

ALICE in Wonderland: Navigating the Anti-Poverty Service Ecosystem

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Poverty is commonly conceptualized by a simple money metric; that is, earnings beneath a specified income threshold (United Nations 2022). Broadly speaking, the thresholds, which are determined by national governments, represent the annual gross income a typical household requires to consume at a level necessary for survival (Hauver, Goodman and Grainer 1981). Roughly 10% of the world's population is thought to live in extreme poverty, where survival is imperiled (World Bank 2018). In the United States, according to the United Way (2020), a leading US anti-poverty organization, roughly 13% of US households (or approximately 16 million people) live at or below the FPL of \$25,100.

Scholars have long held that money-metric conceptualizations, where poverty is a simple trait of households or individuals, can be doggedly (and grimly) optimistic, because they routinely underestimate what is needed and what must be done to avoid survival-threatening deprivation (Subramanian 2014). One response in recognition of these shortcomings, has been to broaden the category of those living with precarity to incorporate working people earning wages above a poverty threshold but less than a living wage. The U.S. characterizes such people as Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE), and they are known colloquially as “the working poor” (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). The United Way estimates roughly 35 million US (29%) ALICE households (United Way 2020). Combined with those officially in poverty, some 42% of US households live under precarious circumstances.

In this project, we explore a service ecosystem of businesses and anti-poverty-oriented programs (government and NGO) that serve ALICE and poor consumers. We focus specifically on their consumer journeys through the ecosystem. We pay focused attention to participants in a program called “Staying Ahead,” run by a Community Action Agency in a small city in the southeastern United States. Our interest in these consumers is based on the goal, laid out for them by the program, to begin a longer-term local engagement as citizen-consumers. In that role (see Coskuner-Balli 2020), they are expected to interact with local stakeholders, including program mentors, employers, local organizations, community groups, etc.

In the spirit of studying poverty rather than the poor (Brady 2023), our interest in these consumer-citizens' journeys is to better understand how much-needed resources are distributed across a local landscape, namely where they are clustered, how they can be accessed, and the myriad administrative, locational, and other challenges to acquiring them. To that end, we have

built a TCR team to study this approach to poverty eradication. Each member has a deep interest in community and social change, and significant experience in studying vulnerable and marginalized people and their pursuit of positive social transformation. We have conducted in-depth interviews with participants, program mentors, employers, local organization members, community groups, and other key community stakeholders to assess the layout and contours of the anti-poverty service ecosystem. We are also collecting relevant secondary data about this and other communities. Our goal is to understand journeys through the anti-poverty service ecosystem as well as how changes impact it and how community members experience this change. This project will result in theoretical and practical insights into how individuals and groups address community level poverty (e.g. contributing to knowledge of institutional entrepreneurship and social movements), as well as how social programs can address issues of consumer well-being through bottom-up, community-level initiatives.

Timeline

Task	Completion Date
Pre-Conference	
Review Completed Data Sources to determine additional data collection (meeting)	August 25, 2024
Collect additional qualitative data - In-depth interviews	January 1, 2025
Collect secondary data - Mapping of organizations	January 1, 2025
Plan data analysis and assess progress (meeting)	December 31, 2024
Literature review of theoretical and empirical arenas to inform theoretical framing (Theories of poverty, Service provision to the poor, Subsistence marketplaces, Homelessness, Cultural trauma theory, Customer Journey literature)	December 31, 2024
Conduct data analysis of secondary and qualitative data	April 30, 2025
Assess progress (meeting) and share data analysis	March 31, 2025
Update literature review and complete data analysis	June 10, 2025
Post-Conference Timeline	
Writeup Findings	July 31, 2025
Complete a 1st draft	September 15, 2025
Review and revise	October 15, 2025

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