

# The Atlantic

## Poverty, Compounded

Staying poor isn't just a matter of having too little money—it's about a series of unstable circumstances that build upon each other.



Rebecca Cook / Reuters

**GILLIAN B. WHITE**

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It's true that poverty affects people of all races, genders, and nationalities, but it's also true that poverty—especially deep, persistent, intergenerational poverty—plagues some groups more than others. That's because poverty isn't just a matter of making too little money to pay the bills or living in a bad neighborhood—it's about a series of circumstances and challenges that build upon each other, making it difficult to create stability and build wealth.

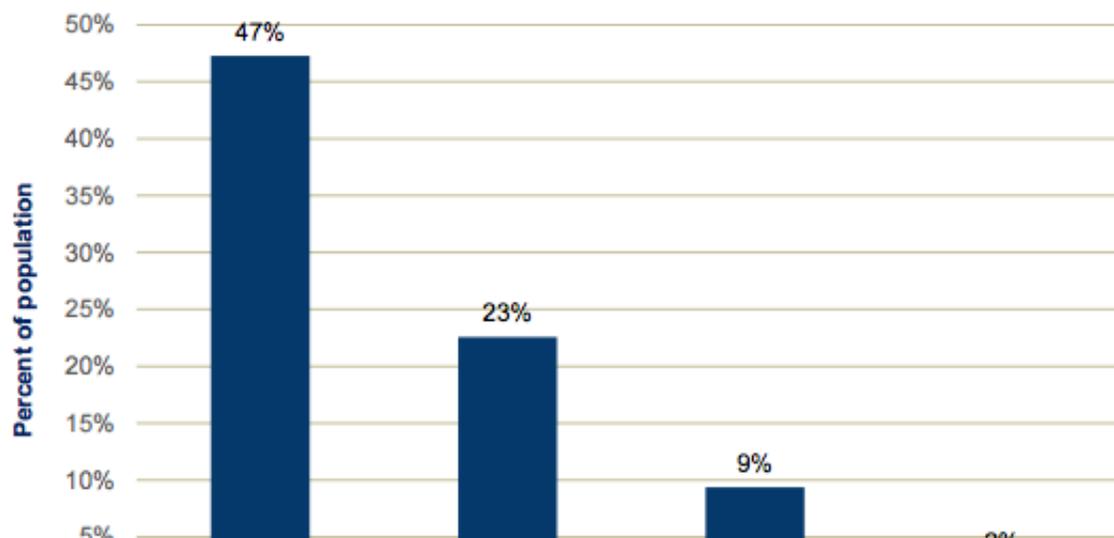
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“Total Inequality”—“the sum of the financial, psychological, and cultural disadvantages that come with poverty,” in his words. “Researchers cannot easily count up these disadvantages, and journalists cannot easily graph them,” he wrote. “But they might be the most important stories about why poverty persists across time and generations.”

Recently, the Brookings Institution [published a report](#) looking at the same idea but giving it a different name. The paper, builds on research from the British economist William Beveridge, who in 1942 proposed five types of poverty: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease. In modern terms, these could be defined as poverty related to housing, education, income, employment, and healthcare, respectively. Analyzing the 2014 American Community Survey, the paper’s co-authors, Richard Reeves, Edward Rodrigue, and Elizabeth Kneebone, found that half of Americans experience at least one of these types of poverty, and around 25 percent suffer from at least two.

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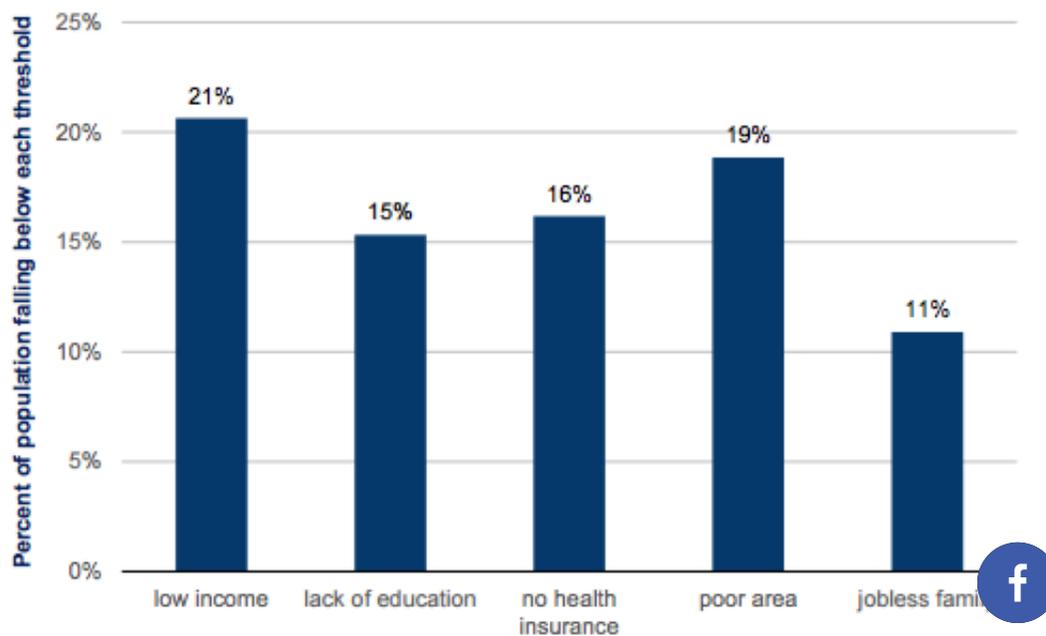
## Almost Half of Americans Endure At Least One Aspect of Poverty





The Brookings Institution

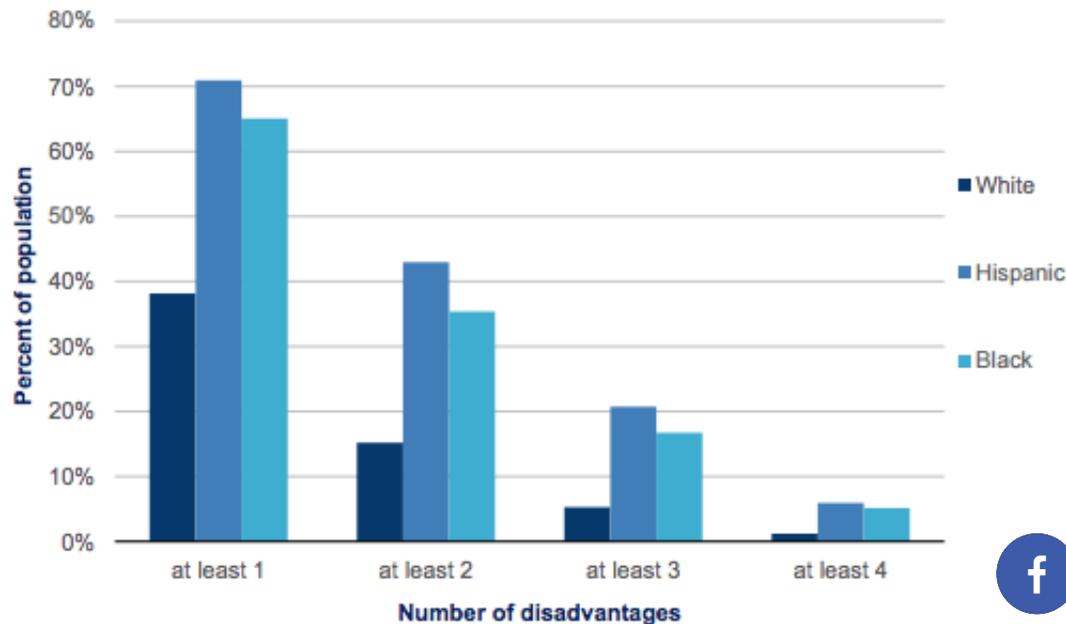
## The Percentage of Americans Who Experience Different Types of Poverty



The Brookings Institution

But the likelihood of living a life that includes more than one of these types of poverty is significantly higher for minorities. For instance, the majority of blacks and Hispanics live with at least one form of poverty, while the majority of whites do not. And for white Americans who do experience one form of poverty, it's pretty unlikely that they experience any others. For instance, if both a white and black American have low incomes, the white American is more likely to live in a better neighborhood, in better housing, and to have better access to superior education and healthcare.

# Minorities Experience Much Higher Rates of Compounded Poverty



The Brookings Institution

Overall, black and Hispanic Americans are more than twice as likely to experience two or more forms of poverty than their white peers, and up to five times more likely to suffer from four or more. And while both blacks and Hispanics often live in low-income households, Hispanic households are more likely to also have lower educational levels and poor access to healthcare and black households are more likely to live in bad neighborhoods and lack jobs.

The findings also illuminate why poverty can be so difficult to escape. The Brookings researchers note that anti-poverty solutions often focus on solving only one problem at a time—usually income, because it's the most pervasive and, perhaps, the easiest to quantify. They argue that in order to address the compounding effects of the various types of poverty, it would actually be useful to de-emphasize the matter of income. That may sound counterproductive, but it would just mean working to offer things like better

quality public education, low-cost, comprehensive health care, and safer, higher-quality affordable housing, things that could improve the lives of all Americans, regardless of income limitations. It's a tall order but, the authors suggest, one that is not out of reach.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**GILLIAN B. WHITE** is a senior associate editor at *The Atlantic*.

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