



Storied Lives: Shifting Perspectives on Poverty

Lilian Barraclough and Leah Levac (University of Guelph), with support from
Dominica McPherson (Guelph & Wellington Poverty Elimination Collaborative)

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Background

*Storied Lives: Shifting Perspectives on Poverty*¹ is a four-part podcast series about the experiences of people living with poverty and how their experiences of discrimination, rural living, gendered violence, and other structural barriers shape the effects and endurance of poverty. Each podcast includes two parts: a composite story created from focus groups with people with lived expertise of poverty; and commentary from someone with named expertise in the field.

Telling people's stories is important, but what, if anything, do people learn from hearing these stories? Can we *shift perspectives* on poverty? Specifically, can we raise awareness about the structural causes of poverty?

This research summary is based on data from 219 people who completed a survey both before and after they listened to at least one of the *Storied Lives* podcasts. Survey respondents varied by age, income, gender, and experience with poverty. The surveys were open from mid-2022 to early 2024 and were advertised through social media, word of mouth, and in a few university classes at the University of Guelph. We asked listeners about their opinions and understandings of the causes and effects of poverty.

Most listeners (n=168) felt that their understanding of poverty shifted after listening to the stories. Listeners had different reactions to each of the four podcasts.

¹ Storied Lives was a joint research project by the [Guelph & Wellington Poverty Elimination Collaborative](https://www.gwpoverty.ca/storied-lives-podcast/) and the University of Guelph's [Community Engaged Scholarship Institute](https://www.gwpoverty.ca/storied-lives-podcast/) and [Live Work Well Research Centre](https://www.gwpoverty.ca/storied-lives-podcast/). It ran from 2018 to 2024. You can find the podcasts and more information about the project here: <https://www.gwpoverty.ca/storied-lives-podcast/>



Episode 1: Saving Grace

This episode explores the intersecting themes of poverty, mental health, and physical disability. It follows the story of an injured worker who is housing insecure in a rural area and has limited access to resources and services. Following the story, Elsa Mann, Team Lead for the Rural Wellington Community Team with Mount Forest Family Health, discusses the failures of social safety nets that often entangle people in poverty, rather than providing them with necessary supports. She also elaborates on structural barriers to accessing employment and needed supports, including related to childcare, transportation, disability, and more.

For the 139 survey respondents who listened to *Saving Grace*, this story was most likely to invoke feelings of **sadness, frustration,** and **pity** for the main character; they also felt discouraged for the main character. Listeners described the main character as unlucky, controlled by their circumstances, failed by the system, and resilient.

Some listeners also offered more elaborate reactions. One was struck by *“how hard it is to get out of the cycle of poverty. Even if you can get help and financial assistance, this only becomes available to you once you’ve already hit rock bottom. There’s gotta be a way to change things so that you can receive support to prevent you from ever hitting rock bottom.”* Another *“felt frustrated and angry for the storyteller as [they] listened to him explain the actions he needed to take to survive (i.e. take out a money loan), which only pushes him further into poverty. I did not realize that services were so location dependent.”*



Episode 2: **Quota**

This episode explores the intersecting themes of poverty, racism, and xenophobia. It follows the story of a newcomer couple to Canada. One is injured at his workplace and is refused accommodations and medical treatment and discriminated against because of his English language skills. The other—the main character in the story—also faces barriers at her workplace, including long hours and unevenly enforced rules and opportunities for advancement. Listeners learn about the experiences of newcomers with precarious workplaces that endanger their lives and wellbeing. Following the story, Jasmine Ramze Rezaee, then Director of Advocacy and Communications at YWCA Toronto, discusses how newcomers, especially with limited English, often have a difficult time securing employment once they are here, and are often trapped in short-term, low-wage work arrangements with no security or stability, and facing racial discrimination.

The 31 survey respondents who listened to *Quota* were most likely to feel **sad, frustrated, and discouraged** for the main character. Listeners also described the main character as **resilient, oppressed, controlled by their circumstances, and strong**. One listener found *“the discussion of working conditions and limited access to resources for many newcomers to Canada”* impactful. They were struck by *“how the lack of support perpetuates poverty and inequality.”*



Episode 3: **Old Enough to Hit**

This episode explores the intersecting themes of poverty, familial and sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and harassment. It follows the story of a woman who experienced abuse from an early age and was consistently failed by social assistance programs, facing bureaucratic and systemic barriers. Following the story, Lieran Docherty, then Director of Programs at the Women Abuse Council of Toronto—a policy and planning body working to eradicate violence against women through systems change—discusses systemic causes of poverty that perpetuate unequal access to quality jobs, health care, housing, transportation, education, and other vital resources. They emphasize that women are more likely to live in poverty because of their social and economic marginalization.

Of the 90 survey respondents who listened to *Old Enough to Hit*, some felt **sadness**, **pity**, and **discomfort** for the main character when listening to this story. Some listeners described the main character as **unlucky**, **a poor decision maker**, and **failed by the system**. Seeing the main character as ‘a poor decision maker’ may reflect widespread victim-blaming narratives that circulate about people living with poverty and highlights the need for more nuanced and trauma-informed public education. Survey respondents also reflected on the effects of cycles of abuse on people living with poverty, noting how intimate partner violence, harassment, and other forms of gendered violence can create especially challenging contexts for people living with poverty.



Episode 4: **Paying Customers Only**

This episode explores the intersecting themes of poverty, substance use, mental health, racism, policing, and physical violence. It follows the story of a young adult affected by mental illness, policing, lack of access to needed supports, and racism. The story also emphasizes the role of intergenerational trauma in perpetuating poverty. Following the story, Dr. Akwatu Khenti, Associate Professor at University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health, talks more about mental health and anti-Black racism. He discusses the impossible hurdles people must overcome to get out of poverty and mental illness, barriers to accessing affordable mental health care and housing, and the ways in which these barriers are even greater for those who are racialized.

For the 47 survey respondents who listened to *Paying Customers Only*, the main emotions this story caused were **sadness** and **frustration**. They also felt **discouraged** for the main character, who they described as being **failed by the system, oppressed, controlled by their circumstances**, and **resilient**. One listener described being most impacted by a situation to which they could relate. They referred to *"the part of the story where the narrator talks about missing school [because of] issues regarding their mother and the police. In my experience of poverty, education is so greatly affected in these seemingly impossible to overcome ways. I have experienced similar things myself and have worked with students in high schools who have gone through the same."*

General reflections on the podcasts

Survey respondents shared a range of general reflections about what they heard. One respondent wrote, *"[in] all of them, I felt deeply sad for how inescapable poverty seems to be. It seems next to impossible for people to 1) have the resources to escape poverty and 2) be empowered enough by yourself and by society to escape poverty."* Another explained, *"listening to the fictional stories gave me a sense of the challenges [people living with poverty face] in their daily lives and why it is so hard to overcome their situation and escape from poverty."* Others reflected on the power of the stories themselves, noting, *"How real [they were]. How it made [them] feel what the storyteller felt."*

People experienced a range of emotions while listening to the podcasts. Through their comments, they also highlighted the impossible situations in which many people living with poverty find themselves. But did anything change in terms of how listeners think about poverty? We do not have enough data to answer this question definitively, but some interesting findings emerged that are worth considering.

What do people think causes poverty?

Before and after listening to a podcast episode, we asked listeners to consider a list of 17 factors and indicate whether each factor contributed to living with poverty “a lot,” “a little,” or “not at all.” The list included structural factors, individual factors, and mixed factors, but they were not identified in these categories in the survey. When we looked at listeners’ responses before and after listening to a podcast episode, we saw small shifts for some listeners towards understanding the structural factors that contribute to poverty.

Structural factors are beyond the control of an individual. They are usually related to larger economic and political systems. Things like, ‘lack of labour protections,’ ‘lack of affordable housing,’ ‘immigration status,’ ‘trauma,’ and ‘inadequate sources of income’ are structural. Individual factors are within an individual’s control. ‘Making bad choices,’ ‘not taking opportunities presented to them,’ and ‘lack of work ethic’ are examples of individual factors that are usually considered to be within someone’s control. Mixed factors could be considered structural, individual, or a combination of the two, depending on the respondent’s perspective. For instance, some people consider ‘bad luck’ and ‘addiction’ to be within someone’s control, others see these as the result of structural factors, and others still think of these as being shaped by a combination of individual and structural factors.

After listening to an episode, the total number of respondents who indicated structural factors such as ‘lack of labour protections,’ ‘immigration status,’ ‘systemic oppression,’ and ‘trauma’ as contributing “a lot” to living with poverty was higher than before listening. And,

compared with before they listened, more respondents said that after listening, they thought that individual factors such as ‘making bad choices,’ ‘addiction,’ and ‘lack of stable work’ contributed to living with poverty “a little” or “not at all.” In other words, after listening to an episode of the podcast, listener responses overall placed more emphasis on structural causes of poverty than on individual causes. However, after listening to a podcast episode, more respondents also said that ‘lack of work ethic’—an individual factor—contributes “a lot” to living with poverty. This outlier response may be picking up on widespread victim-blaming narratives, which are persistent even in the face of exposure to structural explanations of poverty. Future research could explore shifts in individual listeners’ perspectives and consider factors that explain these shifts.

In the post-listening survey, when we asked listeners whether they thought the main character in the story they listened to was responsible for their fate, most people answered, “definitely not” or “sort of.” However, when we asked listeners more generally if people living with poverty are responsible for their fate, listeners were more likely to say that people living with poverty “sort of” or “definitely are” responsible for their fate. In other words, podcast listeners seemed to recognize how structural factors were causing poverty in the lives of the podcast characters but had a more difficult time translating this understanding to how poverty operates in society more generally.

What do people think we should do about poverty?

Even when people think of poverty as being an individual, rather than a structural, problem, they prioritize structural solutions. For example, after they listened to a podcast, we asked listeners to identify solutions they thought would help eliminate poverty. The most popular responses were to provide Universal Basic Income (50%); guaranteed mental health supports (47%); guaranteed housing (44%); universal education (37%); funding for community resources (33%); improved resources for survivors of gender-based violence (33%); and free public transit (32%).

We also asked them what they would be most likely to do themselves to help address poverty. They said they already do, or would, “talk about poverty issues with people they know” (46%), “donate to a cause” (36%), “share the podcast with peers” (35%), and “participate in informal volunteering” (35%).

Finally, survey respondents thought that sharing posts on social media, and producing more podcasts, would be the most effective ways to engage and educate the public about poverty.





Final thoughts

The Storied Lives podcast series allowed listeners to learn from people with lived and named expertise about the structural causes and individual realities of living with poverty. Through *Storied Lives*, we also invited listeners to reflect on potential solutions to poverty. Through the podcasts, listeners seemed to become more aware of the structural causes of poverty but did not necessarily translate this into understanding that poverty across our communities is also caused by structural factors. Nevertheless, they did recognize the value of learning through people's stories. The Storied Lives podcast series was possible only because people in and around Guelph and Wellington County were willing to share their difficult stories and circumstances of poverty. We continue to honour their teaching and survival work, and hope that Storied Lives will continue to support the essential work of shifting perspectives on poverty.