

Title

Perceptions of Poverty in Springfield, Missouri: Causes, Consequences, and Proposed Solutions

Abstract

Over the past several years, the high rates of poverty in the Springfield, Missouri metropolitan area has been the focus of significant private non profit and public sector efforts. In 2018, the Missouri State University Sociology Department and the Drury University Center for Nonprofit Leadership conducted a joint study to query local resident's opinions regarding the causes of poverty and what types of political or civic strategies residents would support to help address poverty. The survey was a replicated survey conducted initially by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in 2000 at the height of public and political debates regarding welfare reform. The Springfield, Missouri survey was a shortened version of the original study.

Of over 2,000 surveyed, 98.3% of respondents labeled poverty as a problem. Respondents identified low wages, being a single parent, drug abuse, mental illness, and poor quality of education, as the top five reasons they believed caused poverty. A slight majority also believed that it was the role of the government to address poverty. Of the proposed solutions that the government could implement to address poverty, a majority of respondents supported improving public education and expanding job training programs as well as expanding subsidized daycare, increasing the minimum wage, expanding public employment programs, requiring public schools to teach moral values and work ethic, medical care programs, and increasing tax credits for low income workers. Age and race did not have any statistical difference in determining responses. Gender, political ideology, and self-reported religiosity however did influence both perceived causes of poverty and proposed solutions to address poverty. The implications of the findings are discussed, including the role of individual experience, community support, and policy in proposed local responses to poverty as well as a discussion on the use of large scale surveys as a means of increasing awareness about, and engaging the public in, health and social issues.

Defining Poverty, Who Is At Risk For Poverty, Living in Poverty, or Under-Resourced

'Poverty' Definition

In this study, poverty was defined as individuals and families who are either unable to meet the basic needs of their household or are directly at-risk for being unable to provide for their own and their household's basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, and/or medical costs. Living in poverty, whether episodically or continually, has demonstrable and significant impacts on life outcomes, including health and emotional well-being for both children and adults. Given the inability to meet basic needs or have access to resources that might improve health and wellness outcomes, according to a 2016 Massachusetts Institute of Technology study, those living in poverty are expected to live 10-15 fewer years on average than those with higher incomes. Living in lower income communities has also been attributed to an increased risk of injury and illness (given unhealthy, toxic, or deteriorating homes and infrastructure in lower income areas), an increased risk of obesity (due to the cost or lack of access to healthy and nutritious food), an increased risk of depression, toxic stress, and other physical and mental health consequences related to the continual trauma of scarcity, an increased risk of dental and vision concerns (given the cost or access to such care within or without government aid programs), among other concerns that impact daily physical and emotional quality of life (Driekes, 2016).

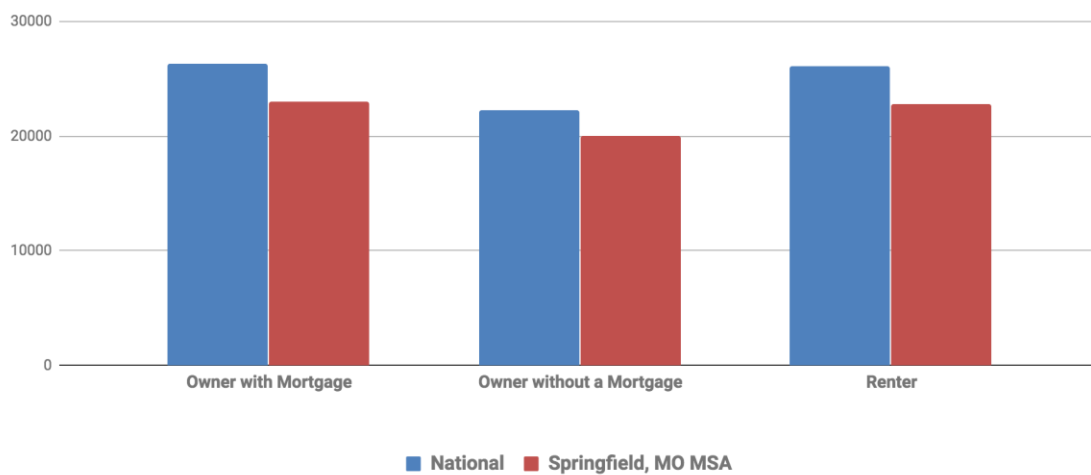
Who Is Considered Living In Poverty or Under-Resourced in Springfield, MO?

There are many ways that a community’s poverty rate, or the percentage of those living in poverty, can be measured or determined. The most common means of determining who lives below the poverty line is by United States Census figures and estimates. According to 2013-2019 standard US Census American Community Survey figures, 25.7% of all those accounted for in Census data collection within the Springfield city limits were considered to be living below the poverty line. The Community Foundation of the Ozarks 2019 Community Focus Report also estimates approximately 25% of all those living within the city limits are considered living in poverty, or otherwise considered ‘under-resourced.’

However, US Census standard poverty measures have continually come under scrutiny for failing to account for cost of living variables that may impact the resources households have or have access to in specific communities and, therefore, often do not provide an accurate description of who is living in poverty or who is at risk of poverty. US Census standard measures use an ‘absolute poverty line’ and income figure as a specific threshold by which households (depending on household size) are considered to be lacking the resources to meet basic needs. These figures are based on formulas created by President Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity in 1969 (Jacob, 2012). These figures remain constant regardless of location. For example, if a household has an annual income of \$20,000, regardless of whether or not they live in New York City or Springfield, Missouri, the household is considered to be living below the poverty line.

In 2010, based on the recommendations of a Congressional panel established initially in the 1990’s, the Census Supplemental Poverty measure (SPM) was created. The SPM defines poverty as the “lack of economic resources for consumption of basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, and utilities (FCSU). To determine family resources, gross annual money income from private and public sources is supplemented with benefits such as food stamps, housing subsidies, and tax credits. Deducted from family income are medical out-of-pocket expenses including health insurance premiums, income and Social Security payroll taxes, child support payments, work-related expenses and child care costs (Jacob, 2012).” These figures are also adjusted for family size, whether or not one owns a home, and differences in housing costs across regions. The supplemental poverty measure defines the poverty income threshold as follows for the Springfield metropolitan area for a household containing two adults and two children. These figures, which take into account cost of living, acknowledge that poverty income levels are lower than national averages.

2016 SPM Poverty Thresholds: Two adults with two children



Given the way that the Supplemental Poverty Measure assesses poverty income levels as contingent upon family size and housing status, it is difficult to statistically determine a general SPM figure for the city, however it is likely slightly below US Census standard measures, or around \$22,000 a year for a family of four.

Who Is Considered At Risk For Poverty?

Utilizing existing US Census data and the Supplemental Poverty Measure, researchers analyzed the income level of Springfield households who might be considered ‘at risk’ for poverty (or one household crisis - a divorce, illness, job loss, etc - away from living under the poverty line). This income level was determined to be at approximately \$35,000 a year. This figure is based upon 180% of the federal poverty line (FDL) for a family of four, a measure often used to determine eligibility for government benefits. The following chart notes the percentage of those considered living under certain gross income levels based upon 2013-2017 US Census American Community survey results.

Gross Income of US Households based on 2013-2017 American Community Survey					
Household Type	Less than \$10000	\$10000-\$14999	\$15,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$34,999	Total
Households	12.4	8.5	15.6	15.1	51.6
Families	7.1	5.6	12.4	14	39.1
Married Couple Family	2.3	2.6	8.7	12.4	26
NonFamily Households	18.8	11.9	19.1	16.5	66.3

According to the results, 51.6% of all households in the Springfield region live with an annual income of less than \$35,000, including 39% of those considered families (households with children). These results vary significantly based upon race and ethnicity. It is significant to note that percentage differences in the chart below are a result of US Census sampling methodologies and the available data as broken down by race and ethnicity.

Gross Income by race of US Households based on 2013-2017 American Community Survey					
Household Type	Under \$35,000	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Families	44753.86	41794.772	686.987	916.113	1355.988
NonFamily Households	43698.33	40494.051	937.482	610.623	1656.174
Total (Families and NonFamily Households)	88452.19	82288.823	1624.469	1526.736	3012.162
Percentage Below \$35,000 by Total Population	49.03	48.9	51.2	46.7	50.48880322
Household Type	Under \$25,000	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Families	45272.87	42160.219	795.921	819.264	1497.466

NonFamily Households	32164.08	29805.576	690.032	449.448	1219.024
Total (Families and NonFamily Households)	77436.95	71965.795	1485.953	1268.712	2716.49
Percentage Below \$25,000 by Total Population	42.9	42.84	46.86	38.86	45.53285283
Household Type	Under \$15,000	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Families	23922.14	22340.428	367.213	489.687	724.812
NonFamily Households	20300.28	18811.716	435.512	283.668	769.384
Total (Families and NonFamily Households)	44222.42	41152.144	802.725	773.355	1494.196
Percentage Below \$15,000 by Total Population	24.5	24.49	25.31	23.6	25.04518941
Household Type	Less Than \$10,000	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Families	12806.27	11925.799	225.141	231.744	423.586
NonFamily Households	12391.08	11482.476	265.832	173.148	469.624
Total (Families and NonFamily Households)	25197.35	23408.275	490.973	404.892	893.21
Percentage Below \$10,000 by Total Population	13.9	13.9	15.48	12.4	14.9

As evidenced by US Census figures, poverty figures, and poverty thresholds, including those defined as ‘at-risk’ vary significantly by reported racial and ethnic category. While the possible reasons for such results are complex, most social science research attributes such differences to lingering social and economic disparities between racial and ethnic groups, including access to social opportunity, differences in arrest and incarceration rates, and overt or aversive discrimination, among other factors (Stanford University, 2017).

Based on available US Census data, the researchers concluded that approximately 50% of the Springfield community is either living in poverty or considered at risk for poverty. This closely mirrors national data as to who is considered under-resourced or ‘at-risk’ (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2018).

Arguments Surrounding the Causes and Consequences of Poverty

Poverty is a complex, multipronged social issue and there is little consensus about the root causes of poverty (including, for example, whether poverty is the result of individual choices, social and structural inequalities, or a combination of these factors). Similarly, little consensus exists concerning how best to

approach correlated concerns such as physical and mental health-related outcomes, childhood poverty, and meeting basic needs such as food, housing, safety, sanitation, transportation, childcare, and education.

Springfield, MO ‘Perceptions of Poverty’ Survey Results

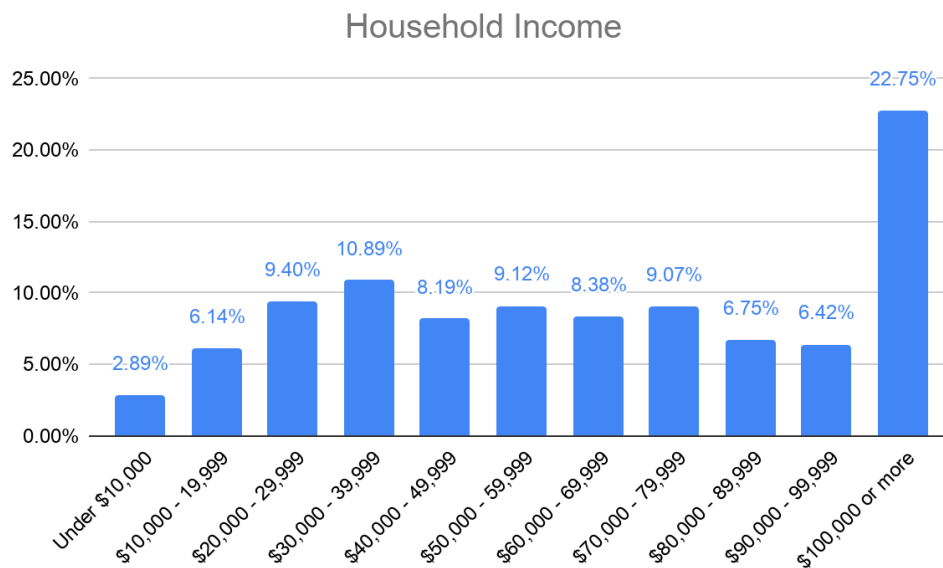
Study Methodology

The survey utilized was a replicated survey conducted initially by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government in 2000 at the height of public and political debates regarding welfare reform. The Springfield, Missouri survey was a shortened version of the original study and was provided in both online and hard copy formats. The survey was advertised in an article in the Springfield News-Leader, and shared on social media by local civic and social service organizations. Hard copies were also provided to various groups that wished to distribute a hard copy of the survey instead of using an online link. The survey queried approximately 2,000 resident respondents on their opinions about poverty in our community. The study, spanning the first quarter of 2018, asked what political or civic strategies respondents would support and about their understanding of the causes and consequences of living in poverty.

Respondent Demographic Information

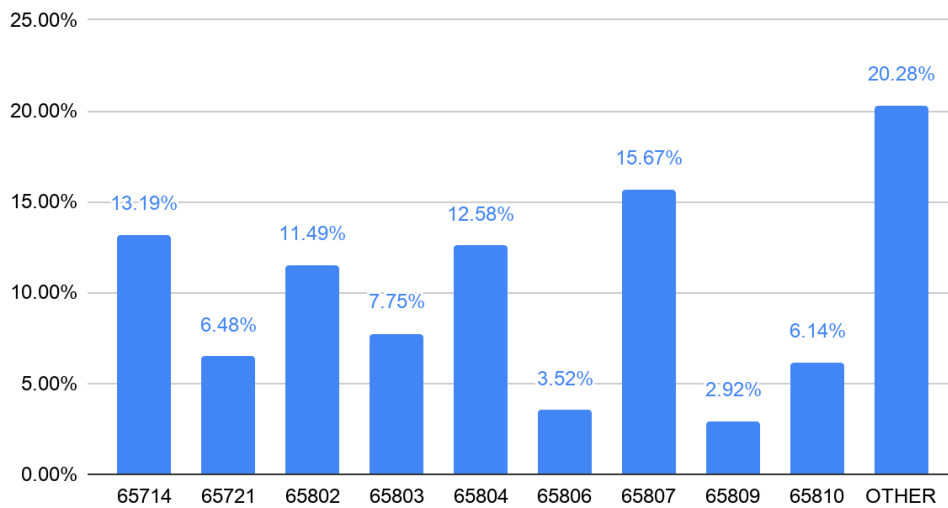
Of the 2200 respondents who elected to specify their gender, 74.5% were female, 25.3% were male, 0.4% were transgender, and 0.1% were non-binary. When self reporting ethnicity, 2077 of 2205 (94.5%) respondents indicated Caucasian/White while 0.6%, 0.5%, 1.0%, 0.1%, and 1.1% selected, respectively, African-American/Black, Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or Hispanic. There were 41 (1.9%) respondents who identified as Multiracial and 11 (0.5%) who choose ‘Other’.

The distribution of household income among the 2149 individuals who selected a household income range are recorded in the following chart.



The relative frequencies of 2298 respondents with respect to zip code is displayed in the graph below.

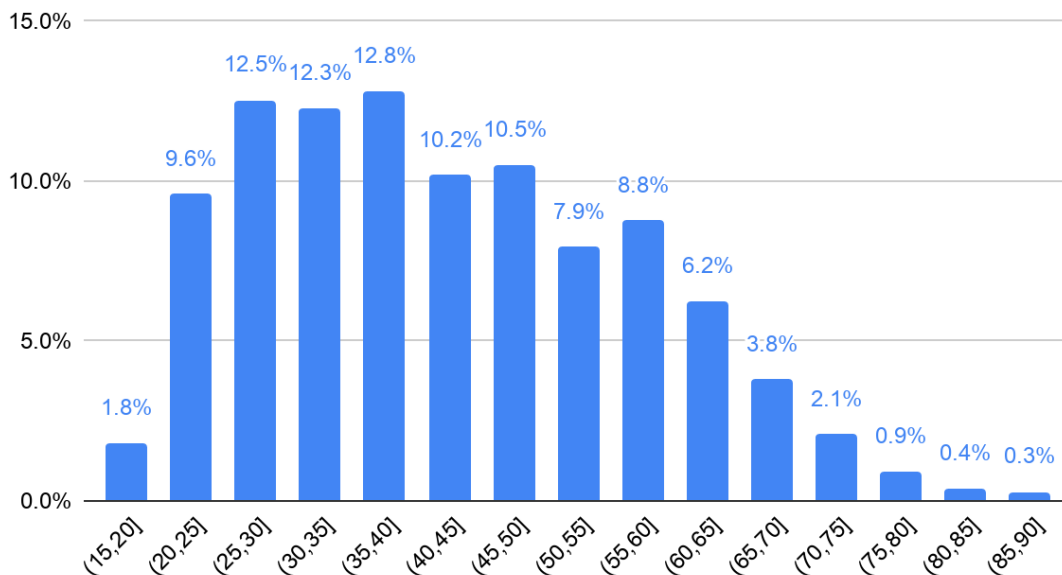
Zip Codes



Statistical analysis revealed that there is a statistically significant association between income level and respondent residential zip code. For example, if a respondent were to move up one level with respect to household income (e.g., from the \$50K-\$60K range to the \$60K-\$70K range) then that individual would be 1.4 times more likely to live in the 65714 area code as opposed to the 65806 area code. Similar, almost always statistically significant, likelihoods can be given for other pairs of zip codes.

The ages of respondents are distributed as follows.

Age



Lastly, for the 2192 respondents who indicated their level of religiosity, 22.6% reported being “not religious”, 11.6% reported being “not very religious”, 22.0% reported being “neutral”, 26.0% reported being “somewhat religious”, and 17.8% reported being “very religious”; meanwhile respondents self-reported their financial situation as: Excellent (14.9%), Good (44.7%), Fair (31.5%), Poor (8.9%).

Springfield, Missouri General Results and Key Findings

- **Respondents believe that poverty is a big problem in our society.** Of those surveyed, 98.3% of respondents labeled poverty as a problem, with 76.2% calling it a big problem. Additionally, 53.6% said that this is due to “circumstances beyond [the people in poverty’s] control,” rather than them “not doing enough” to alleviate their poverty, which 34.4% believe. Furthermore, 74.6% of respondents assume that most people living in poverty are in fact working, but do not earn enough money, with only 19.1% saying that most people in poverty are unemployed. Therefore, most respondents believe that poverty is a systemic issue in the United States, rather than solely caused by individual circumstances.
- **However, respondents overwhelmingly said that their personal financial situations are a result of their individual actions.** When these respondents were asked about their own financial situations, 15% described their personal financial situation as “excellent,” 44.7% as “good,” 31.5% as “fair,” and 8.9% as “poor.” A majority, 75.3% of respondents believe that their personal financial situations are due to “[their] own effort,” 15.3% says that it is a result of “things others have done for [them],” and 9.4% believe it is just “good luck.”
- **Respondents identified low wages, being a single parent, drug abuse, mental illness, and poor quality of education, as the top 5 causes of poverty.** Each of these issues was identified as one of the top 5 reasons by more than 40% of the respondents.

Causes of poverty	Percentage that placed this issue in the top 5 causes of poverty
Low Wages	70.42%
Being a Single Parent	64.79%
Drug Abuse	59.56%
Mental Illness	52.75%
Poor Quality Education	44.05%
Lack of Motivation	39.63%
Medical Bills	36.43%
Welfare System	34.40%
Shortage of Jobs	20.56%
Decline in Moral Values	18.21%
Immigration	5.41%

When asked to identify the top 5 reasons for poverty from this list, 14.25% selected “other,” and only 3.56% marked that “none” of these were a reason for poverty.

- **A slight majority, 50.3%, respondents believe that it is the government’s role to assist those in need.** Half of respondents believed that public programs addressing poverty do not “go far enough to help [people in poverty] live decently.” The alternative, selected by 32.9% of

respondents, was that “poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return,” while the remaining 17.1% did not know which they agreed with more. More people, but not a majority at 41.9%, thought that the government is not spending enough on poverty programs, with 7.4% saying society is spending the right amount, and 32% saying the government spends too much. Roughly the same percentage, 41.3%, said they are willing to pay more in taxes. However, more, but not a majority at 45.7%, say they were not willing to pay more.

Of the proposed solutions that the government could implement to address poverty, a majority of respondents “strongly support” improving public education and expanding job training programs. Additionally, a majority of respondents had “some support” or “strongly [supported]” expanding subsidized daycare, increasing the minimum wage, expanding public employment programs, requiring public schools to teach moral values and work ethic, medical care programs, and increasing tax credits for low income workers.

Proposed solutions to poverty	Do not support	Very little support	Neutral	Some support	Strongly support
Improving public schools in low-income areas	2.4	2.9	10.6	21.8	62.4
Expanding job-training programs	1.8	2.3	11.2	30.3	54.4
Expanding subsidized daycare	5.5	5.3	16.4	25.0	47.8
Increasing the minimum wage	17.2	10.6	17.8	16.8	37.7
Expanding public employment programs	4.6	6.1	21.8	32.9	34.6
Requiring public schools to teach about moral values and work ethic	15.7	12.6	19.4	17.8	34.5
Spending more money on medical care for poor people	11.1	12.3	22.3	19.9	34.4
Increasing tax credits for low income workers	9.6	9.3	21.3	26.3	33.5
Spending more on housing for poor people	12.4	14.9	29.3	21.5	21.9
Guaranteeing everyone a minimum income	32.2	14.3	18.8	12.9	21.8
Making food stamps more available	21.3	17.4	23.9	18.4	18.9
Increasing cash assistance for families	24.4	21.8	27.6	12.5	13.7
Putting more police in low-income areas	19.0	20.7	33.1	14.5	12.6
Making it harder to get divorced	60.0	15.0	12.7	5.6	6.6

Outside of government solutions, a majority of respondents, 54.3%, felt that it is the role of the private sector to “assist those in need.” However, only 43.5% felt that it was an individual’s responsibility to “assist those in need.” Almost every respondent (96.6%) indicated that they personally had “contributed to efforts designed to help the poor.”

Demographic Differences in Responses

Age and race did not have any statistical difference in determining responses. Gender, political ideology, and self-reported religiosity did influence responses.

Results by Gender of the Respondent

- **Female respondents are more likely to feel that poverty is a systemic problem than male respondents.** When asked, “How big of a problem poverty is in our society,” 81% of women, compared to 62.5% of men, described it as “a big problem.” In fact, women were 2.3 times more likely than men to describe poverty as “a big problem” as opposed to “somewhat of a problem”, 6.2 times more likely to view poverty as being a big problem rather than “a small problem”, and over 10 times more likely to regard poverty as a big problem over “not a problem”.
- **Male respondents are more likely to think that people in poverty are there because of their own actions.** By a margin of 16.8%, men were more likely to hold the opinion that “people are not doing enough to get themselves out of poverty” (47.1% compared to 30.3%), while a majority of women (57%) think that people are poor because of “circumstances beyond their control.” Moreover, more than three-fourths of women, 77.4%, indicated that they believed that most people are poor because, while they work, they cannot earn enough money, and only 16.8% believe it is because poor people do not work (compared to 66.2% and 26.1% of men, respectively). Men were also 6.8% more likely than women to believe that people who take government welfare have lower “moral values” than other Americans do. There are also differences in the responses of men and women regarding the top five causes of poverty and the proposed solutions to poverty.
- **Women are more likely to view government assistance as a necessity for people in poverty.** A majority of women, 52.8%, responded that “poor people have hard lives because government benefits don’t go far enough,” and “it is primarily the role of the government to assist those in need” (at 56.3%). Fewer men thought both of these statements were true, but both men and women were unlikely to favor paying more in taxes to help the poor.

Demographic Explanations

Researchers speculate on the reasons for the difference in responses between men and women. While levels of education between these two groups were roughly the same, women were more liberal and less religious. Female respondents are also more likely to rate their financial situation as “fair” or “poor,” as opposed to “good” and “excellent.” These demographic differences could account for the difference in perceptions.

The lived experiences of women in our society could explain the differences in views. For example, more women than men chose “low wages” and “single parent families” as top five reasons for poverty. A significant amount of research has noted that women tend to make less than men on average and often in cases of divorce or the dissolution of a relationship, are the primary caregivers to children. Women were also more likely to list “health care bill” and “mental health challenges” among top five reasons for

poverty. Perhaps a lack of equity in the healthcare system is the cause of these answers. Prior to a few Affordable Care Act legislative efforts, women would often pay more for health care/insurance in their lifetimes than men (Denver Post, 2009), even before factoring in the cost of childbirth (for women who do have children). The sample is also not representative of the overall population in regards to gender, resulting in a skew toward female perceptions of poverty.

Results by Political Ideology

Political ideology plays a large role in the way people perceive the issue of poverty in the Springfield community. As noted, an overwhelming majority of respondents (98.3%) think poverty is a problem. However, those with liberal ideology were 2.9 times more likely to label it “a big problem.” Additionally, conservative/moderately conservative respondents were significantly more likely to believe that people were poor because they “are not doing enough to help themselves” (61.8%/60.7%) compared to moderates (38.9%) and moderately liberal/liberal respondents (15.9%/7.9%). Moderately liberal and liberal respondents were more likely to believe that people are poor because of “circumstances beyond their control” (73.2%/84.6%). Conservative/moderately conservative respondents split on whether or not people who accept welfare have lower or the same moral values than other Americans, while moderate and moderately liberal/liberal respondents were more likely to say those in poverty had the same moral values.

Respondent’s political ideology also contributed to their opinions of the top five causes of poverty and the potential solutions. In addition, liberal respondents were more likely to say that it is the government’s responsibility to address poverty, while conservative respondents feel that it is the private sector’s responsibility (nonprofits and churches). Correspondingly, moderately liberal/liberal respondents were more likely to be willing to pay additional taxes, while a majority of moderates and moderately conservative/conservative respondents were not. All ideologies say they contribute to efforts designed to help the poor at roughly the same rate.

Support for Solutions by Political Ideology			
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
Increasing the minimum wage	26.5%	45.8%	80.0%
Increasing tax credits for low income workers	40.9%	55.6%	75.7%
Increasing cash assistance for families	8.0%	15.4%	46.7%
Expanding subsidized daycare	51.1%	70.9%	89.2%
Spending more money on medical care for poor people	25.0%	48.5%	79.1%
Spending more on housing for poor people	18.8%	33.9%	67.5%
Making food stamps more available	14.2%	27.0%	60.7%
Guaranteeing everyone a minimum income	13.1%	27.1%	55.1%
Requiring public schools to teach about moral values and work ethic	69.5%	58.4%	36.0%
Expanding public employment programs	57.2%	63.8%	77.1%
Expanding job-training programs	80.0%	80.9%	90.6%
Improving public schools in low-income areas	74.8%	80.3%	93.3%
Making it harder to get divorced	21.7%	11.6%	5.7%
Putting more police in low-income areas	36.5%	26.7%	21.1%

Demographic Explanations

Women and those with a graduate school level of education were more likely to be liberal. Additionally, conservative/moderately conservative respondents were more likely to describe their financial situation as “excellent” or “good.” Age is also a potential factor, as the older the respondent, the more likely they identified as conservative or moderately conservative.

Results by Self-Reported Religiosity

Political ideology was a statistically significant correlation in responses, but statistically, political affiliation did not necessarily correlate with religiosity. For example, there are often both liberal and conservative denominations or segments of the Christian religion. However, conservative and moderately conservative respondents are 4.3 times more likely than their neutral or liberal counterparts to identify at a higher level of religiosity; for example, as “somewhat religious” or “very religious” as opposed to “neutral” or a lower level. Based on the results of this study, political ideology explains more of a population individual’s perceptions of poverty than does religious devotion. Moderate liberals and liberals were 3 times as likely to view poverty as more of a problem when compared with their moderate or conservative counterparts who identify at the same level of religiosity. Conversely, somewhat religious and very religious individuals are just as, and no more, likely to hold an increased perception of poverty as a problem than their neutral, not very, or not religious counterparts who hold similar political views.

In the population studied, religiosity is not correlated with the degree of an individual’s perception of poverty as a problem. A respondent’s level of religiosity does not affect whether or not the respondent believes poverty is a problem, but it may influence how they view the causes and solutions. For instance, a majority (54.9%) of “very religious” respondents believed that individuals are “spending too little” to assist poor people (the only demographic group in the study that was most likely to believe that). Even still, the differences in responses for causes of and solutions to poverty are less severe between “not religious” and “very religious” than liberal and conservative.

Support for Solutions by Religiosity			
	Not Religious	Neutral	Religious
Increasing the minimum wage	68.75%	55.76%	42.03%
Increasing tax credits for low income workers	68.28%	57.88%	53.91%
Increasing cash assistance for families	39.74%	23.64%	17.08%
Expanding subsidized daycare	82.81%	71.33%	65.64%
Spending more money on medical care for poor people	70.21%	48.65%	44.61%
Spending more on housing for poor people	56.11%	41.80%	34.28%
Making food stamps more available	51.78%	32.57%	28.28%
Guaranteeing everyone a minimum income	50.36%	32.20%	23.83%
Requiring public schools to teach about moral values and work ethic	40.54%	54.73%	60.55%
Expanding public employment programs	74.96%	64.56%	62.68%
Expanding job-training programs	87.71%	81.53%	83.73%
Improving public schools in low-income areas	88.75%	82.70%	81.07%
Making it harder to get divorced	4.99%	11.59%	18.33%
Putting more police in low-income areas	19.06%	27.44%	33.71%

Results By Experience With Poverty

Less than 1% of respondents believe that poverty is “not a problem”. (The more precise percentage is 0.6 after removing the 1% of total respondents who responded that they “did not know” how big of a problem poverty is in our society today). Since the self-reported current financial situation of individuals in this 98% of the sample are meaningfully distributed across the four categories: Excellent (15.0%), Good (44.8%), Fair (31.3%), Poor (8.9%), the researchers decided, as in the national study, to compare one’s financial situation and if one’s financial status increased the likelihood of a respondent reporting that they believe that poverty is a problem.

The data indicates that individuals in better financial situations feel that that poverty is less of a problem compared to those in poor financial situations, though the association may not be as dramatic as some might expect. The sample data provides evidence that when comparing individuals in the population whose categorical responses when self-reporting their financial situation were adjacent in the list {*Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor*}, the individual with a better financial situation is roughly 1.4 times more likely to believe that poverty is less of a problem. To alleviate concerns stemming from the relatively low numbers of respondents who felt that poverty was a “small problem” or “not a problem”, the researchers performed the same analyses as above on aggregated data. The 1.4 likelihood in the previous paragraph remained unchanged.

National Survey Data Comparisons

As discussed above, the original survey conducted by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government was conducted in 2000. Significant reforms and social conversations have occurred in the last several decades. Some similarities and differences were noted by researchers in comparing 2000 national results and 2018 Springfield Missouri survey results.

Similarities in Survey Results Between National Surveys and the Springfield, Missouri Study

In both the 2000 national study and 2018 Springfield, Missouri study:

- **Respondents believe that poverty is a problem.** In the 2000 national study, when they are asked about it directly, most Americans thought that poverty is still a problem in this country. In the Springfield, Missouri study, of those surveyed, 98.3% of respondents labeled poverty as a problem, with 76.2% calling it a big problem.
- **Respondents are divided over the causes of poverty.** In the national study, about half the public says the poor are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, and the other half says that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor. These results were also evident in the Springfield, Missouri study with many citing personal circumstances or decisions as the primary causes of poverty.
- **Respondents believe that poor people work, but that their jobs don’t necessarily pull them out of poverty.** In the national study, more than 60% of Americans said that they think that most poor people work but that wages are not either not enough or that employment alone, lifts individuals, families, and households above the poverty line. These results were also closely mirrored in the Springfield Missouri study with over 60% (regardless of demographic differences) supporting education and work training programs, and over 35% noting support for increases in wages.
- **Conservatives and Liberals express substantially different opinions about poverty.** Similar to the national study, Springfield Missouri respondents varied greatly based upon political ideology.
- **Experience of familiarity with poverty does not necessarily impact what people believe are causes or solutions to poverty .** To compare sympathy toward those living in poverty among

residents of Springfield and the surrounding area, we considered those respondents who reported whether they or family members or friends “would be considered low income” (86.2% responded “yes” and 13.8%, “no”) and who believe that either “people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty” (38.1%) or “circumstances beyond their control cause people to be poor” (61.9%). The sample data in our local study does not provide evidence that there is an association between a member of a population or their family or friends being considered low income and their belief as to the cause of poverty. This is in alignment with the national study.

Differences in Survey Results Between National Surveys and the Springfield, Missouri Study

- **Respondents are unsure about the effectiveness of government programs for the poor.** In the 2000 national study, Americans expressed some ambivalence about government programs aimed at helping the poor. About half believed that government programs aren’t having much impact one way or the other on the condition of those considered poor. In the Springfield, MO study, a slight majority, 50.3%, respondents believe that it is the government’s role to assist those in need. It is significant to note that 54% also believe that it is significant for the private sector to also address poverty.
- **Racial and Ethnic Differences in Perceptions.** In the 2000 study, statistical differences were noted among different racial and ethnic groupings. In Springfield, Missouri racial and ethnic differences were not statistically significant.

Discussion of Survey Results

Individual Experiences and Poverty

As noted in the survey results, many believe that poverty is both structural and also is a product of individual circumstances and decisions. Poverty is an experience for many individuals and households that is inherently complex. Individual needs such as experiences of violence in the home, individual or household illness and health needs, individualized legal or education needs for example, can all impact a household’s experience, what additional resources may be beneficial for the household, and ultimately the solutions that may assist in lifting a household above the poverty line.

Social and Community Support in Addressing Poverty

While individual circumstances can influence the experience of poverty for many, so can social and economic trends that impact the larger society as a whole. For example, the recession of 2008-2009, impacted available resources for many families, including those considered ‘low-income.’ As evidenced by survey results, many Springfield, Missouri respondents believe that social and community support systems, such as the private sector, education sector, and employment sector, can contribute to improved outcomes for those under resourced households.

The Role Of Policy in Addressing Poverty

Many respondents believed that increased social and community support is initiated primarily by policy. These could include reforms to current aid programs, strengthening the public school education system, providing workforce training programs, and increasing wages among other solutions. Specific needs of communities, such as transportation issues, food insecurity issues, or other concerns can also impact the experience of poverty and can be addressed by both the public and private sector.

COVID-19 Considerations & Survey Replication

It is significant to note that at a press release of this report on October 10th, 2020, the realities of COVID-19 and its potential implications on increased poverty rates were briefly discussed (given that the data in this study was from 2018), as well as how the pandemic has influenced viewpoints and initiated several conversations in the United States surrounding the complex and correlated causes and impetus of household economic difficulty. Also at the press conference, the possibility of redistributing the survey in 2021 was also discussed to measure any potential change in perceptions since COVID-19.

Community Engagement in Social Issues Through Large Scale Surveys

The very purpose of such large scale attitudinal social/human service surveys is to engage community members in conversations surrounding social and health related issues, with the hope of increasing community ownership and engagement in future policy and public/private efforts at addressing such social issues. It was the hope of the researchers that the report would provide information about public perceptions of poverty as well as inform the general community, community leaders, and public officials on the views of the public and the types of possible local interventions that might be considered desirable (as well as the factors impacting proposed interventions). In October, 2020 the written results of the survey were released to the general public and included information on local poverty initiatives and opportunities for individual or group volunteerism.

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