

# What Could Possibly Be Worse than Poverty Porn?

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What could be worse?

“Poverty porn” that isn’t even true, that’s what.

## What, Exactly, is “Poverty Porn”?

It’s a term that has emerged in recent years to criticize the practice of telling gritty stories and portraying gruesome images and video of destitution, of natural catastrophes, or of serious illness, injury, or deformity in order to create interest in media (newspapers, TV, movies) or to induce donations to charities.

“...Poverty porn, also known as development porn or even famine porn,” explains one critic, “is any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor’s condition in order to generate the necessary sympathy for selling newspapers or increasing charitable donations or support for a given cause.”

There are several threads of criticism unleashed against “poverty porn.”

It exploits and degrades the individuals portrayed, many argue. It misrepresents the poor and poverty, say some. It represents an elitist and condescending attitude toward the poor and other suffering people. It leads to mere charity, rather than true activism and enduring change.

There are many articles that discuss these objections; see, for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Unfortunately, poverty porn works all too well. Charities report they generate much more money in donations when they show or describe more gruesome images or stories. That’s the key ethical dilemma.

But in most “poverty porn” situations, the stories or images are true.

## *A Step Beyond: Fabricated Images*

Of course, in many “poverty porn” situations, the stories or images are true and undoctored. Astonishingly, some nonprofits have not been satisfied with that. So – occasionally – it tips over from unsavory, disagreeable, or debatable into prohibited fraud and misrepresentation under state charitable solicitation statutes.

### ***Indian School***

St. Joseph’s Indian School, a boarding school in Chamberlain, South Dakota (and affiliated with a Roman Catholic charity based in Wisconsin) has been extraordinarily successful in its fundraising efforts. A huge national direct-mail marketing campaign netted some \$50 million in 2014.

In one mailing, the charity introduced Josh Little Bear, who reports: “My dad drinks and hits me... my mom chose drugs over me . . . my home on the reservation isn’t a safe place ....” His request is that people send “a few dollars” to help the school to keep “kids like me safe... so we don’t have to live this way anymore.” But Josh Little Bear is not a pseudonym to protect a real boy’s privacy. He doesn’t exist at all. “The story is a fabrication, a compiling of events that may or may not have happened to paint a broad picture...” Another objection is that Native American leaders challenge whether this type of problem exists at all in their communities.

The school has since suspended these fundraising practices, but “does not admit to any wrongdoing.”

### ***North Carolina – OCx20N***

About one year ago, Dr. Melanie Stewart started a nonprofit in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina called OCx20N – short for “One Church! One Can! One Night! Its purpose is to help people with short-term emergency needs like food, shelter, or other care.

The organization generated strong interest in this small town. But almost immediately, followers and other concerned citizens started raising alarms over the fundraising practices.

There have been examples of entirely fabricated tales of woe. For instance, Dr. Stewart posted a photo of “a local abused mother,” claiming the family had “food for now, but lights will be cut off Monday. Her bill is \$400. Please inbox me for any amount at all.” But the photo had been lifted from a British newspaper website. Another photo purporting to show a van housing a homeless family of seven, was actually an image taken from a *New York Post* article. When questioned about these images, Dr. Stewart gave flimsy excuses, even after being told that solicitations like this are illegal.

And, according to some intended beneficiaries, the donations are not going to them at all. A donor wanted to give money to help the daughter of the lady with the electric-bill problem buy art supplies for craft projects. The donor reported that Dr. Stewart was evasive when asked if the young girl had received her art supplies. Asked generally about whether donations were going to the designated individuals, the organization’s head replied: “For the most part, I believe so. We try and make every effort.. And sometimes if donations come in and we can’t locate that person...we will give it to someone else that’s in need.”

The icing on the cake here is that this organization promoted itself as tax-exempt when, in fact, it was not an approved 501(c)(3) organization.

The Charitable Solicitation and Licensing Division of the North Carolina Secretary of State's Office reportedly issued an advisory letter to this group, asking questions about its practices.

### *Fundraising Misrepresentation*

Across the nation, states have statutes prohibiting fraudulent fundraising practices. In California, the Attorney General's office investigates and brings actions against charities and fundraising professionals that misuse charitable assets or engage in fundraising fraud. For example, in 2012, the Attorney General sued a California veterans charity, [Help Hospitalized Veterans](#), for problems including fraudulent fundraising.

### *Conclusion*

Short of actual fraud, shading the truth – the slippery-slope of small lies and misrepresentations – is all too common nowadays across all sectors of society. This practice in fundraising is particularly problematic and dangerous because it taints an otherwise noble undertaking.

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