SCARCITY AND POVERTY

“The Science of Scarcity” (May-June, page 38) presents important insights into the psychology of poverty. But—unless I missed something—it seems to make a jump from the discovery that poverty leads to bad choices, to encouraging better choices through a number of approaches in social programs, job-training programs, and participation in retirement-savings programs. All of these approaches can help individuals make better choices.

But the article seems to skip too quickly over the brutal fact that many people trying to survive on minimum wage have options only for bad choices—or worse choices. They can go hungry or they can survive by taking out a payday loan. Only

Cambridge 02138

Energy options, David Ferry, home schooling

7 WARE STREET

Meaningful Metrics

The U.S. Department of Education’s promised college-ratings system (aimed at helping families make informed decisions about access, affordability, and student outcomes) doesn’t have many friends on the nation’s elite, selective campuses. President Drew Faust, for example expressed her reservations in a Washington Post interview last year. “Is it all going to be about how much more money an individual makes with a college degree?” she worried. “I think these should be very complex portraits of institutions,” not reducible to a “simple metric.”

But simple metrics may help many families. The ratings, The Boston Globe editorialized, have “enormous potential to temper the allure of shiny new facilities and big names with the simple facts of affordability and career outcomes.” Even the economic metrics may be improved: two Brookings Institution scholars recently released “Beyond College Rankings: A Value-Added Approach to Assessing Two- and Four-Year Schools.”

Rather than dismissing measurements they find inadequate, elite institutions’ leaders might enrich the debate by adding to it something they are learning more about: what kinds of teaching are most effective. In other words, what works educationally for students and their families investing time and treasure in the classroom.

The University has a $40-million Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching, and a $30-million investment in online education through HarvardX. Both report to a vice provost for advances in learning, and their work is tied to a robust research effort. The first online reports were about who signs up, but much deeper studies are under way. The faculties conduct complementary programs: the Harvard Kennedy School’s Strengthening Learning and Teaching Effectiveness initiative has examined what students know before and after a course (and their first year of master’s studies), and links the findings to teaching, instructor training, and assessment.

The potential for such research to improve education at Harvard is obvious. Its possible application to the national discussion of higher education—by whatever means families and students pursue it—makes the case all the more compelling.

* * *

Staff writer Stephanie Garlock concludes her service with this issue (see her coverage of online learning, on page 48, and of College Dean Rakesh Khurana on page 24). She now heads from journalism toward graduate and professional school. We will miss her as an excellent colleague and reporter, and extend our warmest wishes in her new pursuits.

~John S. Rosenberg, Editor
when they have at least enough income to meet basic needs can they afford to make wiser choices.

As a society we need to ensure that everyone has the possibility of a living wage. Then the article’s insights can be applied to enable lower-income people to maximize the rewards of their work.

Christopher B. Sanford ’57  
Durham, N.C.

Yet another excuse for “impulsive behavior, poor performance in school, poor financial decisions—may... be the...pervasive feeling of scarcity” due to poverty and the lack of proper innate biochemicals that is a result of that poverty? And we have scarcity? I doubt it. Rather, we have an abundance, a surplus of everything: labor, capital, commodities, choices, rules, regulations, taxes...

By and large, in America, poverty is a choice, usually the result of frequent and repeated bad choices. True, there are those who may have no control over events that placed them into poverty. For them, I am truly empathetic.

However, we now have an overwhelmingly broad safety net: free or heavily subsidized education, healthcare, transportation, food, utilities, rent, mortgages, entertainment (cable), communications (“Obama-Phones”), childcare, eldercare, (un)earned income tax credits, cash and non-cash transfer payments, and so much more.

In fact it is so much more that we now have four or five generations living on the dole, just waiting for a check from the taxpayers. Perhaps there is little incentive to change the poverty behaviors. And our “poverty” must always exist—by definition, some percentage will be at the bottom of the income scale, at least temporarily.

So temporary, that when evaluating economic class structure, it is our social, upward mobility that is striking. The turnover of the Forbes 400 Richest is astounding high. The number of those with inherited wealth in that stratosphere is much lower than most would believe. There are 100 million people escaping poverty around the globe annually, as we export property rights and rule of law.

And Professor Sendhil Mullainathan does not seem to explain how so many were able to escape poverty. Moreover, when looking at the successful in Western civilization, the success is derived from multiple and consistent good choices. One must be cautious to apply causality to a relationship. Success breeds success. Poor choices breeds failure.

Behaviors affect attitude much more than attitudes affect behaviors. It would serve us all better if the good professor and other behavioral economists helped the poverty-stricken to change their behaviors, instead of effectively saying “It’s not your fault” all the time. That would “build their psychological resources” and reduce their poverty.

MITCHELL LEVIN, G ’77, M.D.  
Orlando

As a social worker, I have seen the toll of scarcity first-hand among families, and it makes great sense to me to investigate the “rationality” of irrational decisions by impoverished families.

I have maintained a decades-long bond with a teenage girl from my community-organizing days; she is now 56 and I am 70. I have seen in-depth how poverty works and doesn’t work.

One of the factors that has impressed me the most is how the unexpected—car trouble or an illness—can up-end the best-laid plans for getting through the week or month. The lack of good alternatives can deepen a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that paralyzes even the sturdiest.

Another problem is the difficulty in dealing with multiple agencies with the capacity to withhold or withdraw help when it is most needed.

The cost of mistakes is also high. This past year my friend’s adult daughter was imprisoned for her small part in a larger

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Letters

Identity-theft crime. While her daughter served time, my friend took care of the two children—ages one and five—left behind, forcing her to quit her part-time job because the anxiety and childcare left her depleted (she has lupus). The costs for lawyers, prison phone calls, and court fees were high.

In order to get financial help in caring for the grandchildren for five months, my friend was told she would have to move to terminate her daughter’s parental rights—which she refused to do.

When I try to put myself in my friend’s position, I cannot see how I could do any better than she has. It puts those who so easily “blame the victim” to shame.

Janis Richter ’67
Rochelle, Va.

Nuclear (and Other) Options

In “Why the United States may be on the cusp of an energy revolution” (the subtitle to “Altering Course,” May-June, page 46), Professor Mara Prentiss takes us on a wild ride of science and fantasy that is breathtaking in its scope. The major failing in her approach, however, is that she presents fanciful, futuristic technical solutions for energy problems that can be solved almost immediately with today’s existing technology and at much lower overall cost. Our energy problems are not technical; they are political!

Clean, renewable nuclear energy has been reliably producing approximately 20 percent of U.S. electrical energy for years at highly competitive rates—that is, once past the friction and monumental extra costs of getting a nuclear plant through the bureaucratic and environmental hurdles. France has the lowest electrical rates in Europe, with 80 percent of its electricity being generated in nuclear plants.

Looking backward before fossil fuels ushered in the modern world, Prentiss advocates wind-generated power, which—by her admission—is massively land inefficient. Those large mechanical airfoils scattered across the formerly fruitful American plains will require a massive expensive infrastructure for maintenance, replacement, and power storage and distribution. She failed to acknowledge these costs or the aesthetic damage to our shores and countryside.

Prentiss seems to like hydroelectric power options over solar, but her hydroelectric arguments fail to state where the massive additional storage would come from for it to become a factor.

Wide use of electric cars using electricity at night when wind and solar generation are at their lowest does not enhance her arguments for wind and solar.

We have proven fossil reserves and nuclear fuel for power generation to last the United States well over the next 100 years.

If wind and solar can be used to supplement these traditional sources of power at competitive, nonsubsidized rates, then let the power companies integrate them into their power mix.

What must be stopped, however, are energy policies which slow American growth, raise energy prices, and make our industry even less competitive in this global economy.

John W. Jenkins, M.B.A. ’63
President, GSM International Inc.
Dallas

Editor’s note: Prentiss was explicitly laying out a scientific, theoretical case about energy potential and options, not recommending a policy or course of action. She did note that hydroelectric storage capacity is limited. Cars would be charged during the day, while garaged or parked at commuter stations, when solar and wind power are readily available.

Professor Mara Prentiss and the magazine are to be congratulated for laying out the physics underlying the feasibility of the transition to renewable energy, and pointing out the opportunities for much greater efficiency in our energy use. However, we on the Left Coast want to emphasize current progress that addresses some of the challenges Prentiss mentions.

She is concerned about intermittency of renewable sources such as wind and solar and suggests that fossil-fuel plants will be needed to balance that. But in addition to the pumped hydropower storage that she mentions, battery storage has been paired with wind energy in a utility-scale plant in West Virginia that has been providing energy to the wholesale grid since 2011; Southern California Edison in 2014 committed to purchasing 235 megawatts of utility scale storage; and commercial battery storage is rapidly falling in price, expected to retail in 2016 for $250 per kilowatt hour; improved battery technology is approaching successful demand. (please turn to page 82)