

Poverty Simulation: A Useful Tool for Creating a Common Understanding of the Obstacles Facing Low-Income Families in Georgia

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Abstract

Family and Consumer Sciences Extension educators in Georgia have facilitated a poverty simulation since 1997, providing “Welcome to the State of Poverty” to more than 4,000 Georgians. While the simulation is a valuable tool, there has been little sustained activity among participants to address the issues identified by the experience. Qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods show that the simulation is effective in changing attitudes and in increasing the participants’ level of confidence in helping poor and near-poor individuals. However, additional work is needed to determine the long-term impact of the simulation and to identify effective ways to stimulate sustained efforts to reduce or eliminate barriers faced by low income Georgians.

The “Welcome to the State of Poverty” simulation was originally developed by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL, 1995) and later revised and copyrighted by the Missouri Association for Community Action (2002). The simulation is designed to increase awareness of the challenges faced by individuals living at or near the poverty level. Participants role-play the lives of single-parent families, senior adults on Social Security, recently unemployed adults with children, and other low-income family members. The participants must maintain their basic needs such as food and shelter while interacting with a variety of community resources. The simulation has been used in Georgia with a variety of audiences ranging from social service providers and county leadership groups to faith-based organizations. Participants complete a pre and post evaluation survey as part of the simulation experience. In addition, the simulation facilitators often gather anecdotal notes from representatives of the participant group to determine any resulting actions.

School teachers and administrators are one of the most frequent audiences to participate in the simulations conducted in Georgia. Over 17% of the individuals living in poverty in Georgia are children (Boatright, 2004). Most of these children attend public schools throughout the state. Students in Georgia experience a number of difficulties in and out of the classroom, including higher drop-out rates, higher rates of teen pregnancy, and higher rates of child abuse and neglect – all factors highly correlated with poverty. Teachers may not understand the situation of a parent who works at a low-wage job, lacks transportation, and simply cannot take the time to visit the child’s classroom, attend counseling sessions, or participate in PTO meetings or other activities. To enhance the teachers’ abilities to understand and adjust to the barriers facing their low-income students, school administrators will recommend participation in the poverty simulation. In addition, teachers are often encouraged to read and discuss A Framework for Understanding Poverty (Payne, 2003) before participating in the simulation. (Payne’s overview of poverty’s effects on classroom education offers insights that are familiar to teachers and the daily situations they face. Payne offers four reasons why individuals move out of poverty: they have a goal or vision of something they want to be or to have; they have someone who sponsors them such as an educator, spouse, mentor, or role model; they are in a situation that is so painful that anything would be better; or they have a specific talent or ability that provides an opportunity for them. Payne encourages teachers to help move their students out of poverty by understanding the unique “culture” of poverty, enforcing the hidden rules of the middle class in the classroom, and creating a support system with long-term relationships.) When school systems combine a discussion of Payne’s analysis with the poverty simulation, the debriefing includes an opportunity to address issues specific to the school system and allow teachers and administrators to develop concrete plans to improve circumstances at their school. In one instance, a school counselor who participated in the simulation stated that she had to return to the administrative office immediately to reverse a decision to remove a child from the school and indicated that her school would be reconsidering its criteria for such actions. Another group of teachers implemented a plan for holding parent-teacher conferences at the worksite or by telephone rather than requiring parents to come to the school.

The use of the simulation with teachers has even provided a conduit for community-wide reform. Elementary school teachers in one metro area participated in the simulation immediately prior to the Presidential Election in 2004. Several teachers mentioned the need for all parents, including those with low-incomes, to carry out their civic responsibility to vote. After discussing some of the barriers identified through the simulation experience, the teachers realized that many parents simply did not have transportation to and from the polling sites

and could not afford to pay taxi or bus fare. The teachers contacted the local government to request that free public transportation be made available on Election Day. Government officials granted the request. While the actual number of individuals who rode the bus to vote could not be documented, this action was successful in addressing a real barrier imposed by poverty.

The simulation has also been used with community leaders, faith-based organizations, and social service agencies. Participants in these groups typically indicate that their perceptions and stereotypes of low-income individuals change. After a simulation, participants are more likely to focus efforts on reducing or eliminating some aspect of poverty that is within their scope of service. For example, faith-based groups may implement mission projects to provide shelter for homeless families or meals at a local soup kitchen. Leadership groups may address a local need such as a centralized access point for social services. Social service agencies often use the simulation as an awareness building tool with other community partners.

One of the most effective examples of the poverty simulation’s use occurred in Savannah, Georgia. The local United Way agency arranged for the simulation as part of a community-wide symposium for city leaders. Participation in the simulation increased their awareness of the challenges facing Savannah’s low-income residents, leading to a commitment to eliminate obstacles facing low-income citizens and to reduce poverty in their city. Simulation participants, along with the Savannah Office of Economic Development, spearheaded efforts to form the Anti-Poverty Task Force with representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, the local health care system, business and industry, and other key leaders. The Task Force realized that success would depend on total community engagement, especially from the business community. As part of their initiative, the Task Force arranged for three poverty simulations for the CEOs of major businesses and industries in the Savannah area. Given the well-educated, highly paid, primarily middle-aged, male audience, the debriefing intentionally avoided focusing on “feelings.” Instead, the focus was on what happened as these CEOs tried to emulate the life of someone with much less income and fewer resources. Economic development impact data was incorporated to show the cost of poverty to Savannah’s local economy. At the conclusion of the simulation experience, the business leaders were challenged to commit to serving on task forces that would develop plans to address barriers and to reduce the level of poverty in the city, especially within six census tracts where more than half of the residents live in poverty.

The Savannah poverty simulations were well received and helped the business leaders to frame a common reference from which specific targeted efforts could more easily be implemented. One CEO said, “I wanted to play by the rules, but it got harder as I tried. The system [community resources] made things too hard and did not work.” Another said, “This [poverty] was not like living day to day, it was like living hour to hour.” In Savannah, the resulting efforts focused on transportation, health care and dependent care, affordable housing, asset building, and education/workforce development. To date, the results of this effort include the development of a policy agenda; the formation of strategic goal action teams to develop action steps; the implementation of an accountability structure; and the security of initial funding for personnel, public awareness building, and implementation needs. These efforts in Savannah received recognition from the National League of Cities.

In addition to the qualitative evaluation of the simulation, limited data has been gathered from participants regarding their attitude change and their intent to change behaviors related to their interactions with low-income families. A seven-item instrument with a five-point Likert scale was used to record participants’ attitudes before and after the simulation. The reliability alpha of this attitudinal scale is .82. The responses to the seven items are summed to provide an attitude value. The comparison of pre- and post-test mean values indicate that participants significantly ($t=9.043$, $p=.000$) improved their attitudes toward individuals living in poverty. Pre- and post-test data, as shown in Table 1, also confirmed that participants significantly increased their confidence in helping those in poverty.

Table 1
Participants’ Confidence Levels ($n=1,022$)

Task	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	t-value
I am confident that I can identify key issues that might be contributing to poverty in my community.	3.4	3.7	-7.176*
I am confident about my ability to make a positive impact on poor people in my community.	3.5	3.7	-5.538*
I am confident about my ability to understand obstacles faced by families living in poverty	3.6	3.8	-4.823*

* statistically significant at $p=.000$ (2-tailed)

Additional post-test data address the participants' potential behavior changes. This data reveals that 93% of the participants indicated that they are more likely to view people living in poverty differently to better serve their needs; 81% indicated that they are more likely to work with other related community resources to assist those in poverty; 82% indicated that they are more likely to seek out information that can be used to address poverty issues in their communities; and 90% indicated that they intend to share this information with others in their community. Finally, participants' levels of satisfaction with the simulation were recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale. Almost 84% of participants rated the simulation experience as helpful or very helpful.

Overall, the simulation has proven useful in increasing awareness of poverty and providing a common experience from which participants can initiate discussions regarding action. However, extensive study is needed to determine any long-term impact from participation in the simulation. Specific evaluation tools are needed for follow-up with clientele at appropriate intervals to determine if the simulation stimulated action and if participants sustained their attitudinal changes. Current data collection efforts in Georgia are not formalized or consistently implemented and they do not address the appropriate questions needed to determine this impact. Several other Extension Services, such as Iowa (1998) and Wisconsin (2005), have conducted post-simulation surveys and focus groups to determine impact and are able to relate success stories. It is not evident, however, that participation in the simulation specifically translated into changes in programs or policies or into increased engagement in civic action. Nevertheless, these efforts offer some guidance for improved evaluation efforts in Georgia.

In addition, study is needed to determine the most appropriate applications for the simulation to address in a specific community. Certainly, there is no simulation that can include all the possible scenarios for family profiles or all of the available services within a given community. The simulation must deal in generalities which may or may not be accurate portrayals for the specific community or for a number of low-income families. The simulation developers admit that the family profiles are representative of the "average" – they do not reflect the lowest level or the highest. There are no homeless families, no families with severe mental illness, and no families with language barriers. These situations can be included if a community requests and modifications are provided to the copyright holder. However, incorporating specific scenarios may not actually increase the likelihood of stimulating sustained action among simulation participants.

The authors are currently collaborating with faculty in the School of Social Work at the University of Georgia to improve the evaluation instruments, including a pilot-test of three pre-/post-test evaluation tools. Input on improving evaluation efforts and documenting impact will be solicited at the annual conference of the Eastern Family Economics and Resource Management Association from other educators who have facilitated the poverty simulation in other states. The authors also will explore the need for a multi-state collaboration among those using the Missouri Community Action Poverty Simulation. The goal of these efforts is to provide a method to document more effectively the impact of the simulation, thus providing essential justification for continuing to offer the simulation in Georgia.

References

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Endnotes

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