

Lesson Plan: Poverty in America

By Rachel Roberson

Featured resources

[KQED's The Lowdown: What Does it Mean to Live in Poverty in America?](#)



Opening quick write prompt:

What is “the poverty line?” What percentage of Americans do you think are living below the poverty line? Make your best guess to answer both questions; explain your thinking. *Andy Warner/ KQED*

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will define the poverty line and analyze how it is used to make policy.
- Students will evaluate and reflect on the ways the poverty line has changed over time.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What is the poverty line and how has it changed over the years? Is the poverty line an accurate way to identify poor Americans? Why or why not?

About 47 million Americans live in poverty, which means their earnings fall below the federal poverty line. This threshold was developed in the 1960s and is still used to determine if a person or family qualifies for government assistance. Both liberals and conservatives see the poverty line (and related measure, the poverty threshold) as a problematic and inaccurate measure of poverty. For example, it hasn't been updated to reflect the lack of wage growth (the minimum wage is worth less than it was in the 1960s) and is based on the assumption that average families spends a third of their income on food (no longer true). It also doesn't take into account regional differences in the cost of living.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Disparity (n.)	A major difference
Inflation (n.)	A continued increase in the price of goods and services
Plateau (n.)	When there is no noticeable increase or further advancement
Stagnate (v.)	To stop moving forward or developing
Unconditional (adj.)	Not limited in any way, complete and absolute

Direct instruction and guided practice

- Discuss the quick-write prompt to gauge what students already know about the poverty line. Explain that currently about 15% of Americans are living below the poverty line. Ask students to explain why they may have guessed above or below this number.
- Explain that the amount that puts a family above and below the poverty line is adjusted regularly, but that the way it is measured has stayed the same since 1963. Ask: Why could measuring something like the poverty line the same way since the 1960s be problematic? Again, encourage students to make their best guess. ([Find more information about the poverty line here.](#))
- As a class, read the introduction to [The Lowdown post](#) (the short part before the graphic explainer begins).
- **Transition to independent practice:** What are important facts we have already learned about poverty in America? What kinds of questions do you still have?

Independent practice

- Individually or in small groups, students read the graphic in The Lowdown post. While reading, students write three things they learned that surprised them. **Note:** The graphic contains numbers, graphs and other data visualizations that could be confusing. To encourage students to persist through the reading, you can also ask them to write down three things they didn't understand and one (or more) things they would feel comfortable explaining to the class.

Assessment/Reflection

- After reading the graphic, take clarifying questions about it. Some students may have questions that others can explain. Give students the opportunity to answer their peers' questions first before clarifying.
- When everyone understands the graphic, students respond to the following questions in a discussion or as a written reflection:
 - What did you learn that surprised you about the poverty line?
 - Is it possible to work full time and still be under the poverty line? If so, explain how this happens.
 - If you could change something about how the poverty line is calculated or do something to make life easier for poor families, what would you change and why?

Circle chats, small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension/Homework

Write/speak locally: Students turn their ideas into a letter, short speech or presentation, then research ways to make their voice heard in their community. (Example: Speaking during the public comment section of a city council meeting, posting on an online forum, etc.) For a list of how to contact local officials in your area, check out [KQED Learning's Local Election Toolkit](#).

First 100 Days: Art in the Age of Trump: KQED Arts is accepting submission from artists of all ages for this series. Art of all types (visual, music, dance, poetry) are welcome, and ideally submissions should focus on a specific issue, rather than the appearance or personality of a politician. Find the online submission form [here](#).

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.