

# NOWADAYS CULTURE OF POVERTY – DIMENSIONS AND SPREAD AMONG YOUTH

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## Introduction

The concept of "culture of poverty" first emerged in the anthropological studies of Oscar Lewis in the 1960s. The author explores and describes a specific set of values, attitudes and behavioural patterns among some of the poorest section in Mexican society which lead to reproduction of poverty. According to the study not all poor sections can be associated with "culture of poverty". However, if a group of people has been in poverty for generations, it adapts to a certain design of living and understandings about the larger society. Lewis reports more than 70 characteristics of culture of poverty such as instability, lack of order and organization, apathy, repetitiousness, ignorance, feeling of hopelessness, chronic unemployment, strong present-time orientation, no plan for the future, difficulties to adapt etc. Moreover, Lewis argues that once this style of life is established, it passes through families for generations and continues even if the circumstances change. The feeling of helplessness, the lack of initiative, and the dependency on someone else's help hinder most of the social policies for empowering the slum community – even if the financial aspects improve, the inactivity still impedes the social inclusion.



The concept of "culture of poverty" is controversial since many researchers claim it "blames the victims" and exonerate structural inequalities. However, postmodern researches prove that thinking of the poor as victims even increase their passiveness. Furthermore, in nowadays statistics (worldwide and national) one can find strong evidences for practices which reminds characteristics of the culture of poverty in communities outside the absolute poverty such as NEETs youth. The youth in Bulgaria, for example, has one of the highest rates in European Union for young people without employment, nor in education or training (18.9% in 20-34 years old in 2022 according to Eurostat). On national level, we can notice the so-called phenomena of "hereditary youth unemployment". Suggestions for specific model among the poor strata in Bulgaria also can be found in research from Agency of social analysis, published during the late 90s. The results indicate that feeling of marginality and hopelessness, and reconciliation can be noticed today outside that specific strata in various of social backgrounds. **As part of the socialization of the youth all characteristics pointed out above limit the potential for success in different aspect and create new form of social vulnerability.**



The research aims to explore and describe the cultural models and behaviour patterns which limit the successful social inclusion and establish a new form of social vulnerability among the youth between 20 and 34 years old and living in different social background.

## Methodology

The scientific survey is focused on different understandings, attitudes, frameworks and narratives among young people (ages 20-34) that characterize new culture of poverty. Another objective of the research is also to explore common characteristics and differences of beliefs and behaviour of youth regarding their social status: background, education, place of residence, gender and age.

From a methodological point of view this study is designed as a case study. The included methods at this stage of the project are as follows:

1. Theoretical research on various perspectives and definitions of "culture of poverty"
2. Semi-structured interview with young people between 20 and 34 years old
3. Focus group with teachers
4. Observation of young people between 20 and 34 years old in their everyday life
5. Single-case analysis

### Target group:

The study focus on young people from various social background. However, all participants in the study are chosen based on several common characteristics:

- Inactivity on daily basis;
- Absence of autonomy (incl. financially);
- Low income from part-time or temporary employment;
- Weak commitment.

## Results

### Interviews:

28 respondents interviewed from September 2023 to January 2024

- 18 men and 10 women
- Employment: unemployed (14), part-time job (6) and employed (8)
- Live in the capital (14), regional city (5), town (5) and in village (4)
- Live alone (3), with partner (9) and with parents (16)
- Education: elementary (2), secondary (19) and tertiary (7)
- Only 3 of the respondents are still in some form of training
- 8 of them have dropped out of school/university

All interviews are coded in Quirkos

238 codes were created and organized in 65 clusters

### Focus groups with teachers:

3 focus groups with teachers in regional city, town and village. The focus groups were held in September 2023 and 24 teachers participated in them.

### Emerging themes during the interviews

#### Vague goals

Unambiguously this is the common characteristic between the respondents. 26 of 28 respondents have vague goals for the future; 11 of them are inadequate in their goals (have no training, nor experience in correspondence to the aim). The overlapping between codes proves that 10 of the respondents wants some kind of change in their life but cannot point out the specifics; this leads to indecisiveness (8 of 10 cases overlap hesitation and refusal in advance of actions to realize the goals). Half of the respondents don't distinguish long-term from short-term goals. Often the blurry vision for the future is "hidden behind" intellectualizing and/or focusing on obstacles.

#### Obstacles

The obstacles to reach one's goal or success is the most often mentioned in various aspects. The respondents point out 14 different obstacles but two of them come to the fore – the social environment and lack of finances. Semantic analysis of the quotes indicates that the social environment as theme is used by the respondents to avoid sincere answer, and the lack of finances- as an excuse for their own indecisiveness. Moreover, 14 of the respondents indicate fear of failure.

During the focus groups teachers notice that some of the students are overfocused on excuses and looking for obstacles to explain why they do not study deeply and not make efforts. It turns out that parents often support their children in their excuses without looking for a way to change. Thus, early characteristics of beliefs, repertoires and attitudes specific to the culture of poverty become stable in the period of youth.

#### Education

14 of all respondents share for difficulties at school. 11 of them have refused to start or continue with some kind of training or educational level. 10 of respondents don't want to put efforts in learning. Although it is less often mentioned, the respondents show mainly external motivation for learning, uninformed choice of educational program and high expectations to be "easy" to graduate. Several of the respondents(8) show "disappointment" from education and a negative image of teachers.

Some of the participants show a desire to improve their qualifications, but without a clear idea of the way to do it.

### Daily routine

One key aspect of nowadays culture of poverty can be noted in this cluster since the results show the inactive and inert daily routine. 15 of the respondents share for spending multiple hours daily on their phone or in front of the TV. For 11 of the respondents the most important part of the day is going out with friends, although the semantic analysis on the theme "Friends" shows low level of attachment and superficial communication. The lack of schedule, the lack of hobbies and the absence of permanent arrangements transform the daily routine to "idle passage of time".

### Indecisiveness

Indecisiveness is clearly patterned through delaying in time (14 respondents); 16 respondents show refusal in advance and 11 others - defensive pessimism. However, the overlapping of codes indicates that it is used as a defence mechanism to cover vague goals.

### The idea for success

The idea of success is primarily associated with the material aspects – finances, housing, cars etc. One of the narratives that emerges here is the so-called "good life" (7 of the respondents mentioned it) but the specifics of it are as vague as the goals of the respondents forasmuch as it is associated with "interesting job", "independence" or "balance in life".

The main way to succeed is seen through help from someone else (11 of the respondents). A significant part of the respondents' idea of success in life includes an easy lifestyle.

Low level of responsibility and independence, low level of diligence to achieve higher results present students from different backgrounds according to teachers. This means that these characteristics are spreading among children and young people living in different socio-cultural conditions and are become more individualized.

### Finances

The main sources of finances are parents, partner who live with, and job. However, the employment is insufficient to meet the respondent's needs. It is problematic that many of the respondents are resigned to the situation and accept economic dependence on others as normal.



## Conclusion

This stage of the study clearly define several characteristics of nowadays dimensions of culture of poverty:

- Lack of initiative;
- Vague and often inadequate goals;
- Feeling of helplessness;
- Counting on someone else or "luck" to succeed;
- Associating success mainly with material aspects;
- Indecisiveness and fear of failure;
- Hyperfocus on obstacles as an excuse;
- Idleness and inactivity on daily basis.

From a pedagogical point of view, it is important to reflect and explore more deeply the social representation of the respondents toward education. The negative attitude and the noticeable sense of academic futility can be analysed as one of the main hinders to successful inclusion. The refusal to put effort in education is a forecast for future failure. Even though some of the respondents' examples can be seen as manifestations of easy-culture (i.e. education "is time-consuming" or "should be easy"), others can be analysed and used for positive change. The research will continue by expanding the range of participants and including more young people in the category NEETs. A questionnaire survey will be conducted to further explore the spread of the characteristics of a culture of poverty among young people and to consider options for change.