

Documenting Poverty

There are also a variety of alternative measures that seek to evaluate well-being rather than trying to define poverty:

The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) focuses on “the quality of life we create not only for ourselves but for everyone with whom we share the planet” by measuring factors such as crime and family breakdown, household and volunteer work, income distribution, and pollution.

The Human Development Index (HDI) offers a global perspective on the question of how well people are living. Devised by the United Nations in the 1990s, the HDI is a composite of three different indicators: (1) life expectancy at birth, (2) education as measured by a combination of school enrollment and adult literacy, and (3) standard of living as measured by a variation on GDP per capita that adjusts for price differences between countries (purchasing power parity in U.S. dollars).

Index of Social Health is “a broad-based gauge of the social well-being of the nation, similar in concept to the Dow Jones Average or the Gross Domestic Product.” Published annually since 1987, the index uses government data for 16 social indicators to create profiles and rankings for all 50 states. In 2008, Minnesota ranked number one with a score of 75 out of 100, and New Mexico finished at the bottom with a score of 26.8.

The Elder Economic Security Standard Index is an evidence-based measure of economic security that reflects the current actual cost of basic needs at the county level for retired adults age 65 and over, who receive no public assistance. The index was developed by Wider Opportunities for Women and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Gerontology Institute to address the failings of the FPL for older adults. The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development adapted the index and calculated it for California. As of September 2011, California law requires Area Agencies on Aging to use the index for program and planning purposes.

Collecting data is an important tool in the overall effort to understand and alleviate poverty, but as columnist Mark Shields likes to say, “Numbers don’t bleed.” Maybe that is why some of the most effective vehicles for raising awareness of poverty and sparking action to address it have combined compelling narrative with powerful visuals. Here are five:

How the Other Half Lives, Jacob Riis, 1890

More than a century before anyone expressed concern for the 99 percent, Jacob Riis created an eye-opening account of “how the other half lives.” Riis used the skills he had acquired working as a police reporter, combined with the relatively new technology of flash photography, to create a late 19th century account of life in the squalid slums of New York.

Photographs of the Un-rich and the Un-famous: Lewis Hine

Lewis Hine (1874-1940) photographed people whose lives were a constant struggle to make ends meet: children who spent 12-hour days inside factory walls, newsies who lived on the streets and survived by their wits, immigrants who tried their best to make sense of a strange new land, and hundreds or even thousands of men and women who worked long hours for short money. Hine’s images truly are haunting; once you see them, they stay with you for life. (See also: http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/explore/dgexplore.cfm?col_id=175.)

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee and Walker Evans, 1941

James Agee was the writer, Walker Evans the photographer. *Fortune* magazine brought them together in 1936 for an eight-week assignment to document the lives of sharecropping families in rural Alabama. Their work formed the basis for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* published in 1941. To read Agee’s prose and look upon Evans’s images is to gain an inkling of what it must mean to face each day with little hope and even less money.



Image by Jacob Riis, courtesy Library of Congress, Public Domain

CBS News Harvest of Shame, 1960

Back before they decided that “reality” meant putting various groups of narcissistic adults in front of a TV camera, the networks did some pretty good reporting on issues related to poverty. *Harvest of Shame* was one of the standouts. The 55-minute CBS News documentary focused on the plight of migrant workers, who, in the words of CBS correspondent Edward R. Murrow, were “the forgotten people; the under-educated; the under-fed.”

The program aired on the day after Thanksgiving 1960, in an effort “to shock the consciousness of the nation.” Hard to imagine that would happen today. (See also: <http://billmoyers.com/2013/07/19/watch-edward-r-murrows-harvest-of-shame/> and <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/harvest-of-shame-50-years-later/>.)

Paycheck to Paycheck, HBO, 2014

If you are thinking that all the good reporting on poverty took place back in some golden age that never was, you should set aside an hour of your life to watch *Paycheck to Paycheck: The Life and Times of Katrina Gilbert*. Produced in association with The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Pushes Back from the Brink, it follows a “single Tennessee mom through her day-to-day life, as she works full time as a certified nurse’s assistant but has to choose between paying for her medication and finalizing her divorce.” And if you can’t watch the show, here’s an alternative suggestion: Try spending a week or two living on \$9.49 an hour.