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# Introduction



Much has changed since this book was first published in 1999.

At that time the U.S. Welfare Reform Act of 1996 appeared to be producing impressive results. TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) caseloads had been cut in half, poverty and unemployment rates were at record lows, and there were substantial increases in the income levels of single-mother families. When the technology-driven economic boom ended in early 2000 it became apparent to poverty watchers, if not the media or the general public, that the gains were more a function of a strong economy than the welfare reform policy. When the attention of the nation shifted to terrorism and wars, people in poverty became invisible again, almost as invisible as they were in the 1950s.

Now, with a dubious debt of gratitude to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, poverty in the United States became visible again. Katrina blew away the generally held belief that welfare reform was a success and the U.S. economy was working for everyone. Even the popular media began raising questions about race and class.

But Katrina did more than make poverty visible again; it also has served as a metaphor for poverty itself. The storm threw communities into chaos, forcing community organizations, as well as individuals, into survival mode. Basic community resources such as housing, health care, education, police, transportation, and utilities were wiped out or severely disrupted. Community structures and budgets were overwhelmed. Similar language can be used to describe the impact of poverty on families. Poverty itself throws families into chaos, forcing them into survival mode. Basic resources are wiped out or severely disrupted. Family structures and budgets are inadequate and overwhelmed. Furthermore, the Katrina metaphor can be used to describe some

cities and rural communities. The difference between a natural disaster and the poverty disaster is this: For people and communities in poverty, the crisis tends to creep along in obscurity rather than front and center, day after day, in the news.

So what were the results of welfare reform, and what has happened since 2000 when the economic boom ended? Even though the minimum wage was raised four times during the 1990s, the arithmetic of life was still not working for people at the bottom of the ladder. In 1999 about 42% of persons considered poor *worked* and were still living in poverty. Poverty rates are up. From 2000 to 2005 the number of people in poverty in the United States rose 17%. In 2004 an additional 1.1 million people fell into poverty; it was the fourth year in a row that poverty numbers had grown. In 2004 there were 37 million people in poverty. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in December 2004 that 25% of all the jobs in the U.S. economy did not pay enough to lift a family above the poverty line. In some states 30% of all jobs did not pay a living wage. This country has become a nation where people can work full time and still be in poverty. Amy Glasmeier, in *An Atlas of Poverty in America*, sums up the current situation: “. . . [T]he experiment of the 1990s . . . has resulted in a growth in income poverty [as opposed to net-worth poverty] that leaves the nation’s most vulnerable members unprotected from economic uncertainty and insecurity.”

The Katrina metaphor can be used to illustrate how people respond to disasters and to poverty. To survive Katrina, people used reactive and sensory skills to solve immediate and concrete problems. There’s nothing abstract about keeping your head above water or finding food or shelter. Solving problems minute-by-minute, day-by-day with limited resources is a valuable survival skill that people in poverty possess. In a crisis of a relatively short duration—such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes—concrete, reactive problem solving is eventually replaced by abstract, proactive strategies that are based on future ramifications. This is the experience of many middle-class and wealthy people caught in the upheaval and chaos of natural disasters. For folks in poverty, on the other hand, natural disasters create a double

whammy. First, there is the disaster itself, after which the unrelenting and unending crisis, as experienced in poverty, forces people into the tyranny of the moment. This is where the future is lost, where people get stuck solving the same problems over and over, and where proactive planning is difficult to do.

Individuals in poverty aren't alone in this trap; many communities across the U.S. are so busy responding to crises that they too are using reactive strategies to survive. The same can be said of nations where poverty rates are extremely high.

People at the very bottom of the economic ladder aren't the only ones in trouble. For the first time in U.S. history, the middle class is shrinking. The median household income has been flat for five straight years, and only the top 5% of households experienced real income gains in 2004. The structures that created the middle class—well-paying jobs, the 40-hour workweek, assistance with college loans and home mortgages, and employer-provided health care and pensions—are falling away.

The economic insecurity of low-wage workers and the middle class threatens the viability of our communities. When members of the middle class flee the cities, taking the tax base and spending power with them . . . when Main Street empties of viable businesses and refills with pawn shops, used clothing stores, social service storefronts, and payday lenders . . . when people can't afford to stay in the community to raise their children because of the lack of well-paying jobs . . . and when the free and reduced-price lunch rate at the schools hits 50%, our communities are becoming unsustainable.

Our work is to improve the lives of people in poverty and, by extension, to help make sustainable communities in which everyone can do well. In this edition of *Bridges Out of Poverty* you will find an essay titled “The Additive Model: the aha! Process Approach to Developing Sustainable Communities.” It expands on the ideas introduced here and lays out the philosophy behind our work. In it you will read about:

- Using the knowledge of people in poverty to build an accurate mental model of poverty.

- Studying poverty research in order to develop a continuum of strategies for building prosperous and healthy communities.
- Theories of change.
- The additive model and how it applies to aha! Process constructs.
- Sharing aha! Process constructs with people in poverty.
- Creating sustainable communities.

*Bridges Out of Poverty* is a starting point where one can develop accurate mental models of poverty, middle class, and wealth. It is a new lens through which readers can view themselves, their clients, and the community. Readers can begin to work on front-line staff skills and to develop new program designs in order to improve relationships and outcomes. The purpose is to give community leaders from all disciplines a start on that path. Hundreds of thousands of professionals in education, social services, health care, law enforcement, corrections, business, and government already have been exposed to and inspired by Dr. Ruby K. Payne's understanding of economic diversity. Many towns, cities, and counties—and some states—have begun making changes that come from her ideas, techniques, and approaches to change.

We hope this book will contribute to the good work you are doing.

## SOME KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. *Poverty is relative.* If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Poverty or wealth exists only in relationship to known quantities or expectations.
2. *Poverty occurs in all races and in all countries.* The notion of middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of the 20th and 21st centuries. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance.