly owned."

"Because we live in a system that thrives on some people having money where others don't. Money attracts money so those who have are better positioned than those who don't."

"Those who have money have used public policy to make sure others don't, drain capital from others who don't."

"I think wealth comes from the inequities between what a product is paid for and how much goes into the product."

"In a capitalist society wealth, is generated by manipulating markets in such a way that you get more than you put in. So, some activity is under valued so

that you can get more. You buy low and sell high. You get people to manufacture something and you pay them in increments that are less than what it truly costs. And that's rewarded in capitalist society as being smart business, someone is being overvalued while someone else is undervalued...Poverty comes about when that undervaluing is concentrated or flat out denied like slavery"

5. Embrace of better wages as primary solution

Although a couple of participants brought up desire for a guaranteed minimum income and many described the need for more robust social services, welfare provisions and affordable housing and healthcare, far and away the dominant prescription for poverty was wage related. Both in terms of characterizing why someone is poor and describing a desired "just" world, interviewees tended to lead with and focus on higher paying jobs with better benefits.

6. Reluctance to have a numbers conversation

Almost without exception, participants did not attempt to quantify desired outcomes. This held both for specifying an adequate minimum wage or desirable level of social welfare supports.

In fact, many participants reflected on deliberately not wanting to get into a quantity conversation. This stands very much in alignment with the idea of poverty as relative to how a given society is structured. In this notion, there could not be a set amount, even indexed to inflation, because poverty is about not accessing whatever is currently deemed integral to life in a dominant community.