

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF POVERTY SIMULATION WORKSHOPS

The “*Walk in My Shoes*” poverty simulation workshop¹ aims to help participants begin to understand what a typical low-income family experiences as they try to survive from month-to-month. The intent is to help community leaders, service providers, businesses, and other stakeholders deepen their understanding of the challenges faced by those living in poverty and how current systems, policies, and practices often create barriers. The Rochester Area Community Foundation (RACF)² provided Coordinated Care Services, Inc. (CCSI) with a grant to develop the local capacity to facilitate these simulations as part of a multi-pronged strategy to increase awareness of the issues faced by individuals living in poverty – and to motivate individuals to take an active role in the community’s efforts to address poverty. As part of this initiative, the RACF was interested in evaluating the impact that the simulation had on participants’ attitudes and beliefs about poverty, as well as the extent to which it had prompted individuals to take action. The full evaluation report was delivered to RACF earlier this year. Results and implications are recapped briefly in the sections that follow.

Methods: Individuals were surveyed prior to and following participation in the simulation. The pre-simulation survey consisted of demographic information, participants’ current household financial security, any experience of living in poverty, as well as subscales from the *Attitude Toward Poverty (ATP)* questionnaire (Yun & Weaver, 2010). The post-survey consisted of the same items from the ATP questionnaire, another scale examining changes in attitudes toward and understanding of poverty (Greder & Warning, 2005), and open-ended questions about their experiences of the simulation. Participants were also surveyed 6-months post-simulation.

In addition to the surveys, focus groups were conducted four to seven months following participation. Focus groups participants were asked: 1. How the simulation contributed to any change in their perspective, behaviors, and/or activities; 2. Ideas on how the Poverty Simulation planning team can connect with groups who may not be naturally open to a poverty simulation; 3. Ideas on how changes in perspectives, behaviors, and actions due to participation in the Poverty Simulation, can be sustained.

FINDINGS

More than 500 Individuals Participated in a Poverty Simulation during the Grant Period

- 524 community members attended one of six simulations held between October 2015 and February 2016. The majority were between 35 to 64 years of age, identified as female, white, had a secure income, never lived below the poverty level, and lived outside of the City of Rochester.

Participation Appears to Have an Impact on Implicit Biases, Awareness and Perceptions about Poverty

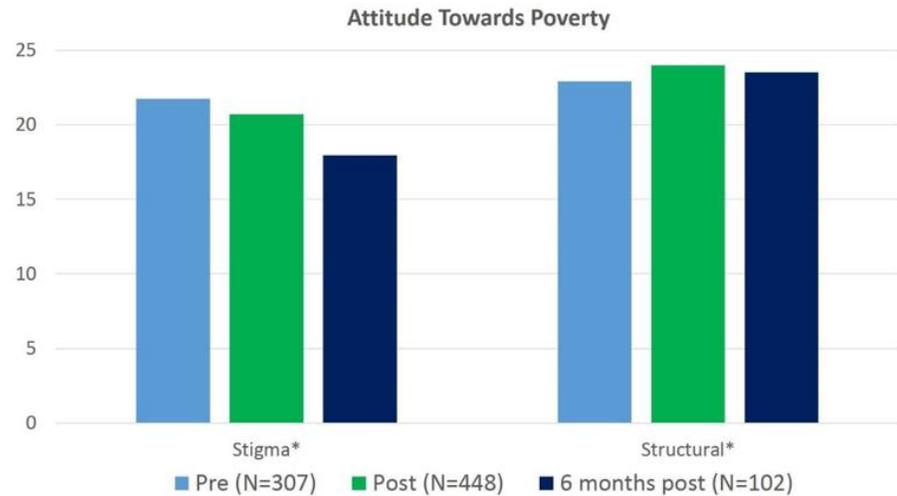
The stigma subscale on the Attitude Toward Poverty (ATP) questionnaire included specific items describing the stigma and stereotypes sometimes associated with people living in poverty. The structural subscale assesses the extent to which individuals believe that the factors contributing to poverty are systemic versus a function of individual actions and circumstances.

¹ The model for the simulation exercise was developed by Visions for Change, a not-for-profit organization based in Syracuse, New York.

² Support for the Poverty Simulation workshops was provided by the RACF and Wegmans.

- The mean score on the stigma subscale decreased from 21.75 pre-simulation to 20.71 post-simulation, suggesting **participants were less likely to agree with common stereotypes and to associate stigma with people living with poverty immediately after experiencing the simulation**. The changes were significant at $p < .001$.

- At six months post-simulation, the mean score for the stigma subscale continued to decrease from 20.71 to 17.95, indicating participants responding to the six month post-simulation survey were even less likely to agree with common stereotypes and stigma items compared to participants who responded to the pre- and post-surveys.



- The mean scores for the structural subscale increased from 22.92 pre-simulation to 23.98 post-simulation indicating that **participants were more likely to agree that structures and systems are factors that contribute to an increase or reduction in poverty, rather than individual circumstances**. The changes were significant at $p < .001$. The mean score on the ATP subscale decreased from 23.98 to 23.53 from post-simulation to six months post-simulation. However, it was still higher than pre-survey mean attitude scores. This suggests that overall participants were more likely to agree that structures and systems are factors that contribute to an increase or reduction in poverty after participating in the poverty simulation.

- **There was a significant increase in mean scores on all factors of awareness and understanding of the challenges and experiences that people with low income face from pre-simulation to post-simulation ($p < .001$).**
 - From the post-survey to the six month post-survey, mean scores were slightly lower on all factors of awareness and understanding; however, the scores declined by .24 points or less suggesting modest differences between the two time periods. One exception was an "overall awareness of what it is like to live in poverty" (which increased by 0.1 from the post-survey to the six month post-survey).
- These findings suggest that the poverty simulation experience may contribute to an increase in awareness and understanding of the challenges and experiences that people with low income face. However, continued efforts and intervention may be needed to sustain the long-term effects of the simulation on awareness and understanding.
- When asked immediately following the simulation how participants' perceptions have changed, the most common response (81%) was a new awareness or

"I had some understanding and experience with individuals in poverty but this really brought home the frustration level"

"I knew it was tough, but the training helped me to put into perspective how difficult living in poverty is."

"The stress is amazing, it takes so much energy to even begin to help yourself to try to get ahead."

understanding of the realities of living in poverty. Some specific areas of awareness included challenges/barriers such as time, transportation, juggling priorities, lack of choices and limited resources. Additional emotional awareness included stress, chaos, frustration, and feeling overwhelmed.

Many Participants Expressed Changes in Planned Behaviors, but More is Needed to Stimulate Action

When asked on the post-survey (immediately following the simulation) what participants would do as a direct result of simulation to address poverty, the most frequently cited response was related to showing more empathy or compassion toward people living in poverty. The second most frequently rated response was associated with using their new level of understanding to be more mindful, sympathetic, patient, accepting, supportive, and appreciative of what they have. A smaller number of responses stated that they would advocate, volunteer, and educate on their experiences with the poverty simulation.

CONCLUSION

The results of this evaluation suggest that RACF's goals of helping to create greater awareness of and sensitivity to the challenges faced by individuals living in poverty were achieved. Survey findings indicate that attitudes and biases about people in poverty, especially those associated with stigma and the role of systems and structure in causing or sustaining poverty, changed in a more positive direction immediately after the simulation. Findings related to a reduction in stigma were maintained and even improved slightly among participants responding to the six month survey. These changes in attitudes suggest that the poverty simulation may contribute to reducing stigma, increasing the understanding of how systems and structures contribute to poverty, and raising overall awareness of the experiences faced by people living in poverty in the short-term. While the long-term effects of the simulation are not known at this point, there is much that can be done to maximize the immediate impact that the poverty simulation has on respondents.

The evaluation also examined the extent to which participants engaged in efforts to address poverty following the simulation. In general, it appears that the poverty simulation increased awareness and sensitivity, sparked a new or increased an already formed interest in reducing poverty, and allowed individuals to have more meaningful conversations about poverty. However, participants appeared less clear on how to take actions that would contribute to the community's goal of reducing poverty.