

The Complexities of Poverty and Hunger in New York State

Depending on your role in Cooperative Extension, you may or may not have been prepared to work with low income audiences. Poverty and hunger in New York State is a complex issue – not one that can be introduced in just a page or two! As such, our aim with this brief overview is to begin to frame this multifaceted, challenging matter, particularly for those educators who may not have entered into this arena before, and to offer some questions for sincere reflection prior to embarking on the *Seed to Supper* journey as a satellite partner.

We'll offer four resources to give you some reflective foundation.

- 1). **National Geographic: "The New Face of Hunger".**
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/foodfeatures/hunger/>

What she has, Christina says, is a kitchen with nearly enough food most of the time. It's just those dicey moments, after a new bill arrives or she needs gas to drive the kids to town, that make it hard. "We're not starved around here," she says one morning as she mixes up powdered milk for her daughter. "But some days, we do go a little hungry." -- The New Face of Hunger.

It is helpful to put a face to our neighbors who are struggling with food insecurity. Even though this resource doesn't address people in New York State explicitly, their issues are similar. Review this resource. And of course, if you learn of others that are compelling, we would appreciate hearing about them.

- 2). **Confronting Poverty: Tools for Understanding American Inequality.**
<https://confrontingpoverty.org/>

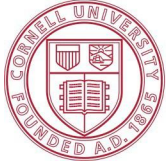
"...between the ages of 25 to 60, 61.8 percent of the population will experience a year below the 20th percentile [of the income distribution], and 42.1 percent will experience a year below the 10th percentile."-- Rank & Hirschl, The Likelihood of Experiencing Relative Poverty over the Life Course.

Faculty at Cornell have been involved in contributing to this important resource. The site offers research-based context for addressing stereotypes, questions, and assumptions we may have about poverty in the United States. We suggest that you peruse the discussion guide as a tool for starting a conversation among staff about how poverty affects our work and vice versa.

- 3). **Cornell Cooperative Extension Program Work Team on Poverty and Economic Hardship.**
<http://povertyaction.cals.cornell.edu/>

Led by Thomas Hirschl, the Poverty and Economic Hardship work team was formed to help explore how CCE can expand its reach in New York State to better serve those in poverty. The Poverty Action website displays research on poverty in New York State, mostly specific to the Southern Tier, as well as the work group's contact information. There may be members in your county or region and it will be helpful to connect with them as resources and potential collaborators.

- 4). **Get to know your own biases and assumptions.**



A **stereotype** is an exaggerated belief, image, or distorted truth about a person or group. This kind of generalization allows for little or no individual differences or social variation. Stereotypes are based on images in mass media or reputations passed along by our parents, peers and other members of society. Stereotypes can be positive or negative.

A **prejudice** is an opinion, prejudgment, or attitude about a group or its individual members. A prejudice can be positive, but in this context it generally implies a negative attitude. Prejudices are often accompanied by ignorance, fear or hatred – they are formed by a complex psychological process that begins with attachment to a close circle of acquaintances, including our workplace colleagues, friends and families. Research demonstrates that biases thought to be absent or extinguished remain as a kind of mental residue in most of us. In *Seed to Supper*, we aim to become consciously committed to egalitarianism and deliberately work to behave without prejudice.

As such, we encourage you to reflect on these questions to get in touch with your own hidden assumptions and biases. This isn't intended to shame or diminish any of us as educators – rather, to surface what may need to be known to be effective with a Seed to Supper program.

Recall an incident that occurred early in your life in which you felt different from people around you.

- What happened?
- How did you feel?
- How did this incident influence the choices you made (or still make) about the future?

What are some things you have heard or learned about “people like you?” (It may be useful to think about this in terms of your identity *and* position at work, for example, are there assumptions you've heard about garden educators or nutrition educators of your race/class/gender/etc.? What other identities and roles do you hold?)

- What's difficult about these things you may have heard or learned?
- What's true about “people like you?”
- Which of these biases or misunderstandings would you like to see ended?
- On the other hand, engaging in sincere and sometimes difficult reflection, are there benefits of being in a group of “people like you?” What are they?

Reflect on those times you may have made assumptions about “people not like you.” Who are those people who are “not like you?” Who can help you see what isn't apparent to you, since they are usually “unconscious,” and what specifically can you do to strengthen your skills in understanding your own assumptions and biases?

- Given this reflection, what can you do right away to minimize the impact of your unconscious bias?

Suggested for further learning: “**Examining Our Unconscious Bias and Perceptual Lens**” by Britt Gamble, Associate Director for Multicultural Affairs in Cornell's School of Industrial & Labor Relations ([online PowerPoint document](#)).