

# Does dislike of the poor reflect the middle class's self-doubt?

Americans dislike poor people. They cost money, threaten the work ethic and—perhaps most significantly—challenge the comforting notion that individuals have control over their lives.

That belief is especially held dear by the upper middle class, according to University of Michigan social work Prof. John E. Troman.

"If the poor were not to blame for their own predicament—through laziness, lack of ambition, or the like—it would have to follow that the non-poor are not responsible for their successes," he explains.

"This conflicts with an important American value. Most people assume that status is determined by personal effort, not by external conditions or chance. Poverty is linked to moral failure: wealth is associated with virtue."

This line of reasoning pays off in two ways, Troman says. It keeps most Americans from feeling guilty about the poor, and convinces them that it is unlikely that they will ever become poor themselves. If by some quirk of fate they become poor, they are confident that through virtue and resourcefulness, they can get out.

Why is one of the world's wealthiest countries so hostile toward its poor? Troman sought the answer in a series of in-depth interviews with 192 residents of Boston and Kansas City.

The respondents drew a distinction between the "next to lowest class," which they identified as the "working poor," and the "lowest class," which they described as "those on welfare."

About 45 per cent of those interviewed mentioned welfare and lack of education as characteristics of the "lowest class."

Here welfare means more than just program enrollment, Troman notes. "To the public, it seems to indicate the difference between those who have given up, and those who are still trying."

"Education has long been associated with upward mobility in this country," he continues. "Especially in recent times it has been considered the necessary, and often sufficient, condition for getting ahead."

Work problems were mentioned less frequently than welfare and education in connection with the lowest class, Troman reports. But of the total respondents, one-third made some comment indicating that it was the poor's fault that they were poor, often citing lack of ambition, laziness and unwillingness to get a job.

While about 17 per cent of those interviewed associated mental or physical illness with the "lowest class," less than five per cent mentioned family disorganization or old age. Only one per cent made a reference to ethnic groups, immigrants or women.

"Perhaps most surprising of all of the findings was the low proportion—five per cent—who identified race as a characteristic of the lowest class," states Troman.

"This result confounds those who would see class prejudice as a cover for race prejudice. Insofar as these data are concerned, it would appear that the general public makes a distinction between race and class."

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"In summary, it appears that people see 'the poor' as those who are for the most part uneducated, unemployed and dependent on welfare—traits which they believe the poor are capable of changing. In contrast, they make little reference to such fixed characteristics as race, age, sex, or ethnic heritage."

"This view is not realistic," Troman believes. "What we know about the macro-economic system indicates that society itself creates difficulties which people cannot easily surmount."

Troman feels it is not accurate to equate being poor with being on welfare. Less than half of the nation's individuals and families whose earnings fall below poverty level receive welfare dollars.

And while the poor do have less education than the non-poor, the connection—especially for blacks—is far from perfect, Troman notes. Studies on the correlations between education and later income confirm that education is important, but not sufficient for later success. And it clearly does not prevent failure.

"But getting an education and getting a job are crucial to the American goal of 'doing better,'" Troman explains. "The pilgrims came to this

country to improve their lot. The settlers moved west for the same reason.

"Thus, people are hostile toward the poor because they have appeared to have given up, and giving up runs contrary to the American tradition. 'It is equivalent to rejecting our value system,'" he concludes. "That is why people hold a much higher regard for the 'working poor.' They, at least, are still trying."

Troman plans to expand his research with a national survey of public attitudes toward the poor. The growing welfare rolls indicate that the stigma is decreasing among low income groups, he says, but it is not decreasing among the general public.

"The public's image of the poor is less based on factual data, however; it is a reflection of our image of ourselves."

"External status indicates internal worth: this assumption is very important to the American character. Troman maintains. "If poor people were not morally 'at fault' for their status, then the non-poor would have to question whether they can take credit for their own success."

"Worse, they would have to question how much control they have over their own lives, including the possibility of ever falling into poverty themselves."

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## Regional Roundup

### HOW HIGH IS HIGH?

For two years residents and developers in Birmingham have been waiting for the other shoe to drop. This week it did.

The city commission, after two years of review, officially slashed building heights in Birmingham and outlawed high-rises. The action has been expected; it was only a question of how low to go. Monday, commissioners cut off the high-rise debate by voting unanimously to reduce building heights by 37 per cent—that is a maximum of no higher than 90 feet, or about 10 stories.

### LOOKING FOR THE GREEN

The City of Troy was tied off when Sylvan Glen Golf Course revenues didn't balance last year's expenditures. The city-owned course has paid its own way since the 1971 golfing season, but last year, it required \$86,000 assistance from taxpayers. As a result, the city council voted to hike green fees for residents and reduce weekend rates for nonresidents to attract the business. Season pass rates were also raised.

### HILLS SPLITS FROM FARC

Farmington Hills will have its own division of parks and recreation beginning July 1. City council members voted Monday to disengage the city from the Farmington Area Recreation Commission (FARC) and to establish its own independent recreation unit. Current FARC members are the City of Farmington, the Farmington School District and the Clarenceville School District.

### BREWSTER RESIGNS

Blair Brewster, who has served nearly eight years on West Bloomfield School Board, resigned Friday. He is being transferred by Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. to Akron, Ohio, where he made his home before coming to the area.

Brewster's resignation could change the political alignment of the seven-member board, which frequently finds three veteran members pitted against three newcomers.

If the remaining six cannot agree on a replacement for Brewster, a person will be appointed by Oakland County Schools superintendent.

### 4th MAYOR IN YEAR

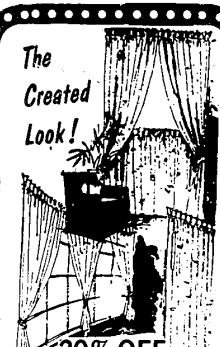
Oregon Lake has its fourth mayor of the year following Keith Miller's selection to the job Monday night.

Miller was mayor pro tem to former Mayor Willard Stephen who resigned last week.

David Merzell, a psychologist, was named to fill Stephen's seat on the six-member council.

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