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Reviews:

Poor Kids: A Child's Perspective of Living in Poverty

By: Elizabeth Jahn

I. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is an ongoing problem in the United States, particularly among our most vulnerable population. In 2015, the poverty rate in the United States was 13.5%. The rate of poverty among children aged 18 and under in the United States was 19.7%. These rates are substantial, and have only slightly declined over recent years. Child poverty is not a recent problem. In 2012, the poverty rate in the United States was 15.8% and the child poverty rate was 21.8%. The poverty rate has not substantially improved as the United States has worked itself out of a recession.

We constantly hear that poverty is an overwhelming problem in our country, but what may remain unclear is what the term poverty technically means. Poverty is defined as an annual income of less than \$24,000 a year for a family of four. Extreme poverty is defined as an annual income of less than half of the \$24,000 a year poverty level. Thus, families living in poverty can barely afford to meet their basic needs and often struggle to keep their homes and provide for their children. *Poor Kids* is a PBS Frontline documentary filmed in 2012 that tells the story from a perspective not often heard; that of children living in poverty. Since the filming of *Poor Kids*, the child poverty rate in the United States has declined, but still remains very high. Child poverty has lasting impacts on children's lives and can result in a cycle of poverty. The cycle of poverty describes families who live in poverty for multiple generations. Children, like the ones featured in *Poor Kids*, grow up in poverty and often are unable to lift themselves out of it. As a result, their children grow up in poverty and the cycle continues.

II. SUMMARY OF POOR KIDS

The film *Poor Kids* followed three children whose families lived in poverty. At the time *Poor Kids* was filmed, one in five children living in the United States were living in poverty and one in forty-five were homeless. The film focused on Brittany, Kaylie, and Johnny, in order to get a unique, child's perspective of the challenges child poverty brings.

Brittany was a nine-year-old girl who lived in a family of four when the film commenced. Brittany's mother suffered from mental health problems which prevented her from working. Brittany's father lost his job and her family struggled to pay the bills. Brittany's family was in a low socioeconomic class before her father's job loss, and they quickly moved into poverty when he became unemployed. As a result, Brittany's family downsized to a much smaller house and Brittany and her brother feared they would not be able to stay in their smaller home. Brittany talked about being hungry and how she missed the healthy food that her family used to eat. Brittany and her brother received free food from school through the "nutrition club." The "nutrition club" provided poor students with a bag of food on Fridays intended to last them through the weekend. Brittany emptied the bag in front of her mother when she got home from school and it was clear that the family would be sharing the food items that were provided. Although receiving a bag of food from the "nutrition club" may seem insignificant, the film

made it clear that the Brittany's family relied on this assistance to receive adequate nutrition. Toward the end of the film, Brittany found out that her mother was pregnant. Her parents knew that it was financially not a good time to raise a child, however, since they did not believe in abortion or adoption, they decided to keep the baby. Brittany felt that it would be difficult for the baby to grow up in her household and feared the baby's future would be "weird and messed up."

Kaylie was a ten-year-old girl that lived with her brother and her single mother when PBS filmed the documentary. Kaylie's mother was in school and did not have the money to both pay the bills and buy her family food. Kaylie's situation was by far the worst featured in the film. Kaylie talked about being hungry and how it makes her sad. She went canning and her brother mowed neighbor's lawns in order to help provide money for food. Kaylie's mother was on antidepressants and anxiety medication as a result of their financial situation. Eventually, Kaylie's family was forced to move into a motel room. The motel room was very small and had one bed for the three of them. There was no microwave or refrigerator. Kaylie and her brother were not enrolled in school because their mother was waiting to enroll them until they lived somewhere more permanent. Kaylie's mother was unable to provide adequate food or shelter for her children, and it seemed as though she was not receiving any assistance from public or private programs. Kaylie wanted to get a good education and she believed that someday she would get a good job. Her last words in the film were "people can't stop you from believing in your own dreams."

At the time of filming, Johnny was thirteen years old and lived with his parents, sister, and two brothers. The family lived in a Salvation Army homeless shelter. Johnny's father lost his job and as a result the family lost their home. Johnny's father was working at a factory in hopes to make enough money to get his family back on their feet. Johnny talked about his father saying "thank god that he has a chance and an ability to just still go out and get different jobs." Johnny and his sister talked about all the rules of the shelter and how the family must abide by the rules in order to remain in the shelter and receive meals. Johnny talked about being embarrassed because his family is poor and living in a shelter, but at the same time Johnny and his siblings appeared grateful that the shelter had taken them in. Johnny knew that getting good grades was important and he dreamed of playing football and going to a university in the future. He said "if I don't succeed doing what I have to do in school and making good grades, I will fail. I'm going to live this life, life of shelter and going through hard times, can't feed my kids, trying to figure out where I'm going to lay my head every night." Toward the end of the film Johnny's family moved out of the shelter and into transitional housing provided by the Salvation Army. The family had to provide household items and food for themselves, which they received at a food pantry.

Throughout the film, it was remarkable how upbeat and positive the children were. Even when they talked about losing their homes and being hungry, they almost always remained hopeful. The children understood the importance of money, and why their families lived the way that they lived. They understood how their family's financial situations led to struggles that they faced. Common struggles throughout the film included job loss, mental health issues, a lack of housing stability, and hunger. All of the children felt that they were being held back from opportunities because of their families' financial situation, and all of them had big dreams for their futures. They all wanted to break out of poverty and live a better life.

In 2014, PBS aired an update on Brittany, Kaylie and Johnny. At that time, Kaylie was back in school and her family moved into a trailer. Her mother still struggled to pay the bills and their housing remained unstable. Brittany's family moved again because of financial troubles, but her father was working again. Johnny's family did not stay in the Salvation Army transitional housing for long. The family moved to Florida after Johnny's father found a higher paying job. Viewers of *Poor Kids* have been generous in their donations to the children featured in the film.

III. THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN

Living in poverty has wide ranging and lasting effects on the physical and mental health of children. Children living in poor households have an increased risk of physical health problems. These physical health problems include poor nutrition, childhood obesity, and chronic conditions such as asthma, anemia, and pneumonia. Children growing up in poverty also have a higher risk of exposure to environmental contaminants and are at a greater risk for behavioral and emotional problems including impulsiveness, getting along poorly with peers, aggression, and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders. It is also common for poor children to suffer from anxiety, depression or low self-esteem. The effects of poverty on children's physical and mental health can also have an effect on children's behavior and decision-making.

Poverty leads to an increased risk of children engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking, increased violence, and engaging in early sexual activity. Poverty can also have a negative effect on a child's academic achievement. Stress from living in poverty adversely affects children's concentration and memory, which in turn impacts a child's ability to learn. Additionally, children growing up in poor families are more likely to need to get jobs at an earlier age to help support themselves and their families, which can affect a child's ability to spend time on school work. Poor children are more likely to drop out of high school and never attend college, which drastically reduces job opportunities in the future. Inadequate education among poor children leads to a cycle of poverty by making it difficult for poor children to find well-paying jobs and support their families in the future.

In an interview, *Poor Kids* director, Jezza Neuman, expressed that she felt that poverty was holding the children in the film back. Children in poverty do not have access to the same opportunities as other children because of their families' financial situation. It was clear to Neuman that the children were witty and intelligent, but unfortunately, they could not achieve their full potential because of the opportunities they lacked.

VI. CONCLUSION

Child poverty in the United States is a serious problem that has not greatly improved in the last five years. Children who grow up in poverty can have lasting mental and physical health problems and are more likely to have their own children that are raised in poverty. *Poor Kids* gives viewers an intimate look at what it is like to grow up in poverty, and shows the common struggles that poor children face in a way that is candid and personal. It is impossible not to feel sorry for the children in the film, but it is important to remain hopeful about their futures.

Children like the ones featured in *Poor Kids* remain hopeful. They understand the financial situations that their families are facing and what it means to be poor. Brittany, Kaylie and Johnny all hope for a better future for themselves and their families. Growing up poor should not hold children back from a better future. All children have great potential, and with time, hope, and motivation, children who grow up in poverty can break the poverty cycle.

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