

# Five reasons poverty persists in Oklahoma

by Kate Richey

Poverty has been a part of Oklahoma's landscape since before statehood. Early settlers faced enormous odds – drought, food insecurity, and nonexistent infrastructure – and possessed few material resources. During the Great Depression, the state lost nearly [half a million residents](#) to out-migration induced by devastating poverty and famine.

Today, [one in six](#) Oklahomans (or 16.9 percent) live in poverty and [nearly a third](#) of the state's counties have a poverty rate of 20 percent or more. Even amidst rising tides of economic prosperity, poverty continues, from one generation to the next.

The reasons are varied and complex, but stem from the material effects of poverty's central feature – difficulty meeting basic human needs. Here are five aspects of Oklahoma's social, economic, and political landscape that explain poverty's persistence.



Oklahoma children 1936, Dorothea Lange

## 1. Underemployment & low wage work

Employment is a prerequisite to escaping poverty. While the statewide unemployment rate is quite low, it's an imperfect measure of actual joblessness because of wide disparities by county and by race/ethnicity. People in [eastern Oklahoma](#) and [people of color](#) are unemployed at much higher rates. Oklahomans are also underpaid and underemployed. Nearly [one in three](#) jobs are in occupations where the median pay is below poverty level, and these jobs comprise an [ever-increasing share](#) of the labor market. The state [ranks 5<sup>th</sup> nationally](#) for the share of adult workers that are not fully employed (11.4 percent).

## 2. Low educational attainment

Education and poverty are intertwined because educational attainment is highly correlated with [employment](#) and [earnings](#). Our public school system is chronically underfunded and its physical infrastructure is badly neglected. We [rank 49<sup>th</sup>](#) for per pupil spending on common education. In 67 of Oklahoma's 77 counties, [2/3rds or more](#) of adults have not completed two years of education after high school.

## 3. Mass incarceration

Incarceration takes a lifelong toll on an individual's earning capacity. Oklahoma leads the nation for the rate at which we incarcerate [non-violent drug offenders](#) and [women](#). There are significant barriers to stable employment and financial stability for felons and ex-offenders. The state [denies them certification](#) for certain occupations and requires regular payments (fees, court costs, restitution, etc.) that they can ill-afford. Between

1999 and 2004, Oklahoma [quadrupled the share of ex-offenders that it imprisoned](#) for technical violations of their release, rather than for committing a new crime.

## 4. Hunger & poor health

Oklahoma leads the nation in severe food insecurity, with [7.5 percent of households](#) going hungry at some point during the year because they can't afford food. Oklahomans are also nearly the unhealthiest people in America, [ranking 48<sup>th</sup> overall](#) in health outcomes, with exceptionally high rates of smoking, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and mental illness. Over [600,000 residents](#) are uninsured, roughly 18 percent of the population.

Malnutrition, poor health, or untreated illness stunt a worker's capacity to earn and drains their assets. Unhealthy people are more likely to miss work, lose their job, accumulate debt, and be left to shoulder alone the ongoing and expensive burden of caring for themselves and their loved ones.

## 5. Inequality

Women and people of color in Oklahoma are more likely to face economic disadvantage. They've been repeatedly disenfranchised and targeted with violence (both public and private). [African-Americans](#) and [Native Americans](#) have been unemployed at nearly twice the rate of Whites since WWII. People of color are [arrested](#), [prosecuted](#), and [imprisoned](#) at alarmingly high rates.

Violence against women is pandemic. More women living in Oklahoma have been raped, stalked, or abused by a partner [than in any other state](#). It's the only state in America where the [life expectancy for women declined](#) during the past decade and we have the [lowest percentage of female state legislators](#) in the country.

There is a silver lining. In some ways, Oklahoma is actually well positioned to alleviate poverty. Oklahomans are some of the most charitable people in the country; the state [ranks 8<sup>th</sup> nationally](#) in per capita charitable giving. Additionally, with a natural resource base abundant in oil and natural gas, the state has and will continue to have access to a growing revenue base. Poverty does not persist in Oklahoma because we're not prosperous. It persists because we're not leveraging those public and private resources to achieve prosperity that can be widely shared.