

2016 SYMPOSIUM SERIES

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THE IMPACT OF WIDENING OPPORTUNITY GAPS: A COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

DEFINING POVERTY:

- The state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions

(Merriam-Webster)

- In support of United Way of the Midlands' mission, community investments are focused on assisting individuals and families that are at-risk for, or live in poverty, with limited or no access to food, housing, safety or health care because of unmet needs or crisis situations. We also seek to remove barriers to academic success and help to increase employability and economic stability.

(United Way of the Midlands)

Poverty affects individuals, families and the communities in which they live. The first step toward understanding its impact on the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area is to consider the data:

TOTAL NUMBER IN POVERTY

2005	81,917	(10.3%)
2014	106,000	(12.3%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY

2005	29,192	14.2%
2014	38,590	17%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

The statistics indicate poverty has increased in our community. Most would agree such need severely limits the potential of those who live in it. Poverty ravages families, depresses entire neighborhoods and prevents communities like ours from reaching their true and full-potential. But identifying the most effective ways to reduce poverty is a much more complicated matter.

On June 16, 2016, United Way of the Midlands and partners hosted a symposium on "The Impact of Widening Opportunity Gaps." More than 500 members of our community gathered to talk, listen and strengthen the bonds of collaboration on addressing poverty in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area.

In the broadest of discussions, education and health and family structure are commonly cited as key factors. In the context of American self-determination, study and hard work are (often) mentioned as a means to overcome poverty. The vast majority of Americans polled agree that everyone should have equal opportunities to succeed.

Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard University professor of public policy believes the gap between rich and poor has widened over the past several decades and “the American Dream” remains well out of reach for some. His latest book “Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis” explores this premise.

Professor Putnam provided the keynote address at the June 16 symposium in Omaha. The event was part of a series of community discussions sponsored by United Way, Buffett Early Childhood Institute, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, University of Nebraska Medical Center and University of Nebraska Omaha.

Together, the partners sought to combine thought-provoking trend data with local insights – to engage community leaders and symposium guests in an interactive local discussion about poverty and the most promising ways to reduce it.

PUTNAM ON POVERTY

While social mobility in our society continues to be influenced by race and gender, Robert Putnam’s premise is blunt: the widening opportunity gaps for the poor today are influenced even more by income inequality. He offers a comparison between “now” and the 1950’s and ‘60’s, when most of his fellow high school graduates achieved greater education and economic success than their parents. Rich and poor were in class together every day and interacted more often. It was common practice for community trustholders to consider the greater good for all of its young residents, calling them “our kids.”

Since then, the economy faltered. Factories closed and jobs were lost, a trend that continues today.

Fast forward to 2016, where Putnam says children in poverty are increasingly isolated – from the middle and wealthy classes. Many cannot afford the fee for extracurricular activities at school that were once available to all. The lost opportunities begin to add up as our youth miss out on chances to develop critical social and emotional skills that employers expect – opportunities that should be available to all of our kids.

Putnam’s data reflects the grim reality, at the family and society level. He measured what he calls “Goodnight Moon Time” when parents and children share books and end-of-the-day conversation. Families in poverty spend 40% less time in this kind of interaction than the upper third of U.S. residents. While there’s an overall decline in “family dinners” at all income levels, poor families report dining together at a significantly lower rate. While the reasons vary from family-to-family, reduced engagement has an impact on a child’s important personal connections with their parents and siblings. Participation in school-based extracurricular activities reveals an even bigger gap between the rich and poor in the United States.

Putnam also noted that “family income” is now a stronger indicator for completing college than a child’s academic abilities. As a percentage of the whole, low-income students with higher test scores are much less likely to complete college than lower-scoring kids from wealthy families.

“We all pay when kids underachieve, and fall behind” said Putnam, because the sum total of all children –their successes and failures – shapes our society.

He spoke with optimism however, when he said “we have been here before” in reference to how the heartland addressed income and social segregation of 1890-Early 1900’s. With financing from bankers in Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and South Dakota, the American High School was created – providing additional education to increase the skills and potential of “our kids” at that point in time.

“We can do it again,” said Putnam, with that same sense of “we” and in fact noted that Omaha is at the epicenter of early childhood education already with its homegrown Educare model. That kind of shared investment in everyone’s kids, he said, was key to American growth in the past. “It is the key to restoring the American Dream today.”



PANEL DISCUSSION “Our Community’s Challenges and Opportunities”

Following the keynote address, Bellevue University President Dr. Mary Hawkins moderated a lively panel discussion that included Robert Putnam and six of our area’s key local business, civic and nonprofit leaders.

Putnam noted that there are communities banding together to work on critical issues related to the opportunity gap, along with the National Community Foundation and its members. He also provided examples of such collaboration, including South Carolina’s vocational training network that grew with the arrival of auto manufacturing plants across the region.

The panel of local leaders was prepared with challenging questions for Putnam, and members also offered their own assessments of our metro area’s challenges. We offer this summary of their exchange:

Dr. Samuel Meisels – Buffett Early Childhood Institute/UNL: Through working with the eleven superintendents of the learning community, we have a plan that’s been begins at birth and goes through the end of third grade for 4,000 children living in high concentrations of poverty. We’re doing home visiting once a week. We’re working to increase the children’s social capital – things we do to get along with one another, learn how to problem solve, to be curious and know how to communicate. Those are the things that young children acquire, early on, through these kinds of experiences. And what the economists say is that the return on investment in those years is staggeringly greater than trying to teach those kinds of skills later on. I believe this is the place we can make a big difference.

Dr. Mary Hawkins – Bellevue University: Starting young is important as we try to provide children with social capital. It is hard to resolve issues by the time young people reach college-level, but many of our organizations are working with faculty to build some of those things into our curriculums.

David Brown – Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce: Neighborhoods with an identity, with mini economies and opportunities are important to addressing poverty. We need to build the economy in a way that brings better jobs for all, and there are a number of organizations doing that across our community. We know collaboration with nonprofit groups is critical when it comes to working in neighborhoods with more poverty. We need to pay attention to all parts of our community, to engage businesses and provide opportunities for all to prosper.

Carolina Quezada – Latino Center of the Midlands: Place really does matter. While class may play a role, our community is still segregated by race and income. I think we sometimes overlook the important role that geographic boundaries and neighborhoods play in the way our children experience the world and our community. Where we live matters. We need to acknowledge young people for who they are, and how our Latinos and African Americans contribute to the American fabric of life.

Thomas H. Warren, Sr. – Urban League of Nebraska: Kids need to be engaged in pro-social activity, because you have to have an alternative to gangs and juvenile delinquency. Involvement in extracurricular activities is an important advantage for them. We need to prepare the next generation’s workforce – keep them motivated and engaged. My sister, Brenda Council, puts it this way: “when there’s no hope, consequences don’t matter.”

Dr. Mark Foxall – Douglas County Department of Corrections: There’s a lot of need, a lot of mental illness among the jail and prison populations. Generations of families come through the system now. Our jail houses more than 1,400 prisoners a day. We have rehabilitation efforts to help them return to society, but more help is required. We’re working on that infrastructure now, so there are treatment opportunities once people leave the jail behind and go back into the community.

Jennifer Skala – Nebraska Children and Families Foundation: Poverty puts a lot of stress on families. They have to decide which bills to pay first and which ones they think they can pay later – which things they can put off, like health care or child care, because they’re so expensive. Maybe they decide they have to pay the rent, but feel they can perhaps risk other things. Their choices may not make sense to others, but we all need to build some trust and try to understand the challenges that poverty brings. These families need a voice.



THE LOCAL CALL TO ACTION:

Symposium guests were encouraged to share what they learned and how they, as individuals, plan to make an impact on local poverty and the widening opportunity gaps – going forward:

- “This is a big problem in our community, and it’s only going to get bigger if the community doesn’t come together to fix it.”
- “As a faculty member at a college that specializes in medicine, I hope to share the dynamics of poverty with those who will be providing medical care to poor patients in the future.”
- “We have made steps in the right direction, and we have far to go.”
- “I learned we have everything in our community that we need to close these gaps that we face. However, we have not gotten to the point where we all have a shared investment in this movement.”
- “Our city’s poverty has increased in recent years. This means we need to take action, or we will continue to marginalize huge groups of capable people.”
- “There will always be ‘haves and have-nots’, but the opportunity exists to turn the ‘have nots’ into the ‘have mores’.”
- “It’s very important to give hope to those who are in poverty.”
- “Focus on ‘we’ not ‘me’. Focus on our children, not ‘mine’ or ‘theirs’.”
- “The word ‘our’ will have a new meaning for me.
- “It gave me ideas on how to start the conversation about economic inequity, and how to address it.”
- “This issue will affect all of our children when they become adults; we must tackle this issue now.”

HOW WILL WE – AS A COMMUNITY – BE RESPONSIBLE?

Open discussion, collaboration and common goals will empower our community to effectively address and reduce poverty across the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area. The symposium partners are committed to nurturing this conversation with future events.

Poverty remains the focus of all United Way of the Midlands donor investments, through a local network of strong, carefully-vetted and results-driven programs. Volunteer opportunities are created with the same ultimate goal in mind: to strengthen our community by reducing poverty.

Together, our community can:

- Identify effective local resources and responses
- Create shared goals for progress
- Embrace practical steps that empower our neighbors to become economically stable, and
- Inspire their steps toward independence.

THE SYMPOSIUM SPONSORS THANK:

- Nebraska Loves Public Schools
- Omaha Community Foundation
- University of New Hampshire

To view a selection of slides from the symposium and regionalized poverty data, please visit: www.unitedwaymidlands.org/opportunity-gaps-symposium.

