

Poverty in Paradise: Implications of Poverty in Cuba

Quanisha Miller

The University of Pittsburgh

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Introduction

Poverty is defined as “the state of being poor”. What that means for American citizens, is totally different than what it means for many Cubans. In the United States, the definition of poverty is based on how much money you need to support a particular standard of living that is socially constructed by the American society.

Poverty is partially about not having sufficient amounts of money to buy what society expects you to have. If you do not have enough money to meet societal expectation, there is an assumption that you are poor. Who constitutes what it means to be poor in America society? When you see a homeless person on the street, there is an assumption that person is impoverished. If you see a person with clothes on and well groomed there is an assumption that they are not impoverished. What is wrong with this picture? Well in America there are individuals who work and are still considered poor according to the government’s poverty level. Do you see the same level of poverty in Cuba that you see in the United States of America?

Well that question, solely depends on who you are asking. In Cuba they do not have many amenities that are basic necessities here in the United States. There buildings needed to be renovated, and they had electricity and water on most days. We had the luxury of eating four course meals, because we had the money to do so. However, because of food scarcity, many Cubans did not have the privilege of doing so. No one person fit the “looks of the poor”. And even with the crashing housing market, I only recalled seeing one homeless person. I am not sure if they even exist. I wondered

is this a developing country or developed county. They have free education and healthcare for all citizens.

What I found out quickly, is that the same poverty in Cuba is different than that of the United States of America. They may be poor in material possessions, but they are rich in their values of community, and spirit. We met random people that were willing to help us despite not knowing how to speak their language. They were willing to share their wealth of knowledge, whether they acquired it from research or experience.

Poverty to them means we literally have no food to eat. However, here in the United States it is quite complex because even though our welfare system is not very good, we do not have mass starvation. So poverty in America is relative in comparison to Cuba which is absolute. Poverty is a lack of basic necessities and security, how are you going to pay your bills, and it is about relying on the imperfect government institutions to provide us with these necessities. In this paper, I sought to address some of the social, historical implications of poverty in Cuba. I provide a description of what poverty means diverse populations in Cuba.

Time Periods of Poverty

With astronomically high literacy rates, and access to a first class education, poverty should not exist in this country. Well that is only if you are measuring poverty, by using the two variables education and healthcare. But there are other variables that can used to measure poverty to Cuba, such as the: food, jobs, transportation and wages. Some families actually have to gather money for their basic necessities.

Cuba is a developing, western country. Poverty in Cuba is severe in terms of access to physical amenities. Farmers struggle to maintain and sustain crops, while women depend on prostitution to in order to make a living. They have far more limited political freedom, because of the government.

Cuba has been successful in many ways, in managing to provide for its citizens what other countries in the region cannot. In terms of levels of miserable poverty, there was a time frame where Cuba was worse.

Before Revolution

Before the 1959, there poverty was at an all-time high. For Cubans who lived in the countryside, they lived in abysmal poverty. Many residents in rural communities were unemployed and in debt. Many Cubans were malnourished and hungry.

Individuals in rural neighborhoods did not have health care nor education. Illiteracy rates were high, and many did not finish grade school. Transportation issues still existed, and many people died waiting for buses to the nearest hospitals and clinics (PBS, 2004).

Below I have compromised a chart of some statistics that illustrates poverty in Cuba prior to 1959.

More than 50% had no toilets of any kind	45% of the rural population was illiterate
85% had no inside running water.	25% of the labor force was unemployed.
91% had no electricity.	27% of urban children did not attend school
1 doctor per 2,000 people in rural area	75% of rural dwellings were huts made from palm trees.

Source: http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=405x3388

After Revolution

The “Special period” is where some ate cats into extinction, and the average Cuban lost many pounds. When the Soviet Union collapsed it destroyed the Cuban economy, cutting their GDP by half. The economic crisis had a negative impact on the health conditions in Cuba due to the sharp decline in food availability and living conditions deteriorated.

According to Alberto Prieto “Adult caloric intake was reduced by 40%”. In addition, many low weight for children were born with epidemics and diseases were at an all-time high for this country. With the increase in health problems, due to the economic crisis they did not have the necessary reagent medicines, and least qualified personnel were working in polyclinics and hospitals.

Many thought that this “special period” would last for a few years, but it lasted for two decades. This period is described in explicit and vivid details by Irino Pino. She recalled having to walk fifteen blocks to get to work, because of transportation issues. She even mentioned that she her family did not have enough toothpaste to brush their teeth, so on some days she did not brush her teeth (Irina Pino, 2014). Even though the special days have passed, the country continues to suffer especially because of the United States embargo. The United States embargo is a Cause of Poverty today.

Present Day

Cuba’s economy is negatively affected by the sixty year embargo that has been placed on the communist country. The U.S embargo against Cuba began when President Eisenhower, discontinued ties with the century in early 1961 under the

Trading with Enemy ACT also known as (TWEA), this act allowed the president to impose strict economic sanctions on any country which they believed to be hostile during wartime. This trade embargo was implemented in response to Fidel's Castro expropriation of American assets.

It had a significant impact on their economic development, commerce and travel.

Third countries are not allowed to sell goods to the United States that have passed through Cuba. Professor Anicia Garcia, asserted to provide goods or services, regardless of the country of origin, they cannot stop at the United States port for 180 days. This affects, who will be willing to trade with the country of Cuba. So while many believe this to be a United States embargo, it is a global embargo that effects Cuba's world trade as well.

This has affected poverty in Cuba because they have limited resources, and accessibility to other resources necessary to provide a basic standard of living. When researchers and scholars conceptualize poverty, they note that social exclusion is a clear indicator of whether or not a country, community, or person is living in poverty.

Social exclusion is defined as not being able to participate in society because of the lack of resources that are normally available to the general population. Meerman (2005) asserts that five to 10 percent of the world's population is considered socially excluded, either by enslavement, outcaste status, stigmatization, economic discrimination, and slow economic progress. When focusing on the country, social exclusion must be viewed in a broader framework, and a clear indication that a community is impoverished is due to poor housing.

Social Implications

Poverty sets in, more citizens are faced with greater financial problems. Individuals with houses, have to worry about how they will pay their bills, and those without their own homes cannot afford a home. Poverty has a great impact on housing, food, transportation, and in some cases family structure.

Housing

Hurricanes has have a damaging effect on Cuba's, housing by destroying dwellings entirely or partially and accelerating the deterioration of the housing base. Houses that are damaged by hurricanes are always given priority but Zabala Argüelles (2010) emphasizes that only 22% of the damaged house were actually renovated (pg.120). A prominent reason is the United States embargo that has been placed on the country. Gordon (2012) asserts that due to the embargo Cuba is unable to purchase construction materials from the United States. This not only affects their housing market needs on a regular basis but also when they are in crisis.

Throughout our visit to the country the housing conditions appeared to be unbearable. The community director at the Boys and Girls Club described vividly, what their living situation was when 140 individuals had to share one bathroom. Our translator, told us even though she is a professor, due to the limited houses in the market, and astronomically high costs, she still lives with her parents like most Cubans. She said when she decides to have a family, she and her husband would be forced to live with her parents.

This happens to be the case for many Cuban women. In an attempt to explain how gender is intricately linked to housing Hamilton (2009) in her qualitative study interviewed several Cuban woman discussing the impact that the housing market has had on their lives. A story of particular interest, was that of a black woman name Lily. Lily had to share a house with her ex-husband, who she described as a womanizer, and his mother. Even though her living situation was not ideal, she expressed that she had faith that their commander Fidel would alleviate her housing problem. Interestingly, not having adequate housing can cause some woman to feel like they are forced to stay within a particular relationship in order to have a place to live.

If the embargo was lifted what does that mean for the housing market and poverty in Cuba? If the embargo was lifted, Cuba would have more access to raw materials, and construction materials so their homes could be renovated. Many Cubans hope that the embargo would be lifted for this very purpose. An article that we had the pleasure of meeting while in the airport of Havana, said that he was there with the hope that the embargo would be lifted so that they could start reconstructing, and revitalizing the homes in Cuba.

The vast majority of Cuba's GDP is being spent on healthcare and education. However, I was curious in seeing how they address food security. Just like poor housing, food security is considered an indicator to poverty.

Family Structure

Poverty affects the family structure in Cuba. The family structure in Cuba is predominantly, characterized by extended families, single mothers, patterns of early

motherhood, and high birth rates. A study by the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS) found that the majority of disadvantaged families were extended, single parent and many economically dependent family members. Their study revealed that these families often live in poor housing conditions, neighborhoods with little socioeconomic development, and resource scarce rural areas (Diaz Tenorio, 2008). Another study conducted in Havana found that in regard to poverty, poorer families were typically headed by single women, elderly individuals living alone, those unemployed, disabled, full – time homemakers, large families, and families of color (Ferriol et al, 2004).

It is important to note that before the Revolution Cuban women were forced to stay home and take care of household and motherly duties. A contributing factor, could have been that women were considered second class citizens at time, and were not given the same equal rights as men. After the Revolution, women were able to work, and were required to help with contribute to family income because of the economic crisis.

Food

Many Cuban families spend 60 to 80 percent of their income on buying food (Garcia, 2014). To help assist families the government has developed a ration card, where residents receive certain amount of calories in rice, beans, eggs and poultry. They also buy a small amount of beans, rice, coffee, matches and soap with their rations. The amount changes based on the economy. Historically the ration system proved to be a vital structure for ensuring basic food access especially, in times of

crisis. The portions are dispersed on a rotating basis in the 15 municipalities of the capital according to the Havana Times. Below I have composed a chart, using data from the Havana Times, on the proteins that were available to purchase from April 7th -13th for Cuban residents. Rations are distributed on a monthly basis.

Chicken	1 pound for consumers over 14
Pork	½ pound per consumer
Beef Hash	1 pound per consumer under 14
Flavored Hash	½ pound per consumer
Eggs	5 per consumer

Source: <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=102875#sthash.eiXdLXqW.dpu>

Due to the scarcity of food in Cuba food supplies are limited too what is available in the country. Measures have been taken to focus on improving the performance of the agricultural sector (Garcia, 2014). Food scarcity is due to the global trade and embargo sanctions.

Transportation

As we walked the streets of Havana, the buses appeared to be overcrowded. Diesel filled the air and polluted our lungs. Old cars and taxis roamed the streets looking for potential passengers. What was interesting is that the transportation sector appear to be weak. But for many of the drivers it is a lucrative business, some making twice the salary of professors. But if you are not a driver, trying to commute around Cuba may become relatively expensive.

During our visit I had the pleasure to interview people. On our last day, I had a conversation with someone by the name of Pablo who is a native of Cuba, whose parents are from the island of Haiti. In talking to Pablo he appeared to be a very talented, and creative. I asked Pablo, how did he feel about having access to free education? Pablo said "Well the education is not all of what you think it is. I had to drop out of school because the costs of transportation was a burden on me and my family". In America's terms their transportation was cheap, but for the average Cuban family transportation was very expensive. This small interaction with Pablo, illustrated the effects that poverty has on, accessing the amenities in which every Cuban resident have access to, education. The provision of transportation services by state is insufficient, and the private sector is an alternative but is costly (Garcia, 2014).

Diverse Populations

As social workers we are taught to conceptualize social problems in a holistic way. What we know is that there are certain marginalized groups that are even more affected by the social problem of poverty than others. Typically when we think of poverty in the United States the picture that is painted is that of a "welfare queen" typically with "colored skin". Institutional and racial barriers are implemented to keep certain individuals in poverty and socially excluded.

Typically, low-status minorities are predominantly living in poverty. Poverty reduction among these individuals are particularly difficult for minorities especially those with a history of exploitation. What I found interesting is that in recent year's low-status who were living in poverty, were actually gaining mobility despite historical implications

and stigmatizations of the groups. Meerman (2001) found that black Cubans have been able to achieve upward mobility, because the government has prioritized education, and experience in the country. Between 1960 and 1992 these citizens were moving upward but since 1992 they have lost ground. I was wondering if this has anything to do with the special period and economic crisis that started in 1990. Furthermore, In the United States, the cognitive skills of black and white students remain to be clear predictor to poverty in the black community (pg.1468). Because of Cuba's universal access to education, black Cubans have had the ability to move upward in Cuban society.

Conclusion

While at the Latin American medical school, a professor made the statement that *they are doing God's work*. What does that mean? Well even with few resources Cuba is willing to share their wealth. The Latin American Medical School allows students from other countries including the United States, study to for free. Our presenter said that they do have much, but they give the little they do have. Often in most countries, even here in the United States individuals with the least amount of money give the most.

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