

OECD countries' main contributors to families emerging above the poverty line

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Abstract

The reduction of poverty rates remains a challenging battle for most OECD governments, numerous international organizations, philanthropic associations, and a subject of study for many research centers. In this analysis, 200 empirical governmental documents, international reports, and peer-reviewed scientific publications regarding poverty reduction were meta-analyzed to identify the strongest factors in reducing poverty among OECD countries. A quantitative exploration of the literature using a statistical correlational research design showed that positive political leadership, effective economic and policy-making, low crime rates, low corruption rates, employment, higher earnings, familial support, greater access to higher education, age, physical and cognitive disability, physical health, mental health, positive cultural factors (mentality, values, etc.), access to clean water and food, housing, location, relocation, government support, communal support, scientific development (technology and innovation), and availability of production resources were found to be the most significant areas associated with the reduction of poverty among OECD countries in 2023. An analysis of the findings and suggestions for policymaking and research are also offered.

Keywords: Economy; economic mobility; OECD; poverty, poverty reduction; social mobility

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1. Introduction

Presently, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (from now on OECD) is studying poverty utilizing a poverty rate consisting of the ratio of the number of people (in each age group) whose income falls below the poverty line, taken as half the median household income of the total population (OECD, 2023). Poverty is also explored by broad age groups: Child poverty (0–17 years old), working-age poverty, and elderly poverty (66-year-olds or more). However, two countries with the same poverty rates may differ in terms of the relative income level of the poor. Because the contexts in which poverty increases or decreases diverge each year, most OECD governments and international organizations study these changes every year. The publications of these results are generally shared one or more years after the studies have been conducted, and they vary depending on the time organizations take to collect and analyze macro data.

From a linguistic perspective, Merriam-Webster (2023) defines poverty as the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. The same source provides an additional definition that simplifies the meaning: The state of being poor; lack of money or possessions; want and a small supply. In the United States, the earliest found references that relate to *poverty* include a mention in the Dubois, (1899); *The Philadelphia Negro*, and the first national poverty line set written in Fisher, (1997). Poverty became an issue to combat in the 1960s when then-President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced legislation that led to the passing of the Economic Opportunity Act (OEO) for the war on poverty in his State of the Union address. The January 1965 Social Security Bulletin published Mollie Orshansky's analysis of poverty thresholds that were based on the food plan developed by the Department of Agriculture. After reviewing multiple data sets and hypothetical family situations, Orshansky was able to produce a matrix consisting of 124 poverty thresholds. Over the years, different organizations and committees have altered the poverty thresholds as well as what poverty refers to. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), the official American poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps). For statistical and economic research purposes, poverty is categorized as either absolute poverty, which compares income to basic needs, or relative poverty, which measures when the minimum standard of living cannot be met compared to others in the same living situations. Poverty continues to be studied by referring to the country's official poverty measure, which has two versions: Poverty thresholds and federal poverty guidelines (FPG). Poverty thresholds are used to measure poverty, whereas poverty guidelines are used to determine eligibility for certain federal programs (Kilduff, 2022).

The economic theories of poverty focus on philosophical, social, political, and economic elements within systems (Philip & Sanchez, 2015). These views suggest that the poverty reduction process is in the hands of the systems around individuals and recognize tensions among those views, such as the neo-liberal and Marxian paradigms and the philosophical, sociological, and psychological perspectives on poverty reduction. All these paradigms examine poverty through a macro lens, looking for solutions that affect all individuals in poor clusters.

A growing body of scholars in the field of psychology is focusing on the internal and personal features of individuals when it comes to emerging from poverty. From this perspective, *hope theory* can be used to understand modern poverty reduction. This proposal is based on the work of Charles Snyder (Snyder, 2002). Snyder suggested that hope is not just a wish but a desire to discover strategies or pathways that will lead a person to attain a goal. According to Snyder, those goals cannot be attained without willpower (also discussed as agency) and pathways. Willpower is what makes an individual reach a goal because hopeful individuals dedicate mental energy to finding or creating pathways to achieve their

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objectives (Oyarzo et al., 2022). It is believed that individuals who overcome poverty develop a plan to experience the social mobility process and possess high levels of determination.

The cultural improvement theory proposed by Oyarzo (2020) and discussed at the 9th Cyprus International Conference on Educational Research (Bahçesehir Cyprus University) suggests that the enhancement of the mentality, values, and culture of a social group can positively impact the poverty reduction process of the societies that focus on those elements. This phenomenon has been observed in OECD countries such as Finland and Denmark. This study was able to identify strong associations between development, economic mobility, and cultural improvement. Publications from this source have also linked *family support* with the reduction of poverty.

Multiple scholars agree that governments have a moral obligation to eradicate poverty within their nations, primarily by the positions they have chosen to adopt (Oyarzo, 2020). Taking office comes with a duty to promote the well-being of the citizens being represented. From the homeless and poverty-stricken to the influential and affluent in society, everyone is a citizen, and this affords them both the human dignity of having their suffering recognized and the opportunity to transcend it. The toll of poverty on the individual is obvious; the cost of over one in ten people living in poverty in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2022) has a range of dimensions. Financially, the cost of poverty is immense. This ranges from the cost of welfare to higher crime rates linked to poverty and low income (Dong et al., 2020; Holzer et al., 2008; Anser et al., 2020). High poverty rates and the poor quality of life they contribute to have an impact on a city's wealth. This, in turn, can affect business presence, productivity, and tourism. Furthermore, the inhibition of effective democracy when poverty rates are high could become another hidden cost to the integrity of a nation. Citizens whose primary concerns are surviving are less likely to give their time and energy into educating themselves, making informed choices, or contributing to their local community (Redzich, 2021). The humanistic costs of poverty are far too high to ignore efforts to alleviate them.

Eradicating poverty is a necessary step toward a healthy and functioning society, for both individuals and communities as well as for economic systems. For individuals, poverty is a social illness that belies consequences including physical and mental health challenges (Cardoso et al., 2021). Ample research finds that eradicating poverty confers both social and economic benefits for families (Himmelstein & Venkataramani, 2019). Impoverished individuals and communities also contribute to a decrease in a country's GDP and economic development. Eradicating poverty has a positive effect on a country's economic growth (Mansi et al., 2020) as well as on both environmental and economic sustainability (Tabara et al., 2019). Eradicating poverty is the most powerful solution to a country's social and economic woes.

1.1. Purpose of study

The purpose of this analysis is to identify the main factors that should impact poverty reduction among OECD countries in 2023. The multiple and complex factors associated with poverty reduction and poverty dissemination vary each year. Global and local economic factors, health issues (such as COVID-19), and political events (such as the war between Russia and Ukraine or the re-election of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela) will diverge and impact poverty in different ways, which is why it is imperative to conduct this type of analysis every year.

2. Methods and materials

A meta-analysis of 200 peer-reviewed scientific publications, government reports, OECD publications, and philanthropic documents has been computed and coded by category, identifying the

most relevant factors that reduce poverty according to this data. A correlational research design has been used for this analysis, and only empirical publications were considered. The decrease in poverty contemplated for this investigation was in points (100–1). All the publications consulted are available to the public, either in peer-reviewed scientific journals or on websites. The coding and analysis of poverty reduction were conducted using the SPSS software. Only publications concerning OECD countries were added to the calculation.

The literature review for the meta-analysis was conducted by 4 of the 5 authors separately to prevent a biased selection of publications. The criteria for the selection of the sample were the identification of a) the latest publications on poverty reduction; b) documents considering large samples; c) studies that use empirical and high-quality research methods; d) publications that approach poverty reduction from a scientific perspective; and e) publications not associated with political parties or companies.

2.1. Ethical consideration

This study was conducted by members of Rogers State University and the University of Oklahoma, United States, in the context of the research work managed by the Department of Psychology and Sociology at Rogers State University regarding the concept of *poverty reduction*. No human individuals were interviewed for this study. The authors have no conflicts of interest, and they did not receive funding from governments, organizations, companies, or political institutions to publish these findings. The purpose of this revision and the publication of the findings are purely academic.

3. Results

The factors below were associated with the reduction of poverty among OECD countries. The list of findings is presented from the most significant factor to the least significant feature in poverty reduction literature:

1. Positive political leadership and economic policy making: Effective economic policy making and positive political leadership are the first factors associated with the reduction of poverty rates among OECD countries (Mokoena & Mazenda 2023). Both factors obtained the same punctuation. Current literature shows that democracies tend to reduce poverty faster than other types of governance. Administrations that focus on economic growth policies do create a positive impact on economic mobility. Investment in the agricultural and economic sectors for low-income families has demonstrated effectiveness in the reduction of poverty.

2. Low crime rates: There is a distinct and strong connection between economies that have progressed and low crime rates. One graphic example of this association is El Salvador. As soon as the Salvadoran government incarcerated thousands of terrorists (also known as *mara* members), the country became one of the safest in Latin America. Contrarily, other OECD countries such as Mexico continue to battle drug dealing at an international level, impacting their growth and poverty reduction efforts. Other nations that used to be safe in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Chile, are now also being affected by terrorism, increasing the possibilities of poverty dissemination. Safe neighborhoods are strongly associated with economic mobility.

3. Low corruption rates: There is an evident and strong link between economies that have reached prosperity and those that have low corruption rates. Peaceful and positive social and political environments create better contexts for poverty reduction.

4. Employment: Areas where a high number of job opportunities are available are associated with lower poverty rates.

5. *Higher earnings*: Regions in which workers receive higher income for their work continue to present lower poverty rates. Within OECD countries, the national economy continues to have a great impact on the budget of each family unit. Poverty trends studied in India found that economic growth and changes in labor market structures influenced poverty reduction.

6. *Familial support*: Regardless of the family structure of each family unit (traditional, single-mom, children raised by an older sibling or by grandparents, adopted children, etc.), individuals who are supported by their family members are at a lower risk of becoming poor. These individuals receive greater protection and nurturing than those who lack this type of provision, especially at a young age (Matos et al., 2021). In the United States, this phenomenon has a direct impact on the existence and size of the foster care program. In the American school system, students who receive guidance, support, and discipline from their families have a greater chance of achieving academic school success and attending college. They also have a lower chance of getting involved in crime-related activities.

Alternatively, Kliuchnyk (2022) indicates that empirical research has shown that poverty can reduce the availability and quality of family support, affecting health, education, and employment opportunities. Zagel & Van Lancker (2022) analyzed the long-term effects of family policies on poverty and found that single mothers were more vulnerable to poverty.

7. *Greater access to higher education*: Citizens who have earned some type of formal education have better chances of obtaining a superior salary or starting their own business.

8. *Age*: Seniors and children are at higher risk of being poor.

9. *Physical and cognitive disability*: Individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities have a greater chance of falling below the poverty line. Instead, cognitively and physically healthy citizens have greater chances of obtaining a job or attending college. Some studies and reports have pointed out the urgent need for supporting and integrating individuals with Down syndrome and people with limited mobility.

10. *Health*: Current research links poverty to poor health outcomes, including increased rates of chronic illness, disabilities, and mental health problems, which can affect the availability and quality of family support (Sinha Roy & Van Der Weide, 2022). Global access to high-quality healthcare has a positive impact on the reduction of poverty rates.

11. *Mental health*: In countries where poverty is minimal, the small percentage of homeless individuals present in those nations has shown some type of mental health illness. In the rest of the OECD nations, mental health remains associated with poverty and vice versa.

12. *Positive cultural factors*: This is one of the areas that, although not the most popular in modern times, is highly associated with poverty. Culture, mentality, and values are highly linked to the reduction of poverty among OECD countries (Oyarzo, 2020).

13. *Access to clean water and food*: Modern literature shows that housing is not enough when wanting to reduce poverty. Families should also have access to drinkable water, food, and safe physical and social environments.

14. *Housing*: Affordable, safe, and accessible housing prevents homelessness and is also associated with economic mobility.

15. *Location*: Poverty is higher in rural areas compared to urban regions (Hümbelin et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2023). Communities located in cities and near factories and commercial areas have a lower chance of falling below the poverty line. Cities and commercial areas tend to offer more job opportunities and higher pay.

16. *Relocation*: Immigrants from impoverished areas continue to seek employment in countries where they can earn higher wages. Cases have been documented in which immigrants, such as Mexicans living in the United States, can save enough money to buy a property in U.S. territory and a second house in Mexico. Some of these families do not speak English and can save and invest only by working 2-3 jobs. These individuals seem to have strong family units in which all adults work and support each other towards common economic goals (saving, investing, etc.) Above all other features, economic causes continue to be the most important factors in the reduction of poverty rates.

17. *Government support*: The financial support and provision in areas such as housing, medical services, and education provided by governments do have a direct impact on the economic mobility process of citizens located in the poor cluster (Sun et al., 2022).

18. *Communal support*: Financial and social support from the community is an important aspect of the lives of low-income families. In countries such as the United States, philanthropic organizations play a significant role in this area. Communal support does have a strong impact on the economic mobility of families living in the poor cluster.

19. *Scientific development (technology and innovation)*: OECD countries with the lowest poverty rates have designated ample resources for scientific development within their communities. On the contrary, the poorest countries within the same group are still in the process of developing a more scientific social and economic system.

20. *Availability of production resources*: Countries that own production resources such as oil, copper, etc. have a greater chance of reducing poverty within their territories.

4. Discussion

Many critical publications related to poverty separate *child poverty* from other types of poverty and from that of other age groups. We suggest that poverty continues to be studied from a perspective that primarily measures *family poverty*. The rationale that underlies this proposal is that every child already belongs to a family unit. If a child is poor, then the seniors, teenagers, adults, disabled individuals, and other minorities within that family unit are also poor. Thus, economic programs should continue supporting the entire family unit and not just sub-groups within it. In the global economic system, families are economic microsystems. Separating family units into subgroups complicates the analysis related to income and the processes of uniform data collection.

Positive political leadership, economic policymaking, and low crime, and corruption rates appear in the first places on the list. Specialized literature shows that when working to end poverty, a specific environment must be facilitated; that is, countries that wish to reduce poverty should be led by honest and creative leaders who promote economic growth through effective policymaking. These types of leaders are also able to reduce crime and corruption rates, two factors that are highly linked to poverty proliferation. Most consulted reports suggested that it is easier to reduce poverty in safe neighborhoods than in communities where citizens feel unsafe and at risk. Drug dealing lingers as one of the biggest obstacles in the fight against poverty among various OECD countries located on the American continent, and in countries such as Mexico and Chile, the efforts made by the governments are not enough.

Higher income refers to an amount of pay that can help families emerge from poverty. Millions of people in OECD countries already work and receive a salary, but the amount received is not enough to transition to the middle class. Increasing income and supporting families to create businesses seem to be the most reliable solutions to this dilemma. The fact that global economic factors impact the capacity of

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companies and businesses to pay higher salaries should be considered an important element in this discussion.

Epigenetics did not appear to be a strong determinant of modern poverty in empirical research. The perception of epigenetics being connected to contemporary poverty remains to come from philosophical narratives rather than from empirical genetic exploration. This is not a minor element to consider, especially in times when epigenetics is believed to be a strong factor in modern poverty in many academic contexts. Epigenetics appears in the literature as a very new field of study, and the comparison and analysis of genetic samples from the past with those that can be obtained today seem almost impossible. The association between historical oppression and modern poverty was present only in political and philosophical publications, not in empirical studies. Authors such as Oyarzo (2020) have suggested that culture, mentality, and values have a stronger association with poverty than epigenetics and historical oppression. Thus, epigenetics is the topic that is getting the most attention in academia.

The meta-analysis proved once again that familial support continues to be the most important social system in the life of a citizen and the most significant economic group within a country. In the same way that family disruption and abandonment are linked to poverty, it is this same group that can assist its family members in emerging from poverty. Families should then remain at the center of policymaking and measurements for economic growth.

Some identified factors, such as employment and education, are coherent with the most recent publication in this area. However, physical, and cognitive disabilities emerge as crucial factors for poverty. Disabled individuals or the disadvantaged segments of a community are at a higher risk of becoming poor than most minorities, which is why policymakers should have them first in line when it comes to inclusion and economic support (Omar & Inaba 2020). These groups are identified as the most vulnerable in all measures.

5. Conclusion

The key factors that cause families to fall below the poverty line seem to repeat across OECD regions. We suggest incorporating the findings shared in this study into school education. The younger students are exposed to poverty reduction, the better. School curricula should continue adding topics such as innovation, economic growth, development, and poverty reduction as important foundations of their academic programs.

Finally, governments and research centers should consider the fact that many citizens living in the lower middle class identify as poor, even though they are not considered poor according to official data. This issue can be observed in numerous OECD countries in America and Europe. We recognize that modern literature offers some strong and scientific solutions to poverty reduction. Unfortunately, we also distinguish many extremist and ideological approaches to battling poverty. Most studies considered for this analysis suggest that defeating poverty through a scientific approach is more effective than through a philosophical method.

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