

Homeless and Hopeless
-- A participant in a Poverty Simulation

Could you survive?



One month in the State of Poverty

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Situation

According to 2000 Census data, 8.7% of Wisconsin citizens and 10.8% of Wisconsin children are in poverty. In many more households, incomes are considered above the poverty line, but are still low enough to qualify families for government assistance programs such as food stamps and Badgercare health insurance. The recent economic downturn is contributing even more stress. Statewide unemployment rates continue to rise -- 4.6% in 2001 compared to 3.5% in 2000. And use of emergency food sources, such as food pantries, is increasing. Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin reports an all-time high distribution in October 2001.

County-based Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) Coordinators and Extension Educators develop and facilitate education programs in local communities to meet a variety of community needs. Often those programs involve or impact low-income families. Extension is therefore well-suited to assist communities as they seek to address poverty issues.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the impacts of one poverty awareness education program, the ROWEL Poverty Simulation, which has been used with leadership from University of Wisconsin-Extension 13 times over the past two years.

Description of Program and Research

Throughout Wisconsin, WNEP Coordinators and Family Living Educators have facilitated local awareness raising programs using the ROWEL Poverty Simulation, a program created by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL) Education Association of Missouri. This welfare simulation experience is designed to help participants begin to understand what it might be like to be part of a typical low-income family trying to survive from month to month. The object is to sensitize participants to the realities faced by low-income people. In a simulation, participants are put in the position of role-playing a low income family member with various resources and barriers scripted for them. For example, they may play a single Mom with two kids, no cash and very few assets. The simulation families move through a condensed "month" of poverty consisting of 4, 15-minute weeks.

Participants are generally staff or volunteers from agencies and organizations which serve low income people. Sensitizing these people to issues faced in poverty will presumably result in better understanding, and ideally changes in programming, that can benefit low income families.

This report summarizes the impacts of the poverty simulations conducted in Wisconsin. The following questions guided the research:

What has been the impact on Extension staff and partner agency staff that participated in a ROWEL Poverty Simulation?

- Do participants report an increased awareness of the situation of individuals in poverty?
- Did the simulation change the way in which participants conduct their jobs or interact with clients?
- What impacts may have occurred specifically in the area of local efforts to increase food security?

Research Design

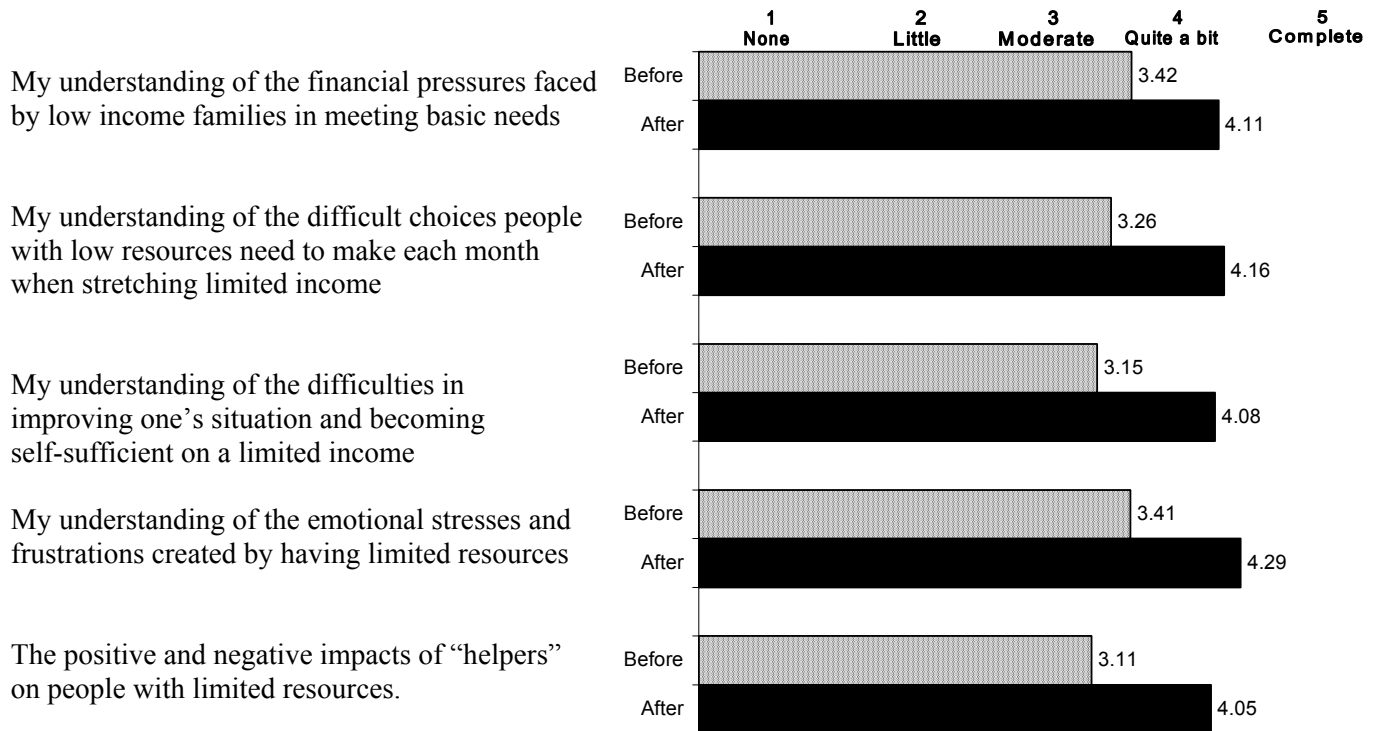
In the last two years, 13 poverty simulations were conducted reaching over 800 people total. In most cases, the poverty simulations were offered as a stand-alone half-day program. In some cases, the poverty simulation was offered as part of a full day program, in conjunction with another program, *Bridges Out of Poverty*. The *Bridges* program focuses on skill development to help staff work more effectively with low-income people.

Post-event participant surveys were administered and summary results were collected from 7 counties, with a total of 562 respondents. A pre-then-post evaluation format was used to measure self-reported change in understanding before the event and after. Because individual survey data (“raw data”) was not collected from every county, the analysis was completed using county summaries.

Because a key objective of this research is to identify longer term impacts of participation in a poverty simulation, **focus group interviews** were conducted 3 to 12 months after individuals had participated in the simulation. WNEP Coordinators in 4 counties volunteered to organize focus group interviews. 9-12 people from each county were recruited from local organizations and agencies that had been a part of the poverty simulation. The focus group questions are included as an appendix at the end of this report.

Summary of Findings

Post event participant surveys showed an increase in understanding of situations faced by low income people. Most responses showed that participants had a “moderate” understanding prior to the simulation, and “quite a bit” of understanding afterwards. The following chart summarizes the post-event participant survey results (n=562). Responses are based on a scale of 1-5.



Focus group interviews were used to assess further impacts of the poverty simulation. These interviews were conducted 3 to 12 months after the experience. Results compiled from all 4 focus groups are summarized below.

Finding: The poverty simulation increased participants' awareness and understanding of the situation of individuals in poverty.

The most common response to the question: “What was your impression of the poverty simulation?” was, “It was a real eye-opener”. Almost all the participants in all four focus groups insisted that the experience had given them new understanding about how individuals in poverty must feel and the frustrations they face day-to-day.

For me it was a wonderful eye-opener. A part of life I had no sense of at all.

It woke me up because I have a fairly comfortable life and don't really think about people that don't and the frustration they must go through...it made me very aware.

I think it was a real eye-opener. I think you can envision some of the steps people have to go through but until you walk through it yourself you really don't realize some of the obstacles, some of the attitudes of some of the vendors or agencies that you're trying to get service from.

Participants said that the experience helped them better understand the frustrations faced by low income people. Frustration arose from lack of time, money and transportation.

Just the frustrations that people feel and by Day 2...I did not care if the kids went to school, because there were too many pressures and we had to pay the bills.

For me to go through this, it really made me aware. I just can't imagine getting up in the morning getting out of bed and going through that struggle again.

The pressures building...it was really awful the whole range of feelings and the lack of resources and just how your emotions affect even your ability to think about it.

It helped increase my awareness to the emotional toll that it takes...many many people who seek out these services are embarrassed, frustrated.

In addition, when asked whether the simulation experienced reflected “real-life”, participants agreed that the events and feelings they experienced in the simulation were similar to those faced by low income people

It was excellent because you got put into their shoes and you walked a little bit in what they have to deal with.

I thought the encounters I had are very realistic. It wasn't that people were uncaring. It wasn't that they were unsympathetic. It was simply that these were their rules and this was their job and they were just doing their job.

I think in some cases the simulation was more exaggerated than real life, but again, I don't think that's inappropriate because it ultimately gives the participants a feel of what the real experience is.

Finding: The poverty simulation changed the way individuals related to low income families

Many participants said the experience changed the way they related to low income families. The experience helped them look at the people they served in a new light. It helped them become better listeners, to show some more compassion for people in circumstances that are out of their control.

I enjoyed it for not only gaining empathy for the families that we work for but also it helped me hopefully fine tune how I work with some of the other resources in my position.

I listen a lot more now.

I have a lot more respect for people when they can ask for help.

I find what changed is it reminded me to stop, sit back, spend a little more time with this person and really get to the root of the problem just by allowing them to talk, vent a little bit. And all of the sudden after we talk for a while, then we really get to the root of the problem and that's where we can solve the problem.

I have a little bit more understanding and I think I respect them a lot more than what I had before because I didn't realize some of the frustrations that they had gone through. And so I've gotten a little more patience with them and a little bit more understanding with them.

I always try to say something positive to that parent to make them feel good too...so that's how it's really impacted my job and a little something that I can do to lighten the load. Make them feel better about themselves.

Finding: The simulation experience did not usually lead to organizations making any changes to programs or policies to better meet the needs of clients/families.

With few exceptions, participants could not describe any policy or programmatic changes that had been made in their organizations as a result of the experience. Many seemed to have ideas of what needed to be changed. The simulation tended to reinforce what they already knew to be “problems” with their systems. However, most felt they were not in a position to make the changes.

Time and money are two barriers in our situation. And lack of staff.

I think that's going to continue to be the challenge for most of us. As an agency person, when you're looking at the time you spend with various activities, unfortunately advocacy and systematic change ends up being at the bottom and if there was a way we could change that it would be wonderful

I think the organizations represented here...I don't think that we're representing some of the things that could be changed and even if so, it's not that easy.

It would be nice to have people who are in the position to change policy.

There were a few exceptions, where people could point to specific outcomes.

I noticed that there wasn't a lot of interagency cooperation and coordination of things, so from that innocent comment she took and ran with it and she organized a....networking program...there were like 25 different agencies invited...it was very well received.

And some people felt that with some additional follow-up/facilitation, changes might be possible.

We need to find a way to do more discussion afterwards.

Finding: The poverty simulation did not help improve participants' understanding of the barriers faced by low income families in achieving food security

While it was not an express purpose of the poverty simulation to illuminate issues related to food security, there were several facets the simulation that related to families having resources and access to food. At the focus groups, no one brought up food as an issue without prompting. When prompted, most said they frankly had not dealt with that portion during their role-playing. Food needs were pushed aside to address other needs.

Truthfully...I can't remember if I got food...I don't think I did.

I remember as a Mom the child saying that and it was going through my mind this kid needs to eat. I don't have the money. But I never really resolved that.

I barely remember the grocery store and I think it was an afterthought...focused on other stuff.

I don't remember that being a huge issue at the simulation.

I think if I was really in that situation I would have thought more about that more, but I didn't. I neglected that part and the kids were hungry.

We weren't there long enough to starve and I thought it was real hard to understand that we didn't have any food for like, you said, three weeks. It just didn't have anything to do with what we were doing.

Finding: Participants offered a wide range of ideas for "next steps" that could be taken in the community to address the plight of individuals in poverty.

Foremost was the suggestion that others in the community should participate in a poverty simulation. Almost everyone made the suggestion at one point or another during the focus groups. There was a belief that others that work with or interact with low-income individuals would benefit from the awareness raising aspects of the program. Teachers and community business leaders were often suggested. Also, participants thought that local elected officials and agency decision-makers should attend a simulation, as they are perceived to be in positions to change policies and procedures.

We need to make this available to many many different groups of people...it was such a profound experience that I just felt myself wondering how can we bring this to other people.

You have to get the legislators in here, people that make the decisions, people that can make those changes, people that run these organizations. They're the ones that need to see what is going on.

I wish we had more simulations which have our average citizens coming in and seeing this is reality.

I think what should come out of it is more public awareness and more simulations for the business people, for schools.

I would do it again in a heartbeat if I thought we were going to get a captive audience of a few people that could truly make a difference.

Most participants agreed that the simulation was a very effective program. They appreciated the opportunity to bring it all home again at this focus group evaluation.

It's the best thing I did last year. Actually for about the last 5 years.

The best experience I've had in a training ever.

I think it would be nice if we had, like, a buddy from the simulation to call every once in a while and say 'hey, remember what you felt or remember what you learned?'

Conclusions/Recommendations

UW Extension poverty awareness education programs using the ROWEL Poverty Simulation clearly benefit local communities. The programs achieve the goal of sensitizing participants to the plight of individuals in poverty. Survey results show striking increases in understanding of the difficulties and stresses faced by individuals in poverty. Participants express that the experience is an "eye opener", and overwhelmingly say they are very satisfied with experience and would strongly recommend it to others. Further, the simulation programs reach a large audience that work with low income people. This confirms the program achieves its main goal -- to increase awareness among a large group of the target audience.

We wanted to determine what the longer term impacts of this program could be. According to the focus group responses, the simulation experience changed the way most participants interacted with their clients. It made them more empathetic and helped them become better listeners. In some cases, the simulation experience gave new energy to existing efforts to collaborate with staff and social services in local communities. However, over the subsequent 3 to 12 months, the experience generally did not lead to any policy or procedural changes in organizations or agencies. By and large, the participants felt like they were not in positions to make the needed changes. The changes needed were out of their control.

The few changes that people did report making after the experience are potential models for action for future participants. For example, at least one community formed a group of people to meet and discuss resources and needs of people in poverty in their own community. Another

community took the momentum gained from the simulation and conducted a *Bridges* training to provide skill development to help staff work more effectively with low-income people.

Participants seemed motivated to do something more after the simulation. For example, some thought that with follow up discussions and facilitation, appropriate actions could be taken to make situations better. Another idea was that participants could be paired with a “buddy” committed to helping their partner keep the experience “fresh” by reminding them of it every few months. These suggestions could be built into future poverty simulation trainings.

The poverty simulation, as constructed, is not particularly effective in enhancing participant understanding of food security issues. If future facilitators of the simulation are interested in enlightening participants about food security issues, the program could be modified to include an emphasis on food issues. One idea would be to integrate food needs more directly into the simulation experience by, for example, requiring families to meet their families’ food needs once per “week” at the food store or food pantry.

Participants felt strongly about the value of the simulation experience and, in fact, were grateful for the opportunity to come together with colleagues for the purpose of this evaluation. They wanted to use it as a springboard for taking next steps. The most commonly suggested “next step” was that others in the community, perhaps those in positions to make changes, should go through the simulation. Examples included elected officials, business leaders and teachers. In most cases, participants volunteered to assist in future efforts to enable others to attend a simulation.

In the case where a *Bridges Out of Poverty* workshop followed the simulation, focus group participants reported that the two programs complemented each other well. Because the *Bridges* training focuses on skill development for working with low income families, the participants thought that having the simulation precede the *Bridges* training was effective...the simulation had raised their awareness and whetted their appetites for more information, and perhaps made them more receptive to the materials covered in the *Bridges* training than they would have been otherwise. An evaluation specific to the *Bridges* program is the focus of another study.

In conclusion, the poverty simulation can continue to play an important role in increasing awareness in local communities about the situation for individuals in poverty. Efforts to recruit participants that may have the ability to make desired changes locally might be a goal of future programs.

Because the ability of the simulation experience itself to go beyond awareness raising is not evident, recommendations can be made to enhance our work in this area. First, the simulation experience could be followed by additional education/facilitation among the audience to encourage the “next steps”. Second, facilitators in future simulations should be equipped to provide participants with options for follow up skills training, such as *Bridges*, to help move them from awareness to action. This would take advantage of participants’ readiness to learn.

Acknowledgements

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Poverty Simulation Focus Group Discussion Questions

We'll begin by going around the table, having everyone introduce themselves and stating the role they played in the simulation. (In Vilas County, we'll also begin with a brief statement distinguishing the *Bridges* portion of the program from the Poverty Simulation portion.)

1) What was your **general impression** of the poverty simulation experience? (*Prompt: What did you like about it? What didn't you like about it?*)

Vilas Co: keep reminding participants to distinguish between *Bridges*/Poverty Simulation as appropriate

2) Please tell us how you think your experience was **similar to or different from the real life** experiences of low-income families.

3) Did the simulation experience **change your understanding** of the situation of individuals in poverty in any way? If so, how? (*prompt for specifics, such as difficulty meeting basic needs, time frustrations, worries about having enough food*)

Vilas County prompt: Did you view the two programs (*Bridges*/Poverty Simulation) as distinct in how they changed your understanding?

4) Describe any **changes you made in the way you relate to low income families**, based on your participation in the simulation.

Vilas County prompt: Did you view the two programs (*Bridges*/Poverty Simulation) as distinct in how they changed the way you relate to families?

5) Based on the simulation experience, **did your organization make any changes to its programs or policies** to better meet the needs of clients/families?

If yes, prompt: What kind of changes? Are the changes helping? How do you know?

If not, prompt: Do you see a need for changes to programs/policies? What are the barriers to changing programs/policies?

Vilas County prompt: Was it the experience in both programs (*Bridges*/Poverty Simulation) that contributed to any changes in programs/policies, or just one of the two?

6) (*If not covered in #5*) One of the areas we are particularly interested in learning about is if the simulation experience leads to helping families become more food secure. **Food security** is defined by "Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life".

Did the simulation experience help improve your understanding of the barriers faced by low income families in achieving food security?

Did the simulation experience lead to any changes in your organization's programs or policies related to helping families achieve food security?

7) What do you see as the "**next step**" for your organization/community in order to improve the situation for individuals in poverty?

8) Are there any **additional comments** on the experience or outcomes?

9) Would you be interested in any **follow-up to this experience** (if that has not already occurred or beyond what has already occurred)? What type of follow up? Who would participate? What would be the goals? Who would plan and facilitate?