



Like Most Americans, Maine People Support Policies to Reduce Poverty by Improving Economic Opportunities

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Today, more than 45.3 million Americans are poor, living on less than \$11,670 a year for an individual or \$23,850 for a family of four. So much deprivation damages families and keeps children from realizing their potential. It weakens communities and drags down the economy.

For decades, poverty and its causes have been debated by experts, politicians, and the public. Discussions and research will certainly continue, but recent national polls indicate that American beliefs about poverty are changing – and the same is true in Maine. As more Americans struggle economically and see friends and neighbors doing the same, they recognize that government must do more to spur job creation and improve wages, benefits, and family security.

Shifting Views about the Causes of Poverty

The U.S. public increasingly recognizes that wealth has been distributed upward and many Americans face multiple difficulties as they try to provide for their families, and beliefs about poverty have changed accordingly, especially in the wake of the recent Great Recession. Sharp shifts are dramatized by two surveys conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* twenty years apart. In 1995, Americans were twice as likely to attribute poverty to personal shortcomings as external conditions, but by June 2014 46% of Americans said that poverty is caused by circumstances outside of people's control, compared to 44% who pointed to lack of personal effort.

Similarly, in a November 2013 survey conducted by the Center for American Progress, 64% of respondents said that people are poor due to external obstacles; and 55% of respondents to a 2014 American Values Survey found people are poor due to structural causes and "that not everyone is given an equal chance to succeed." Yet another national survey done in January 2014 by the Pew Research Center recorded 50% saying that poverty is attributable to circumstances beyond individuals' control compared to just 35% who pointed to lack of hard work. Not surprisingly, all of these findings were recorded at a time when most respondents tell pollsters their own economic circumstances are deteriorating.

Like their fellow citizens nationwide, people in Maine are changing their views about the roots of poverty. In the summer of 2014, Maine Equal Partners and Every Child Matters Education Fund surveyed Maine respondents and found that a strong majority – some 60% – believe that "most people who live in poverty are poor because their jobs don't pay enough, they lack good health care and education, and things cost too much for them to save and move ahead." This view was held by Mainers of many social backgrounds and varied political inclinations; and a simultaneous survey of low-income Maine residents found that 87% identified limited economic opportunities, especially jobs that do not pay enough, as the prime cause of poverty. People's views reflect changing economic circumstances in the state. Although more Maine people have found jobs since 2010, more Maine workers are living under the poverty level and one of every five children is growing up in poverty.

Strong Support for Expanding Economic Opportunities

National polls show that Americans want action to reduce widespread poverty. Four in five respondents to the Pew survey said government has a role in reducing poverty; and seven in ten respondents to the Center for

American Progress survey said they would support cutting poverty in half within ten years through job creation, higher wages, and broader access to education. Two-thirds of people responding to the 2014 American Values Survey said our government should do more to reduce gaps between the rich and the poor.

In Maine as well, men and women of all ages, political persuasions, and income levels agree on the need for a number of policies to fight poverty – even though, in recent years, politicians have moved Maine backwards on these measures.

- **Increase the minimum wage.** This step is supported by 70% of all Mainers and 86% of low-income residents responding to surveys. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the minimum wage would need to be increased to more than \$11 an hour to provide the same purchasing power it did in the 1960s. In 2013, Maine Legislators approved a bill to gradually increase the minimum wage from \$7.50 to \$9.00 an hour, with automatic increases linked to inflation thereafter. But Governor Paul LePage vetoed the bill and the legislature was not able to muster a two-thirds vote to override his veto.
- **Broaden access to higher education.** Numerous studies find that people who earn college degrees earn substantially more than others over a lifetime. In the Maine poll, 78% of all respondents (and 88% of low-income respondents) favor ensuring access to higher education as a strategy to reduce poverty. But Maine has reduced funding for universities and the LePage administration has recommended elimination of the “Parents as Scholars” program that has made higher education more attainable for low-income parents in Maine; the legislature did not agree, but enrollments have declined dramatically.
- **Ensure access to affordable health care.** People without health insurance coverage often leave health problems untreated or face bankruptcy after an unexpected accident or major illness. After the enactment of national health reform in 2010, the federal government offered Maine generous funding to expand MaineCare to cover tens of thousands of additional low-income people, but Governor Paul LePage has repeatedly vetoed bills with bipartisan support to do just that. Instead, he pushed the legislature to cut benefits for 40,000 who were previously covered – making Maine one of only two states to shrink coverage since 2010.

Additional measures that receive strong support in Maine include more affordable housing, new investments in affordable pre-school and child care programs, and improved tax credits for working families. Overall, two thirds of Mainers call upon their leaders to “create more opportunities for families to leave poverty instead of taking help away regardless of their circumstances.” The time has surely come for Maine politicians to listen to what their constituents want and roll up their sleeves to build broader bridges out of poverty.

Read more in “Maine People Agree: Opportunity is the Bridge to a Better Future,” Maine Equal Justice Partners and Every Child Matters Education Fund, October 2014.