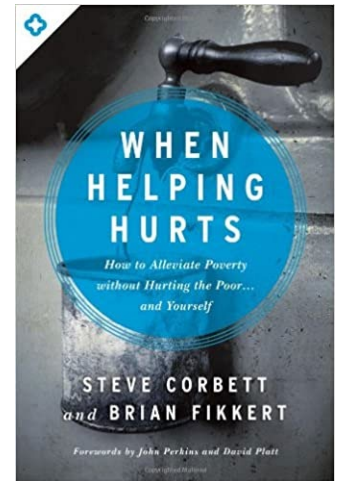


The Entrapment of Alisa Collins

Excerpts adapted from *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert (2012)
pp. 71-72, 80-81, 85-86, 93-94

During the 1990s, Alisa Collins and her children lived in one of America's most dangerous public housing projects in inner-city Chicago. Alisa became pregnant at the age of 16, dropped out of high school, and started collecting welfare checks. She had five children from three different fathers, none of whom helped with child rearing. With few skills, no husband, and limited social networks, Alisa struggled to raise her family in an environment characterized by widespread substance abuse, failing schools, high rates of unemployment, rampant violence, teenage pregnancy, and an absence of role models.



From time to time, Alisa tried to get a job, but a number of obstacles prevented her from finding and keeping regular work. First, there were simply not a lot of decent-paying jobs for high school dropouts living in area where she lived. Second, the welfare system penalized Alisa for earning money, taking away benefits for every dollar she earned and for every asset she acquired. Third, Alisa found government vocational training and job-assistance programs to be confusing and staffed by condescending bureaucrats. Fourth, Alisa had childcare issues that made it difficult to keep a job. Finally, Alisa felt inferior and inadequate. When she tried to pursue vocational training or a job and faced some obstacle, she quickly lost confidence and rapidly retreated into her comfort zone of public housing and welfare checks. Alisa felt trapped, and she and her family often talked about how they couldn't "get out of the ghetto."

Alisa Collins's daughter Nickole described the economic impact of Alisa's broken worldview: "Every once in a while, Mom tried to get off public aid, but it was like she was trapped there. Finding and keeping a job was a struggle, because with kids, no high school diploma, and little confidence, I know she had it in her mind that she couldn't succeed."



Distorted Worldview

In addition to preventing her from looking for work, Alisa's feelings of inferiority likely contributed to her material poverty in more subtle ways. David Hilfiker, an inner-city medical doctor, explains, "For many young women (young girls, really), having a child may be the only way of finding someone to love and be loved by." Getting pregnant as a teenager caused Alisa to drop out of high school. Without a diploma and with nobody to watch her children, Alisa's teenage pregnancy led to economic ruin for her and her family.

One day, "Johnny" and "Tyrone," two boys (whose names have been changed for the purpose of this article) aged 10 and 11 respectively, killed Eric Morse, a 5-year old, by dropping him out of the 14th-floor window of a low-income housing project in Chicago [not far from where Alisa lived]. Eric had refused to steal candy for Johnny and Tyrone from the neighborhood store. LeAlan and Lloyd, teenagers who have lived their entire lives in that same neighborhood, reflect upon the incident:

LeAlan: "If you took the time to think about all the death that goes on around here, you'd go crazy! But that shows you how life is valued now when 10-year-old kids kill for a piece of candy. Life has the value of a quarter now — not even that! It's funny, if you think about it, but it's sad. I mean, killing over a piece of candy!"

Lloyd: "They were raised like that, I guess. They were just following footsteps."

LeAlan: "No one around them appreciates life, so why should they? Look at the building [where the crime happened] — you walk in and it smells like urine, you walk up the stairs and it's dark, broken lights. When you live in filth, your mind takes in filth and you feel nothing."

Dr. Carl Ellis Jr., a scholar who has studied "ghetto nihilism" extensively, notes that incidents like this emanate from a worldview of "predatory gratification" that is embraced by some members of the criminal subset of ghetto populations. This worldview sees other human beings simply as "prey" that may be destroyed if it fills the hunter's belly. Crimes emanating from such a worldview obviously contribute to the material poverty of their



victims, but the total impact on ghetto residents' material poverty is more subtle and far more comprehensive. Living in the context of violence, some ghetto children correctly assume that they will not live very long. This can make them very present-oriented and give them little incentive to invest in their futures through such things as being diligent in school. And of course, a failure to get a good education contributes to their long-run material poverty.

Broken Systems

[Back to] the case of Alisa Collins. While her worldview, values, and behaviors clearly contributed to her material poverty, as an African-American woman growing up in a ghetto, she is also a victim of powerful systemic forces that have dealt her a different set of cards than those received by most North Americans. The ghetto into which Alisa was born, through no choice of her own, originated in the massive migration of African-Americans from the rural South to northern cities from 1910 to 1960 as a result of the increased mechanization of Southern agriculture. Centuries of slavery and racial discrimination contributed to the relatively low levels of education of these migrants, who fled north looking for blue-collar manufacturing jobs. Upon their arrival in the North, a combination of economic forces, public policy, and housing discrimination caused the them to concentrate in inner cities.

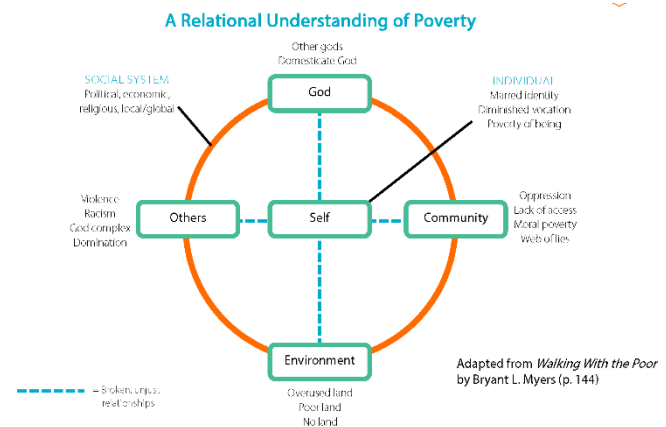
Despite the crowded conditions, in the early 1950s the African-American sections of America's inner cities were largely viable, stable communities; however, the subsequent three decades were quite destabilizing. Federal urban renewal and highway programs required land in inner cities, and African-American neighborhoods were often razed. Low-income African Americans were then relocated into publicly funded housing projects, while middle- and upperclass African Americans were forced to relocate.... As a result of this suburban flight, the remaining inner-city, African-American communities lost leaders, role models, working families, and a solid economic base.

And then the jobs left. America transitioned from a predominantly manufacturing economy to a service economy. From 1970 to 1985, millions of high-paying, blue-collar jobs

simply disappeared from inner cities, moving to other parts of the country or overseas. Unemployment in the inner cities skyrocketed, and many African American inner-city residents joined the welfare rolls, a system that penalized them for working by taking away benefits for every dollar they earned.

Material Poverty Alleviation

After decades of living on welfare checks, Alisa Collins suddenly decided to earn her high school diploma, working full-time as a kindergarten teacher, and getting up at 4:00 a.m. to wash her family's clothes before she was due at work. What happened? Alisa's worldview changed, and the system in which she lived changed.



It all began when Miss Miller, the principal of the local school board, hired Alisa to work part-time as a teacher's aide. Miss Miller soon observed that Alisa had natural teaching gifts and took the time to encourage her to get the education and certification required to pursue a teaching career. With Miss Miller's relational and nurturing approach, Alisa began to gain confidence. And while her worldview was changing, two important changes also occurred in Alisa's economic environment. First, Congress passed welfare reform legislation, making welfare more "pro-work" and placing limits on the length of time people could stay on it. Alisa knew her days on welfare were coming to an end, and she simply had to find a full-time job. Second, Miss Miller offered Alisa a job as a full-time teacher, thereby making the economic system finally work for Alisa.

Churches are uniquely positioned to provide the relational ministries on an individual level that people like Alisa need. While making major changes to national and international economic systems is more difficult, churches can often make just enough changes in local



systems to allow people like Alisa to move out of material poverty. Such systemic change can take on the form of political advocacy, but more often it simply means changing the economic options for the materially poor so that they have an opportunity to support themselves. [...] Of course, churches can also offer Alisa something that Miss Miller could not: a clear articulation of the gospel of the kingdom so that Alisa can experience the profound and lasting change required to leave material poverty in its fullest sense: the ability to fulfill her calling of glorifying God through her work and life.