

## **Deduce, Diffuse, De-cycle**

Consider for a moment, this planet known as Earth. Picture the change of seasons, the phases of the moon, the rise and fall of the tide, the everyday passage of morning to dusk. These events occur day after day, month after month, year after year. These are all examples of what is called a cycle; a series of events that repeats itself over and over again unchanged, usually, for an indefinite amount of time. This world that 6.6 billion human beings call home, flows in cycles, and this works out well for the majority of the population. There is a certain comfort imparted by the consistency of this similitude. Comfort, however, for some, is the last thing this repetition provides. Although these people, just like everyone else, see the seasons change and the days come and go, their perceptions are somewhat skewed, by yet another cycle. For these people, the only security is in knowing there is no security. All they can rely on is unreliability. The only thing they can be certain of is uncertainty. Yet, there is but a single difference that separates them from the rest of the world. These people were born in shackles, given a life sentence before life ever began. One by one these innocent souls came into this world, only to be immediately pulled in and swallowed alive by the perpetual maelstrom, the cycle of poverty.

Although poverty has existed since the beginning of recorded history, thanks to the work of many devoted volunteers, there may be hope. These young men and women have chosen to make a difference in their homeland by joining an organization devoted to defeating destitution and incinerating indigence. This organization, officially founded in 1993, is known as AmeriCorps ("History"). Since its inception, AmeriCorps volunteers have had the seemingly impossible task of fighting poverty in America. Through diligent effort and determination, though, many programs and tactics have been put into effect. One particularly intriguing method AmeriCorps has employed is the usage of after school programs for at-risk children and teenagers. These programs have a phenomenal effect on young people, parents, and the surrounding community. If the cycle of poverty is a bicycle wheel spinning out of control, the implementation of after school programs by the AmeriCorps organization might just be the stick jammed through the spokes, that brings it to a grinding halt.

So how exactly does one define poverty? According to Webster's Concise Family Dictionary, poverty is defined simply as the, "lack of money or material possessions". According to the U.S. Census Bureau's website, in 2003, to be considered poverty-stricken, a typical two parent, two child household would have to earn \$18,660 or below. At first glance, this number doesn't seem substantially low. However, when broken down, this translates to a combined income of less than eighty dollars for a typical eight hour work day. After subtracting payments, expenses, and all the costs associated with raising two children, there isn't a whole lot left. Keep in mind also, that this situation is best-case scenario, as far as poverty is concerned. Many families fall significantly below these ratings. In fact, as of 1999, 6,620,945 families fell at or below the poverty margin. That's 9.2 percent of the U.S. population ("QT-P35").

So why should the average American care about this seemingly insignificant portion of the population? What happens when a child from a below poverty level family becomes ill and needs to see a doctor? What if this family cannot even afford the bare essentials to survive? The government steps in with food stamps and programs such as welfare and free health insurance. Where does the government get the revenue to provide these services? Taxpayers. Every worker, property owner, and consumer has to give up some of the money that they've earned to support these people. From a purely economical point of view, the fewer poor people there are, the less money everyone else has to pay. Hopefully, however, there are other factors that make this a worthwhile cause. Do people deserve to be poor? Perhaps some do. Some people make negative choices that are therefore reflected by their socioeconomic status. What about those that don't have a choice? If two babies are born in the same hospital at the same time; one to an impoverished mother, the other to an affluent one, is it fair that one of them immediately has a significantly greater chance of success in life? Fair or not, many newborns enter this world every day, disadvantaged before they can even open their eyes. Maybe this child's parents made poor choices. Maybe this young mother's parents also made poor choices. Perhaps poverty has plagued this family as

far back as their lineage can be traced. Sadly, often times this is the case. The following lyrics sung by Elvis Presley in 1969 from the infamous song, "In the Ghetto" help put this problem into perspective:

"People, don't you understand  
The child needs a helping hand  
Or he'll grow to be an angry young man some day  
Take a look at you and me  
Are we too blind to see  
Or do we simply turn our heads  
And look the other way"

Can this problem be stopped? Probably not. There will always be people unwilling or unable to change themselves or their situation. Can the cycle of poverty be broken? AmeriCorps thinks so.

The history of AmeriCorps can be traced back to 1963, when President John F. Kennedy, inspired by the global work of the Peace Corps, sought to create a similar program to help the less fortunate here in the U.S. ([Strengthening 3](#)). Although tragically, Kennedy wouldn't live to see his plan actualized, his successor Lyndon B. Johnson carried on his mission. With Johnson's signature, in 1964 the "War on Poverty" legislation passed, creating an organization called VISTA, an acronym for Volunteers In Service To America ([Strengthening 3](#)). Almost thirty years later, in 1993, President Bill Clinton passed the National and Community Service Trust Act, which combined VISTA with the National Civilian Community Corps, forming what is known today as AmeriCorps VISTA ("History"). Since its establishment,

AmeriCorps VISTA has grown considerably in size from 20,000 members the first year, to 50,000 members in 2001 ([AmeriCorps 8](#)). Despite the numbers, though, breaking the cycle of poverty can still seem a bit disheartening. It takes a lot of determination from volunteers to make an impact on such a colossal problem. However, like waves crashing a rock, eventually the efforts of AmeriCorps volunteers will wear away at poverty, until it is but a pebble.

AmeriCorps utilizes a number of different methods to fight poverty. In fact, in 1999 alone over 23,000 people were assisted in seeking a job, with over 6,500 of them obtaining one that paid an average of \$6.98 per hour ([Strengthening 6](#)). Although this is a positive result, especially for the unemployed, it merely scratches the surface of the poverty dilemma. An allusion could be made to the old saying; "If you give a man a fish he will not be hungry for a day, but if you teach a man to fish he will never be hungry again." In order to break the cycle of poverty, one must get to the root of the problem; it must be stopped before it can begin. This is precisely the goal AmeriCorps seeks to achieve through the use of after school programs.

In 1999, supplemental literacy programs were utilized by 24,752 young Americans ([Strengthening 8](#)). By implementing after school programs for disadvantaged young people, a ripple effect is created. A wide variety of programs have been established, many of which focus on basic literacy skills. As a matter of fact, 384,178 were given help by AmeriCorps volunteers in learning how to read in 1999 ([Strengthening 8](#)). Another benefit is that by giving students something positive to do after school, they are kept off the streets where they may succumb to the allure of illegal, unhealthy, or immoral activities (Shriver). In the meantime, this gives an opportunity to busy working parents, a second chance, that could possibly be used to go back to school or learn a new skill. Furthermore, seeing this happen might influence friends, family, and neighbors to follow suit. Before long, an entire community has broken the cycle of poverty.

Breaking the cycle of poverty, no matter how it's approached, is not a simple task. It requires a deep commitment and desire to help those who are less fortunate. Through the utilization of after school programs for at-risk children and teenagers, AmeriCorps volunteers might someday be able to break the cycle of poverty once and for all. Poverty as a whole will probably never be completely eliminated. After all, some people really do prefer to live under their potential, and they have the right to live their lives

however they desire. However, it is unfair for children to become trapped in a situation where rising above poverty is nearly impossible. This is why the cycle needs to be broken. This is why after school programs are so important. Perhaps now it seems far-fetched, but maybe someday poverty will no longer be able to impede potential. Perhaps author Norman Vincent Peale puts it best, "Empty pockets never held anyone back. Only empty heads and empty hearts can do that."

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