With a record 49.1 million Americans – approximately 1 in 6 – living in poverty today, it is more important than ever to raise awareness of the issue as well as programs available to those in need. Despite the growing number of Americans struggling to get by, there are many who are unfamiliar with the realities of poverty in the 21st century.

To highlight this critical issue, The Salvation Army commissioned a survey examining Americans’ attitudes toward those living in poverty. The results reveal a public that is frequently sympathetic but at times misunderstands their neighbors in need. At the same time, with 38 percent of Americans reporting that they have received assistance from charity, an overwhelming majority continue to donate to charity with the belief that people living in poverty deserve a helping hand.

The survey was conducted online earlier this year on Vision Critical’s Springboard America panel and included a sample of 1,004 Americans. With a sample of this size, the data can be considered accurate with a margin of error of +/- 3.1%.
POVERTY AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

- Thirty-eight percent of Americans have received assistance from a charitable group, including food from food banks or financial assistance/housing support.
- Individuals who currently have lower household incomes are much more likely to have needed assistance.
  - Sixty-three percent of Americans who earn less than $25,000 a year have received assistance.
- Among Americans ages 35-54, 46 percent have received assistance at some point in their lifetime.
- Thirteen percent of Americans reported having spent a night in a shelter or on the street due to a loss of housing.
- Those who currently have lower household incomes are much more likely to have experienced a lack of shelter.
  - Twenty-six percent of Americans who earn less than $25,000 a year reported sleeping in a shelter or on the street, while the number dropped to six percent among those who earn at least $50,000 a year.
An overwhelming majority of Americans believe people living in poverty deserve a helping hand, recognizing that people in need can’t do it alone. Indeed, many Americans are sympathetic toward the challenges of those living in poverty, particularly the struggle to escape.

A majority of Americans across all age groups believe people in poverty deserve help, with 92 percent of those ages 55 and older demonstrating the strongest belief in lending a hand, compared to 85 percent of those ages 18-34.

The belief that helping underprivileged families sets up children from these families for success was particularly prevalent among 18-34 year-olds, with 82 percent in agreement.
While most Americans accept that a helping hand is important to escape poverty, there is a significant minority who remains skeptical of the realities and reasons for poverty. Additionally, the further a person is from poverty, the less common he or she believes poverty is in society.

In total, Americans believe 34 percent of the population is living in poverty. While this number increases to an estimation of 40 percent among Americans earning less than $25,000 a year, the number decreases to 27 percent among those earning more than $50,000 a year. In reality, approximately 16 percent of Americans are living in poverty, according to federal statistics.
HOW CAN WE HELP?

In addition to misperceptions regarding the realities of poverty, many Americans are unsure of what they can do to help others – and whether or not their assistance will actually help.

On average, Americans believe the yearly income level that makes a family “poor” is approximately $18,472 – well below the 2012 federal poverty level of $23,050 for a family of four.

AMERICA GIVES BACK

Even during one of the most challenging economic downturns in our nation’s history, the majority of Americans reported donating to a charity in 2011.

Fifty-nine percent of Americans reported donating to charity in 2011. Additionally, the prevalence of donating to a charity increases with income, as 70 percent of those who earn more than $50,000 a year reported donating.

Of those who gave, there was considerable variation in the amount of money donated in 2011, with as many giving back under $50 as donating more than $500.
Throughout the country, The Salvation Army works to provide housing, food, financial and other assistance for those who are homeless or living in poverty. Along with these traditional offerings, The Salvation Army addresses the health and educational needs of clients and seeks to address the root causes of poverty, such as alcohol and substance abuse.

In addition, The Salvation Army works with other organizations in job placement programs to help get people back on their feet. Notably, last year The Salvation Army provided more than 30 million people with a variety of services, including nearly 10 million nights of lodging, 60 million meals, 86,000 job referrals and substance abuse rehabilitation to 324,000 people.

For more information, or if you’d like to volunteer or donate, please visit The Salvation Army’s website at www.salvationarmyusa.org, or call us at 1-800-SAL-ARMY.