

LISTENING SESSIONS

Findings and Analysis

As you know, the Center for Community Change recently partnered with local allies to conduct a series of listening sessions across the country with low income constituents. These open-ended conversations explored current perceptions of poverty and inequality, as well as probing into the role of government and origin of wealth.

What follows is a summary of the major themes echoed throughout these sessions.

1. Participants displayed deep, internalized, racism and classism.

Unfortunately, among the African American and white participants, a narrative of blaming individuals for their lot featured prominently in these discussions. The Latinos in our two Spanish sessions did not demonstrate this tendency. Given their lack of facility with English, we can surmise that either more recent arrival or greater seclusion within a majority Latino community in the U.S. has shielded them somewhat from a very American “anyone can make it, poor are lazy” storyline.

The final element in this toxic perception – ready belief that people of other races are the cause of their own economic problems – did come up in the Spanish groups as did some African American respondents raise this issue to impugn (and at other times admire) immigrants. White respondents were least likely to broach the subject of race out loud.

African American Woman

“Why not learn from the ... why not learn from whites? [...]We don't take the opportunity. **We don't grasp that opportunity** when it's given to us.”

African American Man

“I had Mexican classmates, they had every single Jordan that came out and to me it just look like the **Mexicans they get kids and they live off the government.**”

African American Woman

“[Welfare] just brings you down.”

African American Man

“Um, I just feel though we're like just **too comfortable with being given things** such as like food stamps and that contributes to the reason why we're in the state

we're in now which we're like we really **don't have the desire to strive** for more in life because we're given things such as food stamps and other benefits.”

Along the same lines, there's a tendency to see things as under the individual's control, and to even celebrate this “fact”:

African American Man

“I don't know. I think it's like **without a struggle you can't have a dream**, right? Without being down there, you can't imagine yourself getting higher and you can't push yourself to get up there. So in an ideal world there would still be, there still has to be some kind of something that makes, that pushes you to do better in life.”

White Man

“First of all, we get ... we have to get ... **everyone has to have the same opportunity to climb out of that poverty.**”

African American Woman:

“Why do we have to wait till it's given to us? Why don't we just take or get it?”

2. Participants demonstrate an expected tendency not to self-identify very readily as “poor.” Nevertheless, they easily and frequently shared stories of hardship and described these as examples of having experienced poverty, struggle and hardship. There seemed to be great ease and no shame in sharing these anecdotes among, in most groups, strangers. Perhaps more than any other, one African American summed up the unspoken reasons for this reluctance to affix yourself this label in characterizing how we view the poor in this country: “In the American caste system, they're the untouchables.”

3. Despite the disheartening tendency toward individualism both in terms of causing economic hardship and as potential solution, African American participants – in particular – spoke cogently about economic injustice as part and parcel of our system. Some even went so far as to call this out, by name, as a facet inherent to capitalism:

African American Woman

“That's why I said capitalism...That's why they need the poor, in order to have capitalism.”

African American Woman

“And some people need to fail in order for them to succeed.”

White Woman

“Well, John and I are **going through a patch** right now. He's got a toe problem, he has this IV intravenous daily, going without the paycheck and living off my social security and its nip and tuck, I mean its close. It **makes us feel powerless** you know. It's like, I know that I am far from being like many other people, but you just feel powerless and hopeless, and what am I going to do.”

African American Man

"I was just really to say something, but like in all honestly like we've been **blindfolded by these, um, businesses and corporations** for, one, they, they own the televisions. They own TVs. They own commercials. They own the TV shows that we watch on a daily basis...They show us what kind of house we want, what kind of cars we want. Um, they have cracked the deals, hip-hop. First of all, music is not owned by the black people. It's owned by the major corporation and stuff like that. So they, they teach us that we want this, that we want to make money by a certain means."

African American Man

"...Slavery is not physical anymore. It's mental and we're, um, **we're slaves to the new merchandise** and stuff like Jordan. I don't understand why anybody will pay \$200 for a shoe that came out in 1995."

4. Despite these and a handful of other articulations of systems-level issues, most of the extrapolation past the individual extended only to an immediate sphere. In other words, responses to poverty were rooted in family or immediate community – not larger society and almost never government:

African American Man

"Um, I just wanted to say something. I guess, the people in America today are ignorant to the fact that **poverty is not of an individual's burden but a collective**. America has a saying where ... "You can make it, if you do it." But take out the "you" and replace it with a "we" and we all can, you know, formalize an equation to make [inaudible 01:11:50]. We're now ... **we are so polluted on individual efforts** when ... if you [inaudible 01:11:57] and you say you can make it out, you got to ... you got to then think about it ... those that come ... those that want to look up to you probably. If you could ... **if you can make it over the top and then we just reach back down then, that's one more person** [inaudible 01:12:13] just like **going back to teach one another** because that just shows, we're like that or that **we lost sight of that**. We want the money. We want the cars. We want the clothes."

African American Woman

"Um, we're set up from the beginning. You know -- government, I mean every service that she was talking about. Even when you say, "Need some psychological help." That's a set-up...For Blacks especially, is a set up because we're so vulnerable, because we don't stick together. We're not educating ourselves. You know, we are smart people. We were smart people from the beginning. We have been copying, copy-cat-ed through the years. What we need to do is **learn how to stick together and go right in our household**, before we ever reach out to community, to go in the household where you are, and start educating your kids."

In fact, one recent immigrant put her finger squarely on this lack of thinking beyond one's immediate self or household: "This is why we always say **USA stands for You Stand Alone**, you can't even borrow a cup of sugar from your neighbor as opposed to being back home."

5. Unlike in the written data examined in the first phase of this project, participants tended not to employ multiple metaphors for poverty but rather to rely upon one: poverty as container or barrier.

White Man

"Poverty right now today is I mean I'm I'm 58 years old and I ain't never seen, it where every penny count. You know I don't care who workin or if you ain't workin **you ain't got no, wiggle room** you know. I mean you don't where I came up you know you use to can take your family get your paycheck usually you can take your family out to get something to eat you can't even do that now you got to go buy something to cook you know. And that's poverty to me where you ain't got no wiggle room to enjoy life."

African American Man

"Um, poverty is somewhat I thought a way of life just like for people to, you know, you can't decide how to live but this is odd. For some of us, this is the only object. Um, poverty is but the ultimate struggle [inaudible 00:05:06], um, projects involved violence, many other things that, you know, **can ultimately hold us back from being substantial.**"

African American Man

"You destroy the history of one race in order to control them to oppress them. And so we damn like understand what's really going on. **You can't move but that's why we still suck.**"

White Man

"In our childhood we didn't hear or see of it that much, People took care of people, I think more than they do today. Now when they get to that point, where you met that breaking point there isn't that backbone in America anymore that picks those that are on that lower end up and **carries them along. They get left behind** a lot."

African American Man

"You know, and right now until today, **I can't go nowhere** because I don't have credit."

African American Woman

"Poverty is ... there are more African-Americans in jail and prisons than there ever was um, you know kept track of in slavery time. It's the new way of doing things...and we're, we knew about it in slavery. It was right there in our face. You know, being whipped everyday while we're slaves. **Now, people don't even know that their immensely not free.**"

As we'd expect, evocations of this explanation for poverty as an impediment to free movement are rooted in the familiar life as journey metaphor.

Admittedly, this summary represents real challenges in terms of CCC's objectives in building an empowered, active base of those most affected by America's aggravated impoverishment. However, it also suggests some clear themes to experiment with evoking as we move into quantitative testing.

