

# The poorest countries in the world

By Michael B. Sauter, Alexander E. M. Hess & Samuel Weigley



Spencer Platt / Getty Images

Children and adults scavenge for recyclables and other usable items around a garbage truck at a dump on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

According to 2011 data released recently by the U.S. Census Bureau, 15 percent of individuals in the United States live below the poverty line. While down from 15.1 percent last year, it remains statistically unchanged and near a record high. Today, more than 46 million people live in poverty in America, more than at any point in the country's history.

However, compared to the poorest countries in the world, the poverty rate in the U.S. is relatively modest. In some countries, the poverty rate is more than five times the U.S. current figures. In Haiti, the highest in the world, 77 percent of residents live in poverty. Based on data from the [World Bank](#), 24/7 Wall St. identified the 10 countries with the highest poverty rates.

[24/7 Wall St.: America's worst companies to work for](#)

The presence of extreme poverty usually coincides with significant obstacles, including limited resources, disease, famine and war. 24/7 Wall St. analyzed how the most impoverished nations ranked in several key areas ranging from level of peace to

<http://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/poorest-countries-world-f1B5952554>  
economic stability, health and education. The poorest countries consistently performed poorly in nearly every case.

Educational attainment and literacy rates are particularly low in these countries. While adult literacy figures were unavailable for many of these nations, those that have reported data were among the worst in the world. In several cases, less than half of eligible children were enrolled in primary education (the equivalent of elementary and middle school). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among the poorest countries, less than a third of the relevant population was enrolled in primary education. By comparison, in the United States, nearly 95 percent were.

Health and healthy decisions are often ignored in these countries. In the 10 nations with the highest poverty rates, HIV prevalence is extremely high. Five of the eight countries for which data are available were in the top 25 (out of more than 200 countries) for HIV cases among people 15 to 49. These include Zimbabwe, which has the fifth-highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rate at 14.3 percent, and Swaziland, which has the highest recorded rate at 25.9 percent. In the U.S., the rate is 0.78 percent.

Life expectancy, not surprising, is also very low. In the U.S., a person born today is projected to live to the age of 78.2. In each of these countries, life expectancy is less than 60 years. In four of these countries, the average resident will not live to see 50.

### [24/7 Wall St.: 10 brands that will disappear in 2013](#)

24/7 Wall St. relied on [World Bank data](#) for the percentage of residents who are living below their national poverty lines. Data were only available for 112 developing nations. In addition, we considered GDP per capita, gross domestic product, HIV/AIDS prevalence, life expectancy, unemployment, infant mortality and primary school enrollment -- all from the World Bank. Where current data were not available, data from the most recent available year were used. We also relied on the U.S. Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook for additional information on these countries, including the presence of armed conflict and recent natural disasters.

These are the poorest countries in the world.

#### **1. Haiti**

- **Poverty rate:**77 percent
- **Population:**10,123,787
- **GDP:**\$7.35 billion (66th lowest)
- **GDP per capita:**\$726 (22nd lowest)

The World Bank notes that more than half of Haiti's population lives on less than \$1 a day, while about 80 percent of the country lives on less than \$2 a day. The country's estimated unemployment rate as of 2010 was 40.6 percent. The impoverished nation is in a state of rebuilding since a devastating earthquake hit the country in 2010. According to a USAID report, the death toll from the earthquake was between 46,000 and 85,000, while the official figure by the Haitian government estimated the death toll at 316,000. The World Bank estimates that damages from earthquake totaled \$8 billion, or about 120 percent of gross domestic product.

## 2. Equatorial Guinea

- **Poverty rate:** 76.8 percent
- **Population:** 720,213
- **GDP:** \$19.79 billion (99th lowest)
- **GDP per capita:** \$27,478 (40th highest)

Oddly enough, the country with the second-highest poverty rate in the world has a GDP per capita of \$27,478, well above the average worldwide figure of \$10,034. However, while extraction of oil and gas has led to economic growth, most of Equatorial Guinea's population still relies on subsistence farming. The government has been criticized for the mismanagement of its revenue from energy resources. The health and well-being of its citizens would support the critique. Despite its oil wealth, the nation is among the worst countries in the world for life expectancy, at just 50.8 years, and for primary education enrollment, at just 56.3 percent of the relevant population.

## 3. Zimbabwe

- **Poverty rate:** 72 percent
- **Population:** 12,754,378
- **GDP:** \$9.9 billion (72nd lowest)
- **GDP per capita:** \$776 (25th lowest)

Zimbabwe has effectively had one leader, Robert Mugabe, since it became a sovereign nation in 1980. Mugabe's tenure has been marked by a violent land redistribution program that has harmed agriculture -- a sector that has served as a source of exports and jobs for the nation. Until 2009, Zimbabwe also experienced a problem with hyperinflation. One dollar was worth 9,686.9 Zimbabwean dollars in 2007 and a stunning 430,972.7 Zimbabwean dollars in 2008. In 1993, the nation's poverty rate was just under 35 percent of the population. Since then, the poverty rate has more than doubled to 72 percent.

[24/7 Wall St.: States losing the most jobs to China](#)

## 4. Congo (Democratic Republic)

- **Poverty rate:** 71.3 percent
- **Population:** 67,757,577
- **GDP:** \$15.64 billion (91st lowest)
- **GDP per capita:** \$231 (the lowest)

The Congo has suffered from corruption and conflict in the past 15 years that have "dramatically reduced national output and government revenue, increased external debt, and resulted in the deaths of more than 5 million people from violence, famine and disease," according to the CIA World Factbook. The agency notes that while mining growth has helped boost the country's economy, much of its economic activity still takes place in the informal sector, which is not counted in GDP statistics. Health and education are very poor in the country. Out of 1,000 children born, 111.7 will die before their first birthday, which is the highest rate in the world except for Sierra Leone. Primary school enrollment of just slightly over 33 percent is the second worst in the world.

## 5. Swaziland

- **Poverty rate:** 69.2 percent
- **Population:** 1,067,773
- **GDP:** \$3.98 billion (47th lowest)
- **GDP per capita:** \$3,725 (82nd lowest)

A number of factors combine to limit Swaziland's economic growth, including an over-reliance on exports to South Africa. In addition, the country's workforce is largely concentrated in subsistence agriculture, even though the country faces serious concerns about overgrazing and soil depletion. While these factors harm the nation's economy, health concerns are likely one of the major factors preventing Swaziland's population from escaping poverty. Few nations have a lower life expectancy at birth than Swaziland, where the average person is expected to live just 48.3 years. One of the reasons for the low life expectancy is the high prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS among those 15 to 49 -- at 25.9 percent it is the highest in the world.