

*Challenging Childhood:  
Profiles of Children Living in Florida's Poor Communities*

Non-Thesis Project By:  
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Written in APA Style

### *Introduction*

More than 2 million people in Florida live in poverty, according to U.S. Census (2004) data, and almost 700,000 of them are under age 18. That's 17.3 % of Florida's children. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2007) defines "poverty" for a family of four as a household income of less than \$20,650 a year. That's a mere \$99 per week to support each family member's basic needs – such as food, water, shelter, clothing and healthcare.

One's initial assumptions about those children might be that they live in urban areas, like Miami or Tampa, and that they are minorities – perhaps African American or Hispanic. But Census (2004) data show that's not always the case, and academic researchers say those common misperceptions come, in part, from inaccurate portrayals of the poor in the news media (Clawson & Trice, 2000).

A primary goal of this project is to accurately portray children living in poverty in Florida and to report on issues affecting their lives. The reporter will focus on Florida counties with the highest numbers of children living in poverty and the highest percentages. News stories generated from visits, interviews and research in those counties will be presented in print- and broadcast-style formats, and posted onto a basic Web site. The reporter plans to generate about 4 to 5 television news stories, at least one audio story and 2 to 3 articles.

A review of literature on the portrayal of poverty in the media revealed mass communications scholars had not explored much of the topic until the mid-1990s. But recent studies show the American news media has misrepresented the face of poverty in its stories for decades. Journalists like David R. Jones (2001), of the *New York Amsterdam News*, say fellow news reporters are "either ignoring important stories about poverty or not grasping the crucial issue of a story" (p. 5). The reporter in this project will consider arguments presented in research

studies and the popular press about the media's poverty coverage, and use them as guidelines in producing accurate news stories about poor children in Florida.

### *Literature Review*

#### **Social Issues and Media Coverage**

In an article titled "The threshold of public opinion," author W. Russell Neuman (1990) studied media coverage of political issues from 1945 to 1980. Neuman (1990) used agenda setting theory to analyze coverage of ten political issues in the United States. Those issues include: crime, drugs, energy, inflation, pollution, poverty, racial unrest, unemployment, Vietnam and Watergate. He started by taking Gallup Poll data, which looks at public opinion issues, and analyzing the history of responses to this question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" (p. 165).

Neuman (1990) identified 1964 to 1980 as a period in which poverty was seen as a highly important issue among people living in this country. Using content analysis, he looked at American newspaper, magazine and television news coverage during that time period. Through his research, Neuman (1990) found:

The problems of drugs, pollution and poverty have been with us for some time and are not likely to be fundamentally resolved in the near future. But in each case a combination of events and the responses of the government, the public and the media leads to a public definition of the issue as a problem of crisis proportions for a limited period of time (p. 169).

In short, Neuman (1990) compared the Gallup Poll data, which indicates the level of concern about a given issue among Americans, with the amount of news coverage on that issue.

He concludes that there is a “relationship” between the “volume of media coverage and level of public concern” about certain issues (p. 172). Still, he says such a relationship does not necessarily mean the amount of coverage reflects the reality or salience of those issues at any given time.

An earlier study by Jeffrey C. Hubbard, Melvin L. DeFleur and Lois B. DeFleur (1975) also “explores possible relationships between the mass media of communication and social problems” (p. 22). But they took a more localized approach and, therefore, generated different results. In this study, the researchers looked at “incidence of social problems suggested in media portrayals, conceptions of the incidence of these problems held by the public, and the relative frequency of such problems reflected in statistics accumulated by official agencies” (p. 22).

Instead of using national numbers like Gallup Poll data to measure level of public concern about issues, Hubbard, DeFleur and DeFleur (1975) surveyed a “medium-sized northwestern community of approximately 175,000 population” (p. 25). This particular community relied upon two newspapers and three local television stations as their primary sources of news and current events. So, the research team conducted a content analysis of the news stories generated by those specific media outlets, instead of looking at national coverage.

In their study, Hubbard, DeFleur and DeFleur (1975) focused on social problems like unemployment, crime and drug abuse, among several others. Even though they did not identify poverty as a specific issue, several of the social issues covered in this study – like unemployment – are related to poverty and, therefore, relevant to this project.

Hubbard, DeFleur and DeFleur (1975) posed the following research questions:

- (1) Does public opinion ranking concerning the prevalence of selected social problems reflect the ranking of the same problems in media emphasis?
- (2) Does the relative

emphasis given to these problems by the media reflect rankings of the problems based on agency rates of occurrence? [and] (3) Do public opinion estimates of the relative prevalence of social problems reflect rankings of the problems from agency occurrence rates?" (p. 28).

Surprisingly, Hubbard, DeFleur and DeFleur (1975) found "there was a low relationship between emphasis in the media and public beliefs concerning relative incidence for the social problems studied" (p. 30). They also found "a low relationship between a ranking of agency occurrence rates of the social problems and rankings of media emphasis" (p. 30). But they conclude there was a "high correspondence between rankings based on agency rates and public beliefs concerning the relative incidence of the problems" (p. 30). The researchers acknowledge that their study's results contradict their original hypotheses and theories like the "information dependency perspective on media effects" (p. 30).

About half a decade later, Lutz Erbring, Edie N. Goldenberg and Arthur H. Miller (1980) ventured to look beyond the "'mirror-image' model of media effects theory," arguing that such an approach "has not shed much light on the processes linking public issue salience to varying media attentions" and introducing an "audience-effects model" (p. 16). In their study, Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980) argued that:

Focus on the agenda as an overall pattern or gestalt ignores the obvious fact that issue concerns can and do arise from sources other than media exposure – notably from personal experiences, group perspectives and real-world conditions – and that these factors will vary not only across individuals, but also among issues and over time (p. 18).

They go as far as calling comparisons of media coverage with audience salience "pointless" (p. 18). Their study used data from the 1974 National Election Study, which was

conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan and looked at media usage habits and political attitudes. They supplemented that data by looking at content of the newspapers that respondents in the CPS study reported to have read, and by researching local unemployment and crime rates for recent years.

Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980) admit their data sets are lacking like the studies they criticize, but they assert their approach is better. The researchers explain:

Our data: (1) are national in scope, in order to ensure maximum variance within the limits of a cross-sectional design; (2) include measures of actual media content, in order to avoid imputing effects to the mere fact of media exposure; (3) include real-world measures for some key issues, in order to control for relevant local conditions; and (4) link media content, real-world conditions, and salience perceptions at the individual level, in order to circumvent the pitfalls of aggregating across heterogeneous populations (p. 21).

This approach allowed Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980) to conclude that Americans are generally concerned with “a variety of social issues” (p. 44). They found those issues “are also the issues which receive substantial attention from the news media” and that “different individuals will consider some of the issues more salient than others” – while “different news sources will devote more coverage to some issues than others” (p. 44). In summary, the study found that media affects people’s perceptions of the importance of certain issues, and that the people themselves as an audience affect the importance that media gives those issues. They found it is a two-way street between media outlets and audience members, while also taking into account the effects of outside influences and other forms of communication.

### **Media Portrayals and Public Perceptions of the Poor**

William Powers (2001) wrote an article published in the *National Journal*, titled “The Trickster,” which profiled a journalist who looked for creative ways to make news stories about poverty appealing – thus “tricking” his way into getting the stories printed and read (p. 696). Powers (2001) states: “It’s a quiet role of modern journalism, rarely discussed, but widely understood: Poor people make poor copy” (p. 696). He explains that the average news consumer can’t truly relate to the issues that poor people face, and that lack of empathy makes news stories about poverty a “hard sell” (p. 696).

A few, fairly recent academic studies focus specifically on media coverage of poverty as a social issue and the effects of that coverage on public opinion. Martin Gilens (1996) does so in an article titled “Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media.” He points out in the article: “the portrayal of poverty by the American news media has never been systematically studied,” (p. 518) making his the first of its kind and among the most relevant studies available for the current project.

Gilens (1996) argues that the “American public dramatically exaggerates the proportion of African Americans among the urban poor” and that “network TV news and weekly news magazines portray the poor as substantially more black than is the case” (p. 516). He says attributing this disparity between news coverage and reality to geography might seem to make sense at first glance. Gilens (1996) suggests most national news outlets have journalists working in urban areas and that those journalists rely heavily on “availability” of sources and information (p. 531). So, if the journalists work in urban areas and if African Americans make up most of the poor population in those urban areas, the face of poverty that those journalists portray will be

African American – even though that may not be what “poor” looks like in rural communities throughout the rest of the country.

Still, Gilens (1996) says even though that sounds “plausible” on the surface, U.S. Census data tells a different story. He argues the reason for the misrepresentation of African Americans in the media is not that more poor people in urban areas are black and, therefore, more “available” – but that poor black people tend to live in poorer communities, as opposed to poor white people who tend to be “spread around” (p. 532). He says people living in the more concentrated, poor neighborhoods are “available” to journalists, and that’s why we see them more in the news.

In his study, Gilens (1996) compiled stories about poverty published from 1988 to 1992 in three major American news magazines, which totaled 182 news stories. He looked at all the photographs that accompanied those magazine articles and coded them for the number of black people pictured in those images. Gilens (1996) also looked at network television news coverage, which broadcast 534 stories related to poverty in the five-year period. He tallied up images of poor people in those television stories and coded for the number of African American people shown.

In an effort to gauge how much the portrayal of poor people in the news media affects the way we perceive them, Gilens (1996) cites data from the 1991 National Race and Politics Study, which surveyed people on how they perceive the poor. According to that study, most people – no matter where they live in the U.S. – believe African-Americans make up about half or more of the poor population.

Gilens (1996) concludes: “the poverty population shown in news magazines [is] primarily black, overwhelmingly unemployed and almost completely non-elderly” (p. 537). He

also found that “the overrepresentation of African Americans found in weekly news magazines is not unique to this particular medium but is shared by the even more important medium of network television news” (p. 527).

Gregory Freeman (1997), a columnist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, comments on Gilens’ (1996) study in an article published in the *St. Louis Journalism Review*. In the article, Freeman (1997) discusses the National Association of Black Journalists’ thoughts on the study. He said “the NABJ committees issued a statement calling the study no surprise” and that they recommended two steps toward improvement: hire “more visual journalists of color,” and make “better, more sensitive, and more informed editing decisions” (p. 7).

In a follow-up article published in the *Civil Rights Journal*, Gilens (2000) offers similar suggestions:

One important step to raise the level of racial awareness in news coverage is to expand the representation of minorities in the newsroom. ... But it is not the sole responsibility of minority journalists to supervise the behavior of news organizations in this regard. On the contrary, it is the responsibility of news professionals of all races to see to it that news does not distort the social world by portraying certain groups in unjustifiably negative ways (p. 26).

A similar study published just four years later focuses on media portrayals of the poor during the Clinton administration, which was a period when welfare reform was considered a hot topic in the United States. In “Poverty as we know it: Media portrayals of the poor,” Rosalee A. Clawson and Rakuya Trice (2000) “investigate whether the media perpetuate inaccurate and stereotypical images of the poor” (p. 53). They compiled photographs from news stories about poverty printed in five major American news magazines between 1993 and 1998 – essentially

picking up where Gilens left off. But Clawson and Trice (2000) attempt to tackle a piece of the puzzle that Gilens did not – “investigating whether common stereotypical traits or behaviors associated with the poor are portrayed in the media” (p. 54).

Clawson and Trice (2000) analyzed the photographs for size of families; race, sex and age of the people pictured; work status; and type of activities depicted. The researchers found that even though African Americans made up just 27 % of the poor in 1996, the magazines studied showed them as making up 49 % of the poor. They also found “there were no magazine portrayals of Asian Americans in poverty, and Hispanics were underrepresented by 5 %” (p. 56). Clawson and Trice (2000) attribute that misrepresentation of Asian Americans and Hispanics to “a larger phenomena in which these groups are ignored by the media in general” (p. 57).

The researchers in this study also found that the magazines “over feminized” the poor and that “children were over represented among the magazine poor” (p. 59). They add: “the magazine depictions implied that poverty is almost completely an urban problem” (p. 60). Those results were expected, but a surprise came their way in analyzing for type of activities depicted:

To our surprise, the media did not overly emphasize other stereotypical characteristics associated with the poor. Of the 357 people coded, only three were shown engaging in criminal behavior, and another three were shown with drugs (p. 61).

### **Children in Poverty**

A qualitative study on children living in poverty, titled “On being a poor child in America,” provides firsthand accounts of what it is like for children to grow up in such conditions (Fortier, 2006). Fortier (2006) interviewed 14 children, eight boys and six girls ages 7 to 12, using “activity-based interviewing methods” (p. 117). The researcher found most of the

children interviewed did not directly identify themselves as a “child whose parents do not have much money” and that they identified children in that situation as those “less financially well-off than themselves” (p. 120). The children interviewed did, however, occasionally identify with the scenarios presented by stating: “I know a kid like that” or “I know how that is” (p. 121).

Fortier (2006) also found that the children interviewed had “overwhelming compassion for a child whose parents do not have much money” (p. 120). The interviews revealed that they wanted poor children to “succeed” and “even made up happy endings” for them (p. 120). Fortier (2006) adds that the children suggested “self-advocacy and initiative” like setting up garage sales or lemonade stands as ways to make money and fulfill needs or wants (p. 121). When it came to poverty’s effects on a child’s school or social life, the children shared stories about poor children being teased about tattered clothing and isolated from groups of friends.

The Fortier (2006) study also addresses the digital divide. The children shared concerns about not having access to the Internet and other technology to complete projects and homework assignments for school. The children also associated health problems with living conditions, citing “mold” and “fumes in the house” as reasons for illness among poor children (p. 122). Fortier (2006) also found that the children saw the social lives of poor children as “boring” and “not much fun,” because poor children cannot afford to join sports teams or get involved in activities like summer camp (p. 124). Fortier (2006) further states: “the study offered some evidence that children living in poverty do not view their limited community involvement as indicative as a lack of future career success” (p. 125).

### *Research Questions*

The abovementioned research studies about media coverage of social issues, public perceptions of the American poor, the portrayal of poor Americans by the news media and the way poor children view poverty present several issues the reporter will keep in mind when completing this project. Overall, these studies show the news media as inaccurate in depicting poverty in the United States. A primary goal of this project is to achieve that accuracy in depicting children who live in poverty in Florida.

Questions the reporter would like to pose and answer through the course of this project include:

- How many children in Florida live in poverty?
- Where do they live?
- What are the demographics (ie: race, gender, ethnicity) of those children?
- How does life compare between those living in larger, more urban areas versus those living in smaller, more rural communities?
- What obstacles does poverty bring their way?
- How does poverty affect their health?
- How does poverty affect their education?
- How does poverty affect their behavior as a member of society?
- What efforts are going on to try and help these children?
- What about the undocumented poor?

### *Method*

The reporter will answer the abovementioned research questions through a series of news stories. The news stories – produced in broadcast- and print-style formats – will be presented on a basic Web site.

- ***How many children in Florida live in poverty? Where do they live? What are the demographics (ie: race, gender, ethnicity) of those children?***

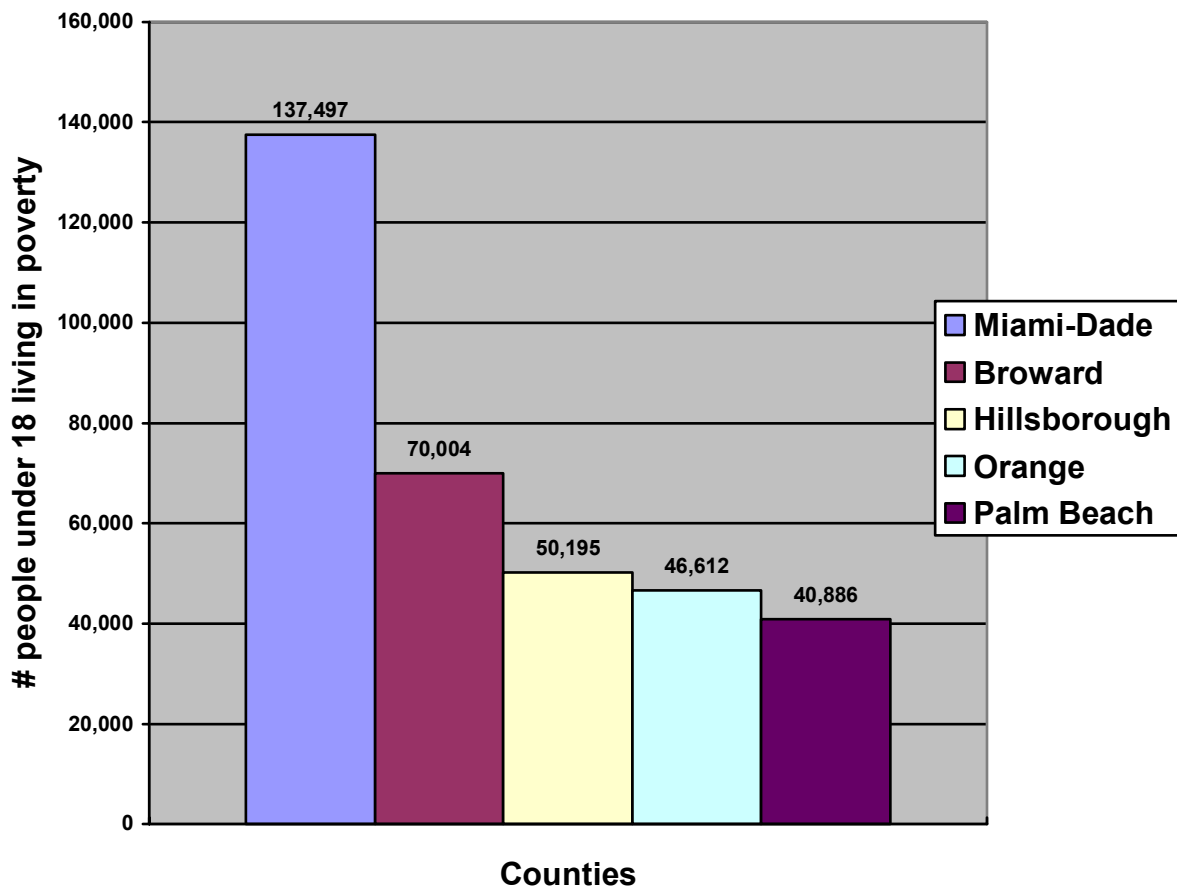
In order to answer the first three research questions, the reporter will use data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Below is a summary of what that data reveals:

The U.S. Census Bureau's Web site homepage features a link titled "Poverty." Click on that link, and it takes you to a page with more links. The link used in this project to determine the poorest counties in Florida is labeled: "Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates." That link provides the options of sorting information by "state and county data" or by "school districts." For the purpose of this project, the reporter selected the "state and county data" link. That link allows selection of a state and year. The reporter chose "Florida" and the most recent year available, which is "2004." Then, the search was narrowed down with specific variables to show data for all Florida counties.

See next two pages for search results.

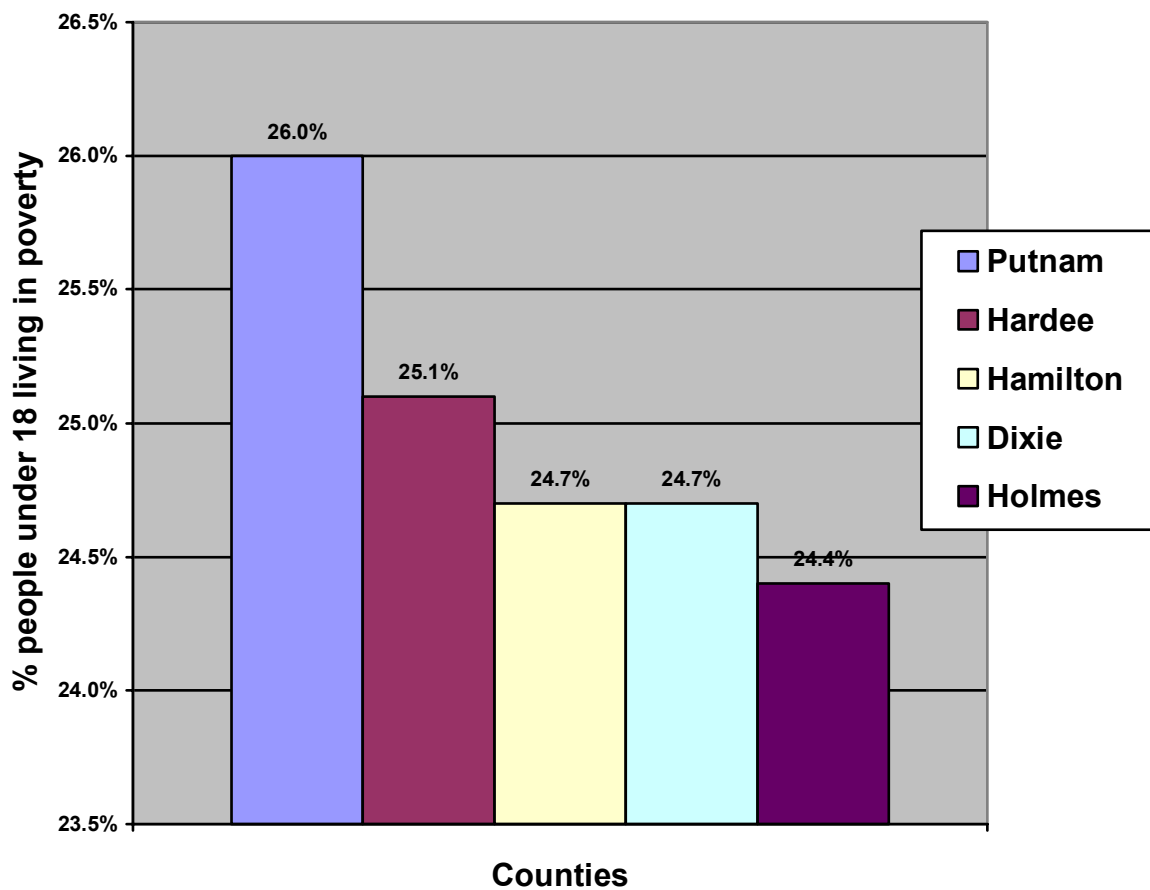
According to the search results, the top five counties in Florida with the highest *number* of people under age 18 living in poverty in 2004 include:

- Miami-Dade County, with 137,497 people under age 18 living in poverty;
- Broward County, with 70,004 people under age 18 living in poverty;
- Hillsborough County, with 50,195 people under age 18 living in poverty;
- Orange County, with 46,612 people under age 18 living in poverty; and
- Palm Beach County, with 40,886 people under age 18 living in poverty.



The top five counties in Florida with the highest *percentage* of people under age 18 living poverty in 2004 include:

- Putnam County, with 26 % of people under age 18 living in poverty;
- Hardee County, with 25.1 % of people under age 18 living in poverty;
- Hamilton County, with 24.7 % of people under age 18 living in poverty;
- Dixie County, with 24.7 % of people under age 18 living in poverty; and
- Holmes County, with 24.4 % of people under age 18 living in poverty.



In summary, counties with higher numbers of poor children tend to be amongst the more populated and urban areas of Florida. Meanwhile, the counties with higher percentages of poor children tend to be those with a more rural environment. That means Miami-Dade County might have more children living in poverty than any Florida county, but Putnam County has a more concentrated problem. A child born and raised in Putnam County would be more likely to grow up in poverty than a child in any other Florida county.

So, an issue to be explored in this project is how environment affects experience for these children. That is not to say one setting might be better or worse than the other. A goal of this project is to simply explore living situations and experiences of children in poverty throughout Florida. Focusing on just the counties with higher numbers of poor children would not do the issue justice, in that, Florida's less populated areas would be completely overlooked.

Additionally, in an effort to put those numbers into context, the reporter performed the same searches for data about the state of Florida as a whole.

According to those results, 699,280 Floridians under age 18 lived in poverty in 2004. That's 17.3 % of Floridians under age 18. Nationwide numbers show that 13,041,492 Americans under age 18 lived in poverty in 2004, which is 17.8 % of Americans under age 18.

Below is a map of the ten Florida counties to be mentioned in this project:



The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services this year defined “poverty” as the following:

<b>2007 HHS Poverty Guidelines*</b>			
<b>Persons in Family</b>	<b>Monthly Poverty Guideline</b>	<b>Annual Poverty Guideline</b>	<b>125% of Annual Poverty Guideline</b>
1	850.83	10,210.00	12,762.50
2	1,140.83	13,690.00	17,112.50
3	1,430.83	17,170.00	21,462.50
4	1,720.83	20,650.00	25,812.50
5	2,010.83	24,130.00	30,162.50
6	2,300.83	27,610.00	34,512.50
7	2,590.83	31,090.00	38,862.50
8	2,880.83	34,570.00	43,212.50

\*48 contiguous states and District of Columbia

Source: Federal Register, Volume 72, No 15, January 24, 2007, pp. 3147-3148. Department of Health and Human Services. Annual Update of the HHS Poverty Guidelines.

The Coalition on Human Needs (2007) used data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2006 American Community Survey to describe the demographics behind poverty in Florida. Though the information is not age specific, it provides some direction as to how much each group should be represented in the news stories. The data shows:

- Of 2.7 million African Americans living in Florida, 623,982 live in poverty. (23.4%)
- Of 387,601 Asian Americans living in Florida, 33,716 live in poverty. (8.7%).
- Of 10.8 million white, non-Hispanics living in Florida, 950,967 live in poverty. (8.8%).
- Of 3.6 million Hispanics living in Florida, 590,568 live in poverty. (16.5%).

A print-style story with charts, maps and still images of people living in neighborhoods in the abovementioned counties would explain that information and answer the first three research questions.

- ***How does life compare for people living below the poverty line in larger, more urban areas versus those in smaller, more rural communities? What obstacles does poverty bring their way?***

According to the U.S. Census Bureau data, Florida's larger counties – Miami-Dade, Broward, Hillsborough, Orange and Palm Beach – had the highest number of children and teens living in poverty in 2004. But some of the state's smaller counties – Putnam, Hardee, Hamilton, Dixie and Holmes – had the highest percentages of children and teens living in poverty in 2004.

Children living in those counties will be the focus of this project. A story idea to answer the third and fourth research questions would be to produce two TV feature stories – one profiling a child living in poverty in Miami-Dade County and another profiling a child living in poverty in Putnam County. The stories would depict the everyday lives of the two children and discuss the obstacles that poverty presents them. Photos and mini-biographies of the children would be posted on the project Web site with a summary of the TV stories and links to them. Additional soundbites and/or pull quotes would also be included on the site.

### **Work in Progress**

Because newsgathering is a gradual process, the exact content of the news stories focusing on the last five of the ten proposed research questions will be determined as the reporter explores relevant issues, visits the counties, and interviews experts as well as other parties involved. Finding the children to profile is also a challenge dependent upon the reporting process. The reporter plans to work with non-profit organizations, social service agencies, homeless shelters, places of worship and other community groups to find families willing to participate in the project.

Below is a brief listing of initial ideas for formats of stories to answer the last five research questions:

➤ ***How does poverty affect their health?***

A print-style story on the effects of poverty on children's health.

➤ ***How does poverty affect their education?***

A radio story with slideshow about a school in a low-income area.

➤ ***How does poverty affect their behavior as a member of society?***

A TV story about juvenile delinquency and if it has anything to do with poverty... and maybe profile kids who are exceptionally productive members of society and have overcome the obstacles of poverty.

➤ ***What efforts are going on to try and help these children?***

A TV story about programs to help poor children.

➤ ***What about the undocumented poor?***

A print story about children of undocumented immigrants living in poverty.

### *Project Outline*

With a professional background in print journalism and a master's degree focus in broadcast journalism, the reporter's newsgathering, writing, shooting and editing skills would be best showcased through a multi-platform news project.

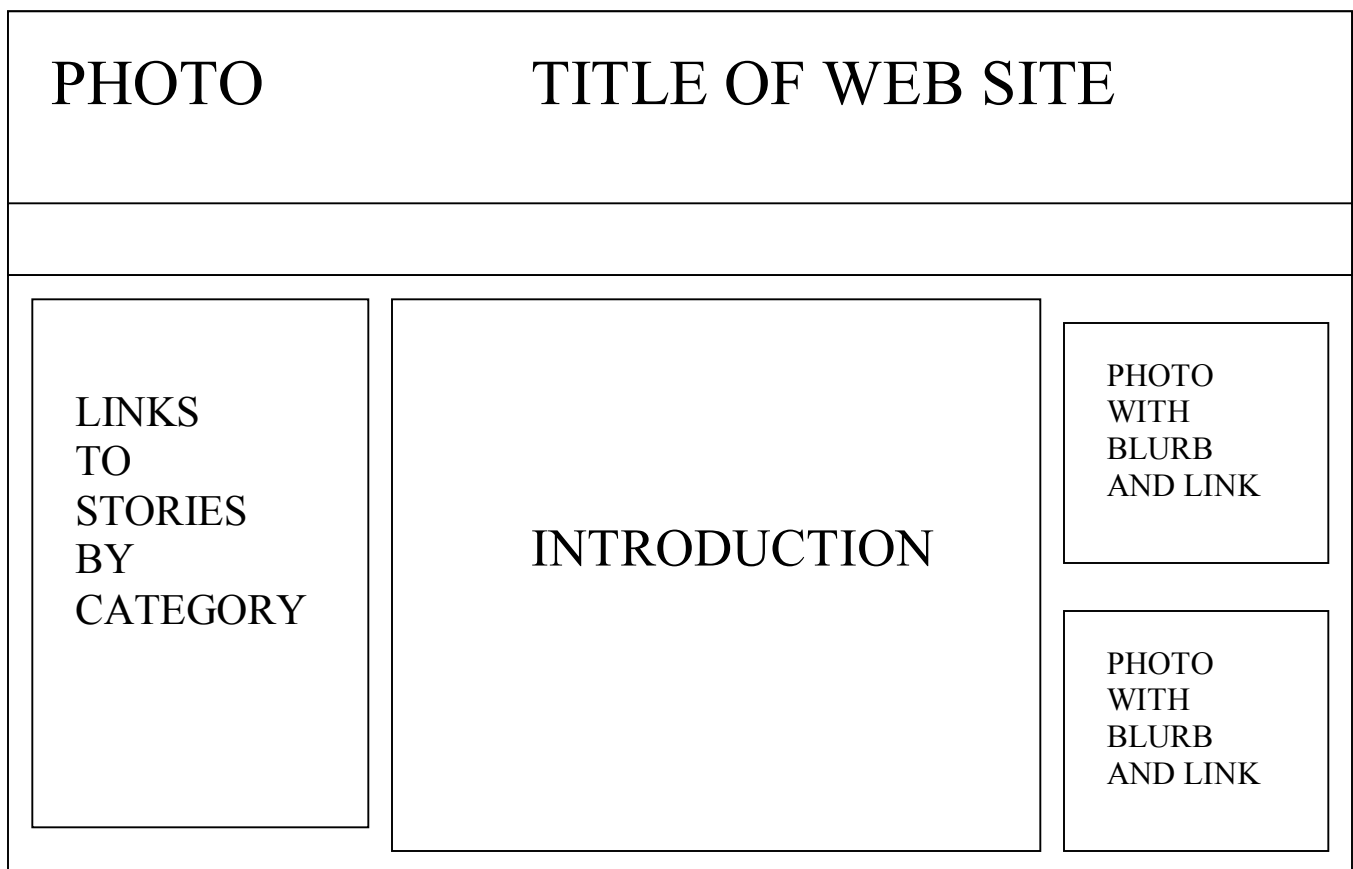
This project would consist of print, radio and TV-style stories published onto a basic Web site. As described in the Method section of the proposal, the project should include the following news pieces – a total of about 8 stories – in order to answer the first five proposed research questions:

- Who? Where?
  - Print story about Florida counties and the prevalence of poverty amongst children who live there.
  - Charts, maps and still photographs of those communities on the Web site to illustrate the U.S. Census data and other relevant information gathered from expert sources.
- Rural v. Urban
  - A series of two or three TV-style stories about children living in poverty in Florida.
  - U.S. Census data show Miami-Dade County as having the highest number of people under age 18 living in poverty in Florida in 2004; and Putnam County as having the highest percentage of people under age 18 living in poverty in Florida in 2004.
  - These TV-style stories would profile a child from Miami-Dade and another from Putnam who live in poverty.

- Headshots and profiles about each child and pull-quotes to complement stories on the Web site.

These stories will be the nuts-and-bolts pieces to the project. The stories about healthcare, education, behavior, undocumented children and efforts to help will develop through the newsgathering process.

The following diagram will serve as a model for the Web site's home page:



*Long-term Goals for the Project*

Goals for this project include:

- Accurately and fairly depict children who live in poverty in Florida and the issues that poverty brings to their lives;
- Create a compelling and informative series of news stories across multiple media platforms;
- Generate 4-5 television stories to be aired on WUFT-TV;
- Generate 1-2 radio stories to be aired on AM850 WRUF;
- Post all relevant content on a basic Web site; and
- Showcase my skills and talents as a multimedia reporter in an easy-to-access format for distribution to potential employers.

### *Proposed Timeline*

#### Proposed deadlines for this project include:

- A proposal for this project will be completed and submitted to Dr. Johanna Cleary by Dec. 4, 2007.
- Meetings with prospective committee members and distribution of copies of the proposal will be scheduled within the first two weeks of the Spring 2008 semester – Jan. 7, 2008 through Jan. 18, 2008.
- A proposal meeting date will be set within the third and fourth weeks of the semester – Jan. 21, 2008 through Feb. 1, 2008.
- Six full weeks of traveling, reporting, shooting, writing and editing time.
- Copies of the completed project will be submitted to committee members two weeks prior to the oral defense date – week of March 17, 2008 through March 21.
- An oral defense date will be set for three weeks before the last day of classes – week of March 31, 2008 through April 4, 2008.

### *Conclusion*

Research shows the news media has been ineffective in covering poverty in the United States. Even the journalists themselves acknowledge there is much room for improvement in accurately portraying people who live in those conditions. But precisely how to go about doing so is a question still up for debate. Some suggest it is a problem with parity – not enough minorities in American newsrooms. Others say it's the nature of the beast – that as long as journalists work in urban areas, the true face of American poverty will not be revealed. Most agree it's also a matter of being more careful and thoughtful news professionals.

There is likely no blanket solution, and perhaps one will never arise. But the reporter in this project has the opportunity to succeed where the industry has failed. Through careful and thoughtful selection of stories and sources, the reporter will produce a series of news stories in print- and broadcast-style formats about children who live in poverty in Florida. Those stories – posted on a basic Web site – will serve as an accurate depiction of the state of poverty among children in Florida.

### *Post-Project Reflections*

Working on this project was an invaluable learning experience. Going into it, I knew I would meet some interesting children with tough stories to tell – but I had no idea how hard poverty in this country could be on children. I did not foresee myself walking through the woods with a teenager who had actually slept there for years, under a tree, covered by a pile of junk. I had no idea I would watch two small children collect litter off sidewalks and roadways – in hopes to trade recyclables in for money and help their mother pay the rent. And it never crossed my mind that I would meet a family of nine who once lived on campgrounds in tents and drank water out of buckets.

Those weren't the stories I was expecting to tell. I didn't think people had to face that kind of poverty in the United States. So, I am glad I got to meet those children and give them a voice. Each child's story proved unique, eye-opening and inspiring. Therefore, I am glad I chose this topic for my non-thesis project, and I like to believe it has made me a better journalist.

I faced several obstacles in locating children to profile in this project, but I believe it was worth the struggle. The stories answered my proposed research questions about education, health, life in rural areas versus urban areas, and undocumented children. One change in plans, which occurred during the reporting process, was the addition of a section of the Web sites titled "Survival and Success." I decided to add that section when I found Jimmy Rousseau, the teen who spent years living in the woods. I found it an interesting addition to include a section about adults who have overcome the obstacles of childhood poverty and grown up to be successful and productive adults.

As for limitations, I wrote, shot, edited and produced each of the stories alone. I also created the Web site myself and took the still photographs featured on the site. Aside from

reporting, the other skills required in this project – like Web design, videography and photography – are by no means areas of expertise for me. So, I found it challenging to “one-man-band” all of it on my own. But at the same time, I believe I proved to myself that I can be a backpack journalist without significantly sacrificing the quality of my work.

Overall, I found it to be a great experience. This project made the whole two years of graduate school worth the effort. I believe I got what I was looking for in terms of an education and training in multimedia journalism.

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