



A Teen View of Young Adult Poverty in Idaho:

An evaluation of essays

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Idaho high school seniors face the future with optimism even though they expect to spend the next few years in poverty. Responses from Eastern Idaho teens to a recent essay contest¹ sponsored by *Partners for Prosperity*² revealed a willingness to endure temporary poverty in order to improve their long term standard of living. Most respondents have hope that acquiring a college education will lead to a prosperous life in the future even if it means making sacrifices, such as living with parents, not buying a lot of things, and avoiding debt while in college. However, there is a concern that the community could do more to assist students to be prepared for college and in completing degrees.

Students' response indicate today's teens seem neither surprised nor alarmed about the recent U.S. Census Bureau estimates that place Idaho first for the highest proportion of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 living in poverty. In fact, several teens openly state that they are willing to live in poverty now if it means a better future

later. However, many teens would like more assistance in the form of financial aid, scholarships, and community education in order to ensure their success.

Causes of Poverty

I believe Idaho has the highest poverty rate for this age group for many reasons. However the main contributors to our high number of indigent young adults are a low minimum wage, and agriculturally based economy, and the fact that most eighteen to twenty-four year-olds are at a transitional point in their lives. (169)³

Nearly half (43%) of the senior essays indicate a primary reason for poverty in Idaho during the young adult years is due to the lack of living wage jobs available to people in this age range. Many suggest the lack of available employment and the current low minimum wage create a situation where poverty for this age group is almost inevitable. These teens indicate the lack of jobs is due to the transition from an agricultural society to a modern society. Farming income is no longer the primary source of income for Idaho residents. Family farms can no longer support the traditional farming families in Idaho. Yet professional, technical and other positions in the non-farming sector are limited. There simply are not enough jobs to go around. The limit of available jobs makes it important that individuals have job related experience and training in order to compete in the job market. However, achieving the experience needed to compete in the job market seems a daunting ordeal to some of the respondents especially since the economy and the cost of living are thought to be getting worse.

Still, these seniors are not looking to others to make space for them but are hoping to make their own way by completing high school, obtaining a college education, saving money and avoiding debt. "It is clear that one can not live on minimum wage. In effect,

a good paying job will come from a good education, and this is necessary for young adults who intend to make it on their own,” (153)⁴. Many associate poverty with the lack of education but also recognize that the cost of a college and advanced technical programs can be prohibitive. Getting into debt is a concern for Idaho teens as many seem to connect debt with poverty. “College students are faced with huge money issues, including a hefty tuition, fees, and the cost of pricey books. Credit cards can cause debt and many problems,” (174)⁵.

Many indicate they feel unprepared to be on their own. “The problem is that Idaho lacks the tools to give students a proper education. . . . Idaho teens are not getting a good education in high school, so when they graduate, they are not prepared for a higher education causing them to live off a minimum wage income,” (162)⁶. They indicate part of the problem is the lack of knowledge about money management, financial aid, and other programs. “Most young people cannot support themselves; they do not have the know-how or the financial assistance to live on their own,” (156)⁷.

Other factors commonly recognized by teens as contributing to poverty include the age of first marriage and /or having children before becoming financially established. “In addition to low wages, young adults are encouraged to get married early and start families right away. Churches, families, and friends influence these young people. In Idaho, it is socially acceptable to get married before careers and financial security are established,” (151)⁸. Sexual activity leading to teen pregnancy is thought to be a primary cause of long term poverty that may lead to intergenerational deficiencies. Some note poverty is sometimes inherited from parents, especially single parents, and may lead to coping behaviors perpetuating the problem. Divorce, death of a parent, illness of a

family member, and lack of parental supervision and assistance were also factors linked with poverty.

The use of alcohol, drugs, and other substances that lead to addictions were said to be closely associated with young adult poverty. Negative influences of friends and family can be contributing factors. “These days’ young adults are getting themselves into a lot more trouble than they think. Instead of going to classes, getting a job, and making a life for themselves; they are going out and getting drunk, hanging with friends, and spending money on pointless things,” (166)⁹. “They party and hang out with their friends rather than make something of themselves,” (164A)¹⁰. These behaviors were said by some to lead to crime and arrest, mental illness, and disease. Nearly half of the respondents associate young adult poverty with lack of responsibility, an unwillingness to work hard, poor money management, and/or self indulgence. “Many young adults are too lazy to go and look for a job, and many can’t keep a job because of the same laziness,” (177)¹¹. “Laziness is one thing we all find in ourselves once in a while, but for one to get in this type of habit is ridiculous,” (178)¹².

Other noted factors thought to contribute to young adult poverty include: (a) Inability of the government to meet individual needs, (b) relying on government, welfare programs, or community programs for sustenance, (c) lack of community and individual resources, facilities, money or possessions, (d) media glamorization and advertising, (e) the cost of medical care, (f) taxes, (g) ageism, and (h) racism. Overall, however, Idaho teens seem to accept young adult poverty as part of the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is almost a rite of passage to be endured in order to get to the next stage of life. “I, like many others, plan to acquire hopefully a small amount of debt while I live

with my parents, go to school, and work the 10-15 hours I can spare. If I can make do, and go without for six years of my life (or in other words, “live in poverty”) it will be well worth it to see my future family able to live far above the level of poverty,” (172)¹³.

Solutions to poverty

Getting a college education was the primary solution to poverty offered by the essay respondents. Nearly 55 % of those who wrote papers on this issue indicate getting a college education is an important step in combating personal poverty. Additionally, many identified the need for more financial aid, scholarships, and grants to help ensure all of those in Idaho who wish to achieve a degree are not prohibited financially from doing so. “My personal suggestion would be to start more programs giving young adults in low-income families the ability to attend college. It seems that there are just not enough scholarship programs to go around,” (167)¹⁴. “One other (thing) that could help the poverty rate in Idaho go down is to offer more scholarship money so young adults can afford to go to college so they won’t go into poverty,” (155)¹⁵.

Students also indicate an awareness that the first step in getting a college education is to complete high school. Many noted the high drop-out rate for high school students in Idaho and were concerned that we address this issue. Several suggest the community could help in this regard by starting with younger children and stressing the importance of education, doing poverty awareness workshops and advertising, and improving the educational experience of Idaho youth. Others suggest some kind of apprentice program would be helpful to both college and technical bound young adults.

However, employment, wages, and job availability is a primary concern for Idaho teens. Some suggest the minimum wage should be raised so that young adults could support themselves while going to college. Some note the link between having an educated work force and improving the economy. “A greater number of educated members in our society could also attract bigger companies, which would in turn produce a greater number of high paying jobs and boost our economy both with the services the companies would provide and with the greater cash-flow of those employees,” (176)¹⁶. Some suggest communities through out the region should concentrate on bringing living wage jobs to the region and supporting tourism. “One way Idaho could prevent poverty is to give businesses in Idaho tax breaks or utility breaks so they can stay in business longer and keep jobs in Idaho so people could have better paying jobs,” (155)¹⁷. Other students suggested that governmental assistance should focus on individuals within this age range. “Idaho government needs to institute programs that effect persons of all ages especially young adults. Such programs should include wage and income support and assistance programs for young adults even if they are not enrolled in college,” (162)¹⁸. Still others suggest intervention focusing on the cost of living and improving economic factors in general.

Most of the respondents also note the problem of poverty is not just an institutional problem but also the result of individual habits and behaviors. They stress the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own lives, to be willing to endure temporary hardship, and to do their part in gaining education and experience. The bottom line for some is that the solution to poverty is “hard work” coupled with good money management. “I have started working hard and saving money so I don’t end up living at

a low poverty level. Right now I'm working hard to change my life. Keeping my mind at work I know I can reach great distances, I only have to work hard to get there," (165)¹⁹. They also said it is important to abstain from sexual activities and to postpone marriage until college is completed. Many indicate being aware of their buying habits and trying to cut back on expenses is vital to economic success. Many also see a need for families to help young adults become established and to help provide some support during the early adult years.

However, the overall sentiment of these high school respondents is that the solution to poverty is "time." Time to get an education, time to get experience, time to learn money management, time, in essence, to transition from a child to an adult. Many see poverty in the early twenties and late teen years as normal, maybe even healthy. "Young adults around this area seem as normal as any other," (173)²⁰. "I don't think that living in poverty for a limited period of time, such as while attending college to get an education so I can stay out of poverty for the rest of my life, is such a terrible thing", (179)²¹. Poverty in the early adult years, as one student suggests, may be the best education young adults in this age group receive. It may teach money management, hard work, and community activism and in the end lower the overall poverty rate. At least, that is what the students of Idaho are hoping and they say hope is important.

Community Programs

High school seniors of Eastern Idaho seem to recognize there are many programs designated to help those in poverty. Essay participants identified twenty-two different programs and agencies that focus on poverty. However, they suggest these or other

programs should focus more on educating the youth of this state about poverty and about the available resources. Students suggest that workshops, seminars, or classes should be offered to the community and to the youth in the community to increase knowledge of poverty issues, money management, budgeting, applying for financial aid, etc.

Other ways the youth suggest communities can become involved is by having more community based events, building and maintaining community centers, offering kindness, and providing scholarships for the young adults that seek college education.

Summary

The high school senior essays submitted by the teens in Eastern Idaho suggest the future of Idaho youth is not as bleak as statistics may suggest. These teens see young adult poverty as a passage to adulthood. They are aware of the problems with the economy in Idaho but are hoping to do their part in becoming educated and experienced. The biggest concern seems to be the lack of living wage jobs in Idaho. Working to bring jobs to Idaho, addressing the minimum wage, and improving the economy were said to be tasks individuals, communities, and government should work together to complete.

¹ Methodology

An essay contest was held by Partners for Prosperity (P4P) in the Spring of 2005. Those eligible to participate in the contest were seniors in high school and/or seventeen or eighteen year old residents of one of the sixteen counties that P4P serves and the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Essay information was delivered or sent to every high school in the sixteen county region where seniors in high school were in attendance including alternative schools. Three cash prizes were awarded to participants in the amount of \$400, \$300, and \$200 for the top three entries. Certificates of participation were mailed to everyone submitting a paper. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent allowing their essays to be evaluated and published. Parents were also asked to give informed consent. A total of 37 entries were received, read and analyzed. Contest entries were judged by a community panel of four persons. All identifying marks were removed from the papers before they were judged or evaluated. A careful reading and modified content analysis of the essays was conducted separate from the judging staff by P4P research personnel. This report is a summary of those essays.

² *Partners for Prosperity: New Beginnings for Eastern Idaho* (P4P) is a non-profit organization with a mission to reduce poverty in Eastern Idaho. P4P receives funding from the Northwest Area Foundation as a ventures community.

³ Each essay respondent was assigned a number for purposes of judging and maintaining anonymity. The reference numbers in this paper correspond with the numbers assigned to the essay from which quotes were drawn. Endnotes indicate the sex, age, and school that the person writing the paper attended. Number 169 is a paper written by a female, 18 year old, senior from Century High school in Pocatello.

⁴ 153 was written by a female, 18 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

⁵ 174 was written by a female, 18 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

⁶ 162 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

⁷ 156 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

⁸ 151 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

⁹ 166 was written by a female, 17 year-old from New Horizon alternative school in Pocatello.

¹⁰ 164A was written by a female, 16 year-old from New Horizon alternative school in Pocatello.

¹¹ 177 was written by a male, 18 year-old, senior from Ririe High School.

¹² 178 was written by a male, 18 year-old, senior from Ririe High School.

¹³ 172 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

¹⁴ 167 was written by a 15 year old female from Bannock County.

¹⁵ 155 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

¹⁶ 176 was written by a female senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

¹⁷ 155 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

¹⁸ 162 was written by a female, 17 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

¹⁹ 165 was written by a male incarcerated at Juvenile Justice Center in St. Anthony.

²⁰ 173 was written by a female, 18 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.

²¹ 179 was written by a male, 18 year-old, senior from Century High School in Pocatello.