

POVERTY, BY AMERICA

ONE OF THE
NEW YORK TIMES
NOTABLE BOOKS
OF THE YEAR

#1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER

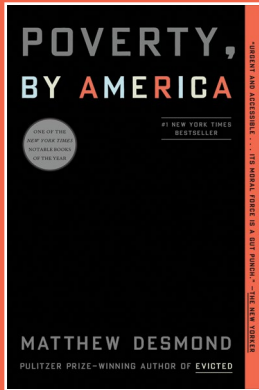
MATTHEW DESMOND
PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF EVICTED

“URGENT AND ACCESSIBLE . . . ITS MORAL FORCE IS A GUT PUNCH.” —THE NEW YORKER

Penguin
Random
House

Education

TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR
POVERTY, BY AMERICA
BY MATTHEW DESMOND



"[*Poverty, by America*] shows how wealthy and middle class Americans knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate a broken system that keeps poor people poor. It's not an easy problem to fix, but through in-depth research and original reporting, the acclaimed sociologist offers solutions that would help spread America's wealth and make everyone more prosperous."—*Time*

Guide written by Laura Reis Mayer

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The United States, the richest country on earth, has more poverty than any other advanced democracy. Why? Why does this land of plenty allow one in every eight of its children to go without basic necessities, permit scores of its citizens to live and die on the streets, and authorize its corporations to pay poverty wages?

In this landmark book, acclaimed sociologist Matthew Desmond draws on history, research, and original reporting to show how affluent Americans knowingly and unknowingly keep poor people poor. Those of us who are financially secure exploit the poor, driving down their wages while forcing them to overpay for housing and access to cash and credit. We prioritize the subsidization of our wealth over the alleviation of poverty, designing a welfare state that gives the most to those who need the least. And we stockpile opportunity in exclusive communities, creating zones of concentrated riches alongside those of concentrated despair. Some lives are made small so that others may grow.

Elegantly written and fiercely argued, this compassionate book gives us new ways of thinking about a morally urgent problem. It also helps us imagine solutions. Desmond builds a startlingly original and ambitious case for ending poverty. He calls on us all to become poverty abolitionists, engaged in a politics of collective belonging to usher in a new age of shared prosperity and, at last, true freedom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Desmond is the Maurice P. During Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and the founding director of the Eviction Lab. His last book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award, among others. The recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, Desmond is also a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*.

INTRODUCTION

While the United States continues to rank as one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 report reveals 37.9 million of its citizens, almost 12% of the population, live in poverty. This ironic discrepancy is the impetus behind Matthew Desmond's *Poverty, by America*. In this book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning sociologist and journalist sets out to answer two driving questions: *Why is there so much poverty in America? And, what can we do about it?* Desmond's book highlights the lived experience of America's poor, details the contributing factors to this inexcusable reality, and lays out a road map for solving the problem.

Today's high school students are in a unique position to appreciate Desmond's work. Not only are they shaped by the Great Recession of 2009 and the fallout from COVID-19, they are also bombarded by daily news reports of rising tuition, sky-high interest on student loans, and unattainable mortgages for the generations that immediately precede them. Young people today are beginning to ask morally urgent questions about inequality, the future of capitalism, and what we owe each other. *Poverty, by America* draws on history, economics, and research from across the social sciences to make an original argument about American inequality. In doing so, it raises provocative moral questions about exploitation, community, and the social good. Do we have a responsibility to look out for one another? What would a more just system look like? Does the problem flow from capitalism or is it more complicated than that? How do race and class collide in the lives of low-income Americans? By raising questions like these in an accessible yet rigorous way, *Poverty, by America* provides students with a deep engagement with civics, social science, and ethics.

Students can read *Poverty, by America* in its entirety, or they might be asked to read selections that align with course goals. Educators can assign any combination of this guide's classroom activities, which ask students to read critically, write argumentatively, and speak persuasively. Whether teachers use Desmond's text to explore history, economics, and current events or to model argumentative rhetoric, *Poverty, by America* addresses important realities and essential truths while inspiring students to advocate for necessary change.



PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT

Before reading *Poverty, by America*, provide equitable access for all students by building their knowledge around politics, economics, and current events. This includes a deliberate focus on vocabulary.

BOOK TRAILER ANALYSIS

As a class, watch Penguin Random House's "Inside the Book" trailer for *Poverty, by America* (prhlink.com/pbainside), in which author Matthew Desmond poses his driving questions: *Why is there so much poverty in America? What can we do about it?* Ask students to look for and record any evocative words, phrases, or rhetorical choices while watching the video clip. For example, students might notice Desmond's use of kennings such as "dream killer" or "capability destroyer" to describe poverty. They may be surprised by his statement that poverty "threatens any story we tell ourselves about being the greatest country on the planet" and that "some lives are made small so that others may grow." Students should note the urgency of one-liners, such as "We don't need to outsmart this problem—we need to out-hate it." Afterwards, students can turn and talk to a classmate, sharing their observations and reactions before discussing as a class: "What does it mean to be a poverty abolitionist?" Ask students to keep these questions in mind as they read Desmond's text.

STATION ROTATION

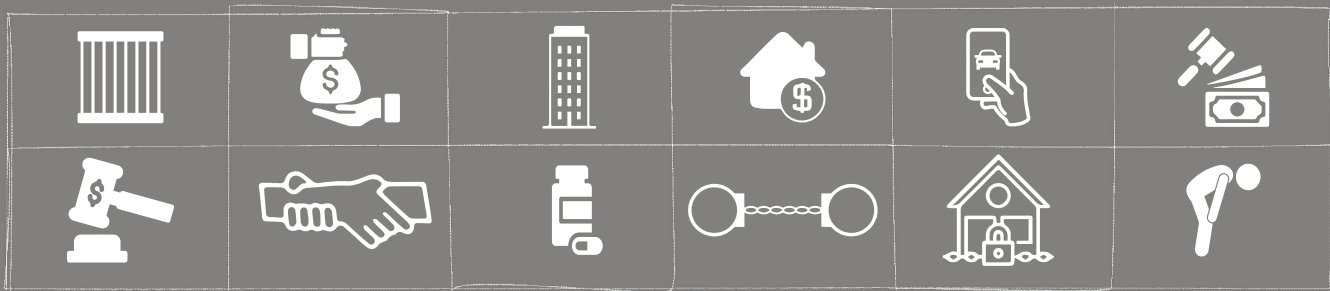
Provide a quick and engaging high-level introduction to socioeconomics by conducting a "stations" learning experience. Explain that by briefly researching some key concepts, events, and legislation that led America to its current poverty crisis, students will be better prepared to read and comprehend Desmond's book. Split students into small groups at various points around the room, designated by labeled chart paper on the wall or tables. Each station represents an economic topic significant to *Poverty, by America*. Stations are set up with an image, podcast, video, infographic, or text that groups quickly research and discuss before writing a summary on the chart paper. When groups have had sufficient time at a station, they can move to the next, where they will examine the resources and add to what has already been noted by their peers. Though not every station must be visited by each group, students will eventually return to their original station, read their classmates' notes, and synthesize them into a summary paragraph clarifying the significance of the event or legislation. For a digital version of this activity, groups can create "thin slides" on a class slide deck or Jamboard. Each slide contains one image and one sentence clarifying the topic's history and impact. Topics for the stations might include:

- Opportunity Hoarding (prhlink.com/dreamhoarders)
- Welfare State (prhlink.com/welfarestate)
- Exploitation (prhlink.com/exploitation)
- The Fair Housing Act (1968) (prhlink.com/fairhousing)
- Earned Income Tax Credit (1975) (prhlink.com/taxcredit)
- Proposition 13 (1978) (prhlink.com/prop13)
- Professional Air Traffic Controller Strike (1981) (prhlink.com/atcstrike)
- Economic Recovery Tax Act (Reaganomics) (1981) (prhlink.com/reagonomics)
- Child Tax Credit (1997) (prhlink.com/childtaxcredit)
- Universal Basic Income (2016) (prhlink.com/basicincome)
- American Rescue Plan (2021) (prhlink.com/arpact)

WORD BANK

Poverty, by America is at a reading level appropriate for grades 11 and above, but recognizing students' various background knowledge and access points and utilizing a word bank may be useful to help all students maximize learning outcomes. Rather than assigning the entire list, pre-teach the words and concepts that will be important in that day's lesson. Ask students to stop and note when these words or ideas are used in the text. After reading, have students rephrase meanings with partners or in writing. These terms and ideas might then be added to a classroom word wall or concept wall. A word bank for *Poverty, by America* might include the following vocabulary:

capitalism	fissured workplace	official poverty measure (poverty line)
commoning	fringe banking	sectoral bargaining
deregulation	gig economy	universal basic income
exclusionary zoning	inflation	usury
exploitation	lobbyist	

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

These questions provide a focus for reading the text and can be used before, during, and after reading to prompt discussion and writing.

Chapter 1

- What does Desmond mean when he says that poverty exists above the poverty line?
- In what ways are the poor criminalized?

Chapter 2

- What factors—both internal and external, cultural, political, and historic—shape our attitudes towards America's poor?
- In what ways does Desmond suggest immigrants are scapegoated for our economic anxieties?

Chapter 3

- In what ways do some people benefit from poverty?
- What is the relationship between homeownership and financial stability? Which comes first?

Chapter 4

- What role do traditional banking sectors and predatory lending play in keeping low-income Americans poor?
- What are some specific ways housing discrimination impacts the poor?

Chapter 5

- What are some ways the COVID-19 pandemic affected poverty rates? Has this impact remained constant? Why or why not?
- Is our nation's attitude toward wealth and poverty an implicit component of our social contract? Are the impoverished poor by design?

Chapter 6

- Do you agree with Desmond's points about "opportunity hoarding"? How do societal attitudes towards tax benefits differ depending on whether they are for the wealthy or for the poor?
- What is the relationship between public services and the dynamic of "private opulence and public squalor"?

Chapter 7

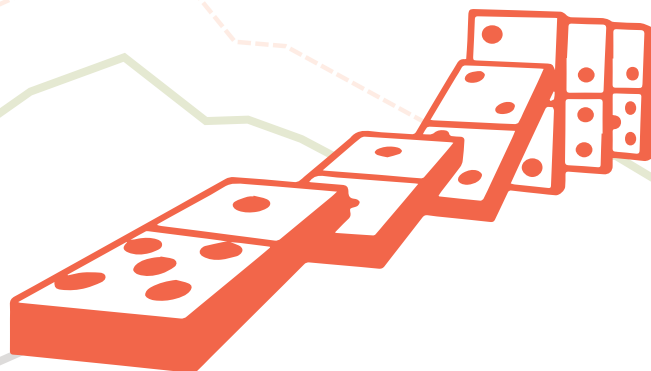
- Who benefits from poverty? Do you believe that poverty is caused by exploitation?
- What is the relationship between income inequality and political power in America?

Chapter 8

- Why is the ability to organize in sectors important for today's labor union movement?

Chapter 9

- What is the connection between poverty and race? Do you believe that opposing segregation is vital to poverty abolition?
- What does Desmond mean by "tearing down walls" and instead "building bridges"? How does zoning impact poverty?



READING THE TEXT

The following classroom strategies engage students in reading, writing, thinking, and talking about *Poverty, by America*.

NETFLIX TIE-IN



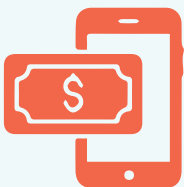
In chapter one, entitled “The Kind of Problem Poverty Is,” Desmond uses figurative language to outline the causes and effects of poverty. He begins his argument by writing, “Poverty is about money, of course, but it is also a relentless piling on of problems” (p. 13). Ask students to consider this assertion while watching a trailer from the Netflix series *Maid* ([prhlink.com/maidtrailer](https://www.netflix.com/maidtrailer)). The series follows a young woman struggling to make a life for herself and her young daughter amidst a culture of generational abuse, mental illness, and poverty. As students watch the clip, ask them to list all the roadblocks Alex encounters on her first visit to social services. Ask students: How does the trailer help provide context to Desmond’s assertion that poverty is “a relentless piling on of problems”? Consider discussing the concept of intersectionality as it applies in the video and in Desmond’s text. As an extension, assign the multi-flow map below.

POVERTY MULTI-FLOW MAP



Ask small groups to read one of 10 short sections on pages 13–23 of *Poverty, by America*, each section beginning with “Poverty is . . .” Each group will read about a specific aspect of poverty, such as health care, violence, addiction, homelessness, and unemployment. Ask groups to evaluate the effectiveness of the parallel structure and other narrative choices Desmond employs, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. As they read Desmond’s text, groups should also take note of the impacts he details for each of these problems and record these on a multi-flow map that illustrates causes and effects. Groups can present these maps on the whiteboard or digital slides. Discuss how the multi-flow maps help to illustrate Desmond’s summary statement on page 23: “Poverty is often material scarcity piled on chronic pain piled on incarceration piled on depression piled on addiction—and on it goes.”

THE TECHNOLOGY DIVIDE: ANALYSIS AND DEBATE



Ask students to use the claim, evidence, reasoning (CER) framework to analyze how Desmond’s claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or sections of text. While there are multiple opportunities for analysis throughout the text, one section that lends itself to CER and civic debate is the author’s argument, “You can’t eat a cell phone” (p. 25). In this section, Desmond addresses critics who believe widespread access to consumer goods (like cell phones) indicates that poverty is overstated. He asserts, “A cell phone doesn’t grant you stable housing, affordable medical and dental care, or adequate child care,” and provides specific evidence to support his argument. Challenge students to record Desmond’s claim, evidence, and reasoning in this section, identify how he develops and refines his claims, and evaluate the effectiveness of this particular argument. Direct students to read author’s footnotes for this section.

Once students have analyzed the author's claims, evidence, and reasoning, challenge them to develop their own argument and rhetoric by holding a class debate about the digital divide. Present students with a resolution statement that facilitates taking a position, such as "Access to cell phones and other mass produced goods is a reliable indicator of poverty versus sufficiency." To prepare, students should consider not only their own position, but they should predict what the opposing side will say, too, in order to prepare opposition and rebuttal statements. As an extra challenge, students should be prepared to debate either side. On the day of the debate, organize students into small groups, assign positions of affirmative or negative, and provide time for sharing notes, organizing main points, and planning strategy. Each team should have one to two speakers, a notetaker, and a researcher. The notetaker and researcher work together to record the opposing team's argument, refer back to the debate plan, and suggest responses to speakers between rounds. One suggested format for the rounds is: speaker one affirmative, speaker one negative, speaker two affirmative, speaker two negative, lightning rounds (for asking questions of the opposing side), and rebuttals. Prep time to confer with the team can be spread out between each of these components. The class can vote after each debate to determine which side had the most effective argument.

LABOR UNIONS: CONNECT, EXTEND, CHALLENGE



Deepen students' understanding of labor unions in America. Using an online bulletin board tool, such as [Padlet.com](https://padlet.com), create a columned graphic organizer and label the columns with historic and contemporary unions such as Teamsters, the National Education Association, the National Football League Players Association, the Service Employees International Union, or the Writers Guild of America. Assign individual students or partners to each column and ask them to research and record their findings on the union's history, the social and economic impact of resistance efforts, and their union's current status. Students should then read their classmate's research, post questions directly on the digital organizer, and post responses to classmate's inquiries. Discussion should include both the benefits and drawbacks of unions.

Next, ask students to read the April 2022 *The Conversation* article "Amazon, Starbucks and the sparking of a new American union movement" (prhlink.com/unionmovement) or the September 2022 PBS interview with AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler, "Is There a New Wave of Unionization In America?" (prhlink.com/pbsunions). Both texts are available in written form and as audio or video files. Ask students to apply the connect, extend, challenge protocol and take note of any "connections" between their article and *Poverty, by America*, specifically to chapter 3, "How We Undercut Workers," where Desmond discusses unionization. Students should also note new information that "extends" their thinking and "challenges" topics they encounter. Discuss as a class: How do the PBS video and the *Conversation* article address, support, or extend our understanding of Desmond's work?

TPCASTT POETRY ANALYSIS



In the prologue to *Poverty, by America*, Matthew Desmond asserts, "To understand the causes of poverty, we must look beyond the poor. Those of us living lives of privilege and plenty must examine ourselves" (p. 7). Ask students to examine the exploitation of the poor by reading Langston Hughes's "The Ballad of the Landlord" (prhlink.com/balladofthelandlord) and consider it within the context of the anti-poverty movement.

First, students should read Hughes's poem using the TPCASTT analysis framework. Students examine the **T**itle and **P**araphrase the poem before analyzing **C**onnotation, **A**ttitude or tone, **S**hifts, **T**itle (again), and **T**heme. Students should note how the title focuses on the landlord rather than those living in the building, while the speaker is the collective voice of the humans who suffer in the landlord's decrepit dwelling. After analyzing, discuss as a class: How does Hughes's imagery support his overall purpose? In what ways does his diction and tone make an argument that the legal entanglements of the poor are often tied to the exploitation by the wealthy?

Next, review EdChange's resource "Stages of Anti-Poverty and Anti-Classist Consciousness" (prhlink.com/edchange-poverty). Ask students: Which stage of anti-poverty is exemplified by the tone of Hughes's poem? Students should recognize the alignment to the "Culture of Poverty" stage because the poor are seen as criminals whereas the landlord is assumed to be in the right. Discuss: Is the landlord, the legal system, or the press what Matthew Desmond calls "in relationship" (p. 185) with working class and poor people? Explain. Because such discussion involves sensitive issues and self-reflection, make sure to remind students of classroom norms and discussion protocols that protect all views and voices.

IMAGE ANALYSIS



Challenge students as they move forward to change the narrative about poverty. Discuss the "bootstraps" philosophy that Matthew Desmond challenges in chapter 5. Show students a political cartoon that illustrates his argument (prhlink.com/bootstraps). In the cartoon, an impoverished man thinks to himself, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, they said." The man has neither bootstraps nor boots, and his ankle is anchored down with a massive weight that reads "inequality." Ask students to reflect on the image using the Library of Congress's primary source analysis tool (prhlink.com/primarysource). Students first record general observations, then possible interpretations, and finally emerging questions. Afterwards, discuss with the class the cartoon's purpose and how it supports Desmond's arguments against the bootstraps philosophy (pp. 100–101). Discussion might include: Do our actions matter? Can we protect ourselves from poverty by "playing by the rules"? How do we explain countries with much lower poverty rates?

Next, discuss with students the words, phrases, and images often used to discuss poverty in social media, in casual or political conversations, and on news media programs. Share with students the article "Language Matters: Words to Avoid When Talking About Poverty in America," based on a study conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with the Ad Council (prhlink.com/talkingaboutpoverty). Ask partners or small groups to evaluate one advertisement, commercial, or news show and, based on the six tips provided on the website, summarize the steps needed to correct or better frame the poverty narrative.

SYNTHESIZING THE TEXT

These activities provide opportunity to reflect on the big ideas in *Poverty, by America* and to engage in public forums connecting students to the world in which they live.

ADVOCACY SPEECH

Encourage students to develop their voice by writing and delivering a social advocacy speech. Point out that author Matthew Desmond first writes about, then speaks out on the issues he addresses passionately in his writing. As a model, show students Desmond's 2023 *Washington Post* interview, where he discusses *Poverty, by America* (prhlink.com/desmondwapo). Ask students to discuss effective rhetorical strategies the author uses. Next, invite students to choose an advocacy topic of personal interest that aligns to one of the many topics addressed in Desmond's text. For example, students might select the plight of immigrants or the continued prevalence of segregation in America. Or, they might argue against some of Desmond's claims, taking an opposing or different stance. Using one of Desmond's excerpts as a mentor text, challenge students to analyze the effective strategies the author uses. One framework students can use to reflect on Desmond's rhetoric is SPACECAT, which is an analysis of **S**peaker, **P**urpose, **A**udience, **C**ontext, **E**xigence (compelling reason), **C**hoices, **A**ppeals, and **T**one. Students can then integrate one or more of Desmond's rhetorical strategies into their own argumentative essay to be delivered in front of the class or on an online video platform.

Afterward, challenge students to debate their argument by defending their position or by countering the arguments of their classmates. Debate prompts might include: *Should the rich pay higher taxes? Should the federal government mandate integrated neighborhoods? Should we dedicate more resources to reducing poverty? Should we pay workers a higher wage? Regulate rents? End overdraft fees?* Sentence stems that serve as scaffolds for this debate can be found at TeachThought (prhlink.com/sentencestems).

SOCRATIC SEMINAR

To promote civic discourse, conduct a Socratic seminar based on *Poverty, by America*. Focus on a chapter or specific excerpt and conduct a close read, or plan a discussion on the entire text. Prior to the seminar, discuss with students what an ideal seminar looks and sounds like, including participation, active listening, and respect of multiple viewpoints. Ask students to set a class goal, such as "I will contribute to the discussion at least one time," as well as a personal goal, such as "I will reference a classmate's name and extend on or disagree with their thinking." Students should record their goals on paper or sticky notes that are visible during the seminar.

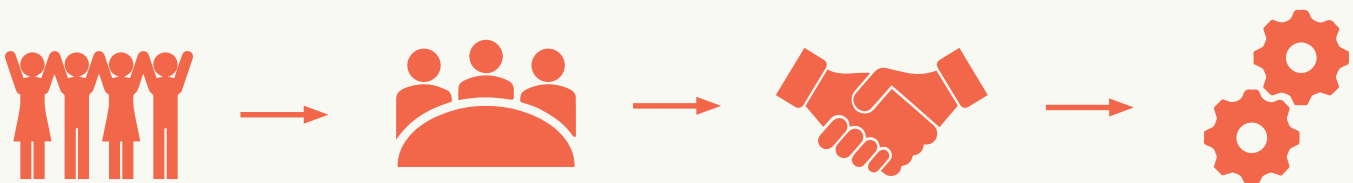
During the discussion, take a facilitator's role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total class participation in a round-robin response, such as "What is the single most important word or phrase in this section, chapter, or book?" This question might be provided the night before. Its purpose is to identify the text's main ideas. Then move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing text details, such as "Desmond asserts that 'people benefit from poverty in all kinds of ways' (p. 41). To what extent does he support his claim? To what extent do you agree or disagree with him?" End the discussion with a closing question that promotes personalization, such as "How might the big ideas in this text impact or inspire you, your family, or our community?" Ask students to evaluate their own and their classmates' speaking, thinking, and listening. Did they meet their class and personal goals? What should the class do differently in the next seminar discussion? How did the seminar deepen their understanding of Desmond's work? For classes new to seminars, consider scaffolding the activity with several small group breakouts throughout the large group discussion.

MULTIMEDIA PRODUCT

In the epilogue to *Poverty, by America*, Matthew Desmond asserts that “all of us can learn from, support, and join movements led by those who have intimate knowledge of poverty’s many slights and humiliations: attending meetings, signing petitions, donating time and money, amplifying social media messages, working the phone banks, adding our voice to public protests, and running supplies to the picket line” (p. 181). Ask students to select a local or national organization or movement targeting poverty and produce an in-depth multimedia product related to one of the solutions Desmond poses. The multimedia product should respond to the author’s driving question: “What can we do about it?” and should integrate ideas from *Poverty, by America* with outside research and their own critical thinking.

For example, their product could inform an audience of a specific advocacy movement such as People’s Action, or it could elevate an individual such as Reverend William Barber II and his work with the Poor People’s Campaign. Students can also focus on a specific solution Desmond explores, such as universal healthcare. Or, students might connect with organizations they are already active in or familiar with, such as scouts, travel teams, or faith communities, and consider how to engage these organizations in poverty abolition. Products should be published and/or presented to an authentic audience of peers, school leaders, or community members. Responses should reflect individual student choice and interests, and might include:

- A podcast using free audio recording and editing software such as [Audacity](#).
- A TED Talk-type video speech complete with scripted narration aided by cue cards. Students can use cell phones or tablets to record their talks.
- A digital story using iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Digital stories combine narration and still images and are easily created on student laptops.
- An infographic using [Canva](#) or a similar platform to illustrate the topic with engaging images and text.
- An interactive web page that combines multiple digital features to tell a story. With Google Sites or [Adobe Spark](#), students can combine text, social graphics, video, and audio.
- A service learning product of value to a local anti-poverty organization. The product should address a question or need identified by the organization as central to their work, such as “What do we know about ____?” or “How should we best do ____?” Products might include hard copy or digital brochures, posters, websites, infographics, advertisements, or alternative ideas. Students should write a brief proposal for approval.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can be used for further research, writing, and discussion:

- End Poverty USA (endpovertyusa.org)
- Reading Guide for Poverty, by America (prhlink.com/pbaguide)
- Confronting Poverty Discussion Guide (prhlink.com/confrontingpoverty)
- "Private opulence, public squalor: How the U.S. helps the rich and hurts the poor," NPR (prhlink.com/desmondfreshair)
- "37.9 million Americans are living in poverty, according to the U.S. Census. But the problem could be far worse.," CNBC (prhlink.com/cnbcpoverty)
- "The War on Poverty is Over. Rich People Won," *The Atlantic* (prhlink.com/atlanticpoverty)
- "Why Poverty Persists in America," *The New York Times* (prhlink.com/nytpoverty)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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