Prior to September 11, the issue of poverty in America was poised to move to the center of the public opinion stage, as the first welfare recipients approached the end of the five-year limit on their federal assistance imposed by the welfare reform law of 1996. That focus of attention shifted, of course, with the terrorist attacks and ensuing war. Like so many other domestic calamities, poverty was, for a time, pushed to the background of the public consciousness, and there has since been little polling on the subject, even as the economy has gone into recession.

Yet the poor are still here, as we are told in Matthew 26:11, among us always.

Some would prefer to believe they were not; the idea of an America divided into “haves” and “have-nots” runs counter to the vision many of us hold dear of a land of opportunity and equality for all. Polls find a majority denying such a division exists, and Americans don’t come close to agreeing on what the meaning of poverty is, at least not in dollar terms.

In fact, the polls show us that our perception of economic hardship is, above all else, a relative thing. For instance, in one survey, 21% of respondents with annual household incomes of less than $20,000 think of themselves as “haves,” 6% making over $75,000 call themselves “have-nots.” And while 19% of the former say they find it easy to afford the things they want, exactly the same proportion of the latter finds it difficult.

Indeed, many of the survey responses make one wonder what is going on in some of the nation’s households. How is it that nearly one in ten people with incomes of more than $50,000 couldn’t pay their utility bills in the previous year? Is it simple gratitude for a roof over their heads that leads nearly two-thirds of the lowest-income respondents to express satisfaction with their housing, while 28% in the $50-75,000 group say they’re dissatisfied with their furnishings and appliances?

And, given these clearly divergent frames of reference within which we assess our own economic well-being, how troubled should we be that over a third of Americans consider themselves poor?

We would like to think no one has to be poor in America today. Nearly three-quarters of us believe that “most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to try,” and close to half say poverty is due less to unfortunate circumstance than to people simply not doing enough to help themselves out of it.

But we are not terribly optimistic that poverty in the US can ever be eliminated. And the polls presented here are completely silent on what we think about poverty in other parts of the world, where the frame of reference might be defined, quite literally, by the provision of one’s daily bread, or the possession of a blanket or a tent.

That, however, is a calamity of an entirely different magnitude, and beyond the scope of this examination.

— Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Editor
Empty Pockets

Question:

Some people think of American society as divided into two groups, the “haves” and the “have-nots,” while others think it’s incorrect to think of America that way. Do you yourself think of America as divided into haves and have-nots, or don’t you think of America that way?


For Richer, Not Poorer

Question:

Would you say that the percentage of Americans who are rich is increasing from year to year, or decreasing from year to year?


Them That’s Got Shall Get

Question:

Do you feel that the distribution of money and wealth in this country today is fair, or do you feel that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among a larger percentage of the people?


What is Poor?

Question:

...Would you consider a family of four making [dollar amount] a year to be poor?

Note: The federal poverty line for 2000 was $17,603 on average for a family of four.

**Question:**

...[Tell me which]... statement comes closer to your own views...
Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard, [or] hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.


**Questions:**

In your opinion, which is the bigger cause of poverty today—that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, or that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People not doing enough</th>
<th>Circumstances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100%</td>
<td>TOTAL 45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-200%</td>
<td>TOTAL 46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200%+</td>
<td>TOTAL 44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**An Enduring Belief**

Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work, others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hard work most important</th>
<th>Hard work, luck equally important (vol.)</th>
<th>Luck most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Question:**

Do you think that most poor people in the United States are people who work but can't earn enough money, or people who don't work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Don't work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-200%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200%+</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:**

Which... comes closer to your views? ...Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return, or poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hard lives</th>
<th>Have it easy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100%</td>
<td>&lt;100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-200%</td>
<td>100-200%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200%+</td>
<td>200%+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>Lower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>67%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:**

In general, do you think poor people have higher, lower, or about the same moral values as other Americans?

*Note: The sample is broken down into those whose income is less than 100%, 100-200%, or more than 200% of the poverty threshold level. The level used is the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau calculation of $17,603 a year, on average, for a family of four.

Among Us Always

**Question:**
When you think of your situation today, do you think of yourself as poor or not?

- Yes: 35%
- No: 64%
- Don't know: 1%

**Question:**
Thinking about your own family—both your immediate family living here and your other close relatives like aunts, uncles, cousins and so on—as far as you know, is anyone in your family poor?

- Yes: 36%
- No: 63%
- Don't know: 1%

**Question:**
In general, how easy is it for you to afford the things in life that you want—very easy, easy, difficult, or very difficult?

- Very easy: 7%
- Easy: 43%
- Difficult: 36%
- Very difficult: 5%

**Question:**
Do you have any close friends who are poor?

- Yes: 48%
- No: 51%
- Don't know: 1%

**Question:**
If you had to choose, which of these groups are you in, the haves or the have-nots?

- Have-nots: 32%
- Haves: 58%
- Don't know/Refused: 10%


In the past year, have you or someone in your immediate family had a serious problem with any of the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about the money you owe on credit cards and installment loans, would you say you owe a lot more than you can afford, owe a little more than you can afford, owe about what you can afford, or owe less than you can afford?</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The sample is broken down into those whose income is less than 100%, 100-200%, or more than 200%, of the poverty threshold level. The level used is the 2000 US Census Bureau calculation of $17,603 a year, on average, for a family of four.

Levels of Contentment

**Questions:**

How satisfied are you with each of the following—very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>The housing you are able to afford</th>
<th>The kind of car you can afford</th>
<th>Your ability to purchase new home furnishings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$50K</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50K-$75K</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75K+</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Very Satisfied/Satisfied:**

- $20K-$50K: 65%
- $50K-$75K: 77%
- $75K+: 91%

**Total Very Dissatisfied/Dissatisfied:**

- $20K-$50K: 34%
- $50K-$75K: 15%
- $75K+: 8%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Affording health care</th>
<th>Money for retirement</th>
<th>Child's college</th>
<th>Losing job or pay cut</th>
<th>Adequate daycare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$50K</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50K-$75K</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75K+</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:**

...How concerned are you, if at all, about...? Are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned about this?

**Percent Responding Very Concerned**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Affording health care</th>
<th>Money for retirement</th>
<th>Child's college</th>
<th>Losing job or pay cut</th>
<th>Adequate daycare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$50K</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50K-$75K</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75K+</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:**

How would you rate your own personal financial situation? Would you say you are in excellent shape, good shape, only fair shape, or poor shape?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Excellent/Good</th>
<th>Only Fair/Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$50K</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$50K</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50K-$75K</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75K+</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question:**

Some people tell us that they worry about becoming poor. What do you think? Does the possibility of becoming poor worry you a great deal, worry you a little, or doesn’t it worry you at all?

- Not at all: 46%
- A little: 38%
- Not sure: 1%
- Great deal: 18%

**My Brother’s Keeper**

**Questions:**

I am going to read you a list of things that some people do and others don’t. In the past twelve months have you...?

1. **Donated money to an organization that helps the poor**
   - **Total:** 68%
   - **<100%:** 43%
   - **100-200%:** 56%
   - **200%+:** 74%

2. **Directly tried to help a poor individual or family**
   - **Total:** 67%
   - **<100%:** 66%
   - **100-200%:** 69%
   - **200%+:** 67%

3. **Contacted a public official about problems faced by poor people**
   - **Total:** 10%
   - **<100%:** 13%
   - **100-200%:** 9%
   - **200%+:** 11%

**Note:** The sample is broken down into those whose income is less than 100%, 100-200%, or more than 200% of the poverty threshold level. The level used is the 2000 US Census Bureau calculation of $17,603 a year, on average, for a family of four.

**Source:** Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

**Help to Help Themselves**

**Questions:**

[How much responsibility do each of the following have in making sure that the American workforce has the right skills and enough education to compete in the global economy?] How about... Do they have a lot of responsibility, some, only a little, or no responsibility at all?

- **The public education system**
  - **A lot:** 60%
  - **Some:** 32%
  - **A little/None:** 6%

- **Individual job seekers**
  - **A lot:** 58%
  - **Some:** 30%
  - **A little/None:** 7%

- **State governments**
  - **A lot:** 39%
  - **Some:** 44%
  - **A little/None:** 15%

- **The federal government**
  - **A lot:** 38%
  - **Some:** 41%
  - **A little/None:** 19%

- **Employers**
  - **A lot:** 36%
  - **Some:** 47%
  - **A little/None:** 15%


**Willing to Pay**

**Question:**

Would you be willing to pay more in taxes to pay for more... government spending to help the poor?

- **Yes:** 57%
- **No:** 40%
- **Don’t know:** 3%

**Source:** Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.
Government Assistance

Questions:

Here is a list of things the government could do to directly help the poor in America. Please tell me if you support or oppose each. Do you support or oppose...?

- Expanding subsidized daycare
  - Support: 85%
  - Oppose: 12%

- Increasing the minimum wage
  - Support: 85%
  - Oppose: 14%

- Spending more for medical care for poor people
  - Support: 83%
  - Oppose: 14%

- Increasing tax credits for low-income workers
  - Support: 80%
  - Oppose: 17%


Questions:

- ...For each, please tell me if you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea...

  - Helping to pay for education and job training for people leaving welfare
    - Strongly support: 90%
    - Somewhat support: 4%
    - Don’t know/Refused: 4%

  - Giving tax cuts to people who work but do not earn enough to keep their families out of poverty
    - Strongly support: 86%
    - Somewhat support: 4%
    - Don’t know/Refused: 4%

  - Offering tax cuts to businesses that hire people leaving welfare
    - Strongly support: 77%
    - Somewhat support: 19%
    - Don’t know/Refused: 4%


Questions:

If the government were willing to spend whatever it thought was necessary to eliminate poverty in the United States, do you think that this is something that could be accomplished, or not?

- Yes: 47%
- No: 49%
- Don’t know: 4%


Own Two Feet

Question:

Do you feel the government will help you if you fall on bad times, or do you think you’ll have only yourself to rely on?

- Government will help: 65%
- Have to rely on self: 29%
- Don’t know: 6%


Perhaps Someday

Question:

If the government were willing to spend whatever it thought was necessary to eliminate poverty in the United States, do you think that this is something that could be accomplished, or not?

- Yes: 47%
- No: 49%
- Don’t know: 4%