

Severe Deprivation in America: An Introduction



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A LIFE

Crystal Mayberry was born prematurely on a spring day in 1990 shortly after her pregnant mother was stabbed eleven times in the back during a robbery.¹ The attack induced labor. Both mother and daughter survived. It was not the first time Crystal's mother had been stabbed. For as far back as she can remember, Crystal's father had beat her mother. He smoked crack cocaine, and so did her mother; so did her mother's mother.

Crystal's mother found a way to leave, and her father soon after began a lengthy prison sentence. Crystal and her mother moved in with another man and his parents. That man's father began molesting Crystal. She told her mother, and her mother called her a liar. Not long after Crystal began kindergarten, Child Protective Services stepped in. At five, Crystal was placed in foster care.

Crystal was bounced around between dozens of group homes and sets of foster parents. She lived with her aunt for five years. Then her aunt returned her. After that, the longest Crystal lived anywhere was eight months. When adolescence arrived, Crystal had to fight more with the other girls in the group homes. She picked up assault charges and a scar across

her right cheekbone. People and their houses, pets, furniture, dishes—these came and went. Food was more stable, and Crystal began taking refuge in it. She put on weight. Because of her weight, she developed sleep apnea.

When Crystal was sixteen, she stopped going to high school. When she turned eighteen, she aged out of foster care. By that time she had passed through more than twenty-five foster placements. She had been approved for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), mainly on account of bipolar disorder, and would receive \$754 a month, or a little over \$9,000 a year.

Crystal was barred from low-income housing for two years because of the assault charge she caught for fighting in the group home. Even if she had not been barred, she would still have found herself at the bottom of a waiting list that was six years long, which wasn't too bad considering that the wait in large cities like Washington, D.C., can extend to twenty years. Crystal secured her first apartment in the private market—a run-down two-bedroom unit in the inner city whose rent took 73 percent of her income. A few months later, Crystal experienced her first official eviction, which went on her record, making it likely that her appli-

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1. I met Crystal while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Milwaukee with low-income tenants and their landlords (Desmond 2012, 2016). Crystal Mayberry is a pseudonym.

cation for housing assistance would be denied. After her eviction, Crystal met a woman named Vanetta at a homeless shelter and, with her, secured another apartment. Then Crystal put Vanetta's friend through a window, and the landlord told Crystal to leave.

Crystal spent nights in shelters, with friends, and with members of her church. She learned how to live on the streets, walking them at night and sleeping on the bus or in hospital waiting rooms during the day. She learned to survive by relying on strangers. She met a woman at a bus stop and ended up living with her for a month. People were attracted to Crystal. She was gregarious and funny, with an endearing habit of slapping her hands together and laughing at herself. She sang in public, gospel mostly.

Crystal had always believed that her Supplemental Security Income was secure. You couldn't get fired from SSI, and your hours couldn't get cut. "SSI always come," she said. Until one day it didn't. Crystal had been approved for SSI as a minor, but her adult reevaluation found her ineligible. Now Crystal's only source of income was food stamps. She tried donating plasma, but her veins were too small. Disconnected, Crystal burned through the remaining ties she had from church and her foster families. When her SSI was not reinstated after several months, she descended into street homelessness and prostitution. Crystal had never been a morning person but soon learned that was the best time to turn tricks, catching men on their way to work.

A CHALLENGE

Many of us who are poverty scholars have met people like Crystal. We learn a great deal from them, and our own lives are influenced by them. And many of us feel, on returning to the library from the field, that the tools provided by mainstream social science are outdated and leave us ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of the lives of people like Crystal.

Should we say Crystal is "poor"? She certainly is that—but living in mere poverty would be a tremendous blessing for Crystal. Poverty is defined officially as an income cutoff, a threshold. But there are many depths below the pov-

erty line. Poverty is qualitatively different from "deep poverty" (half below the poverty line), which in turn is a world apart from "extreme poverty" (living on \$2 a day) (Aron, Jacobson, and Turner 2013; Shaefer and Edin 2013). There is poverty, and then there is *poverty*. Recent debates about poverty measurement have focused largely on its material attributes: for example, how to account for taxes, transfers, and benefits, or whether to adopt a relative or absolute definition (Brady 2003; Meyer and Sullivan 2012). These debates are necessary and productive, but a relatively small income is but one of many obstacles preventing Crystal from living a full, productive, and healthy life. Like many people from disadvantaged families, she experienced setbacks at a very young age (even before birth) and never fully recovered from them. Poverty is more than a material condition (Sen 1999).

Should we place Crystal in a larger "structural framework"? If so, which one? Many of our structural theories, and their corresponding policy prescriptions, trace social problems back to a singular source, some big word that sits at the mouth of the river. Deindustrialization. Neoliberalism. Racism. Welfare reform. What would that singular source be in Crystal's life? The joblessness of her father? Her mother's addiction? The sexual abuse or violence? The broken foster system or schools that allowed her to fall through the cracks? Poverty is *multidimensional*, yet the one-dimensional focus of many of our structural accounts facilitates intellectual fragmentation and prevents researchers from building a comprehensive and systematic theory of poverty that articulates how movements and countermovements in different spheres of life (political, economic, residential, familial) collude to deepen or lessen American inequality.

Should we make sense of Crystal's young life by referencing "culture?" Can we do that and fully appreciate how traumas imprinted themselves on her body and mind? At seventeen, Crystal was examined by a clinical psychologist, who diagnosed her with, among other things, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, reactive attachment disorder, and borderline intellectual functioning. According to his report, Crystal "has limited ability to tolerate

much in the way of frustration or anxiety and a proneness to act out her tensions without much in the way of forethought or deliberation. . . . She is still seen as being fragilely integrated.” Did Crystal put that woman through a window because of the “culture of violence” pervading the inner city, or because she was a young person who had herself been brutalized and psychologically damaged—or both? The time is ripe to explore the relationship between culture, psychology, and inequality (Lamont and Small 2008; Patterson 2015). What is clear is that we cannot talk about agency without recognizing the deep imprint of past traumas, just as we cannot talk about “violent offenders” without recognizing that many of them were “violently offended” themselves as children, as Bruce Western’s article demonstrates.

How should we begin to study the conditions that Crystal’s young life embodies so tragically and completely? Should we design a randomized control trial or a quasi-experimental method to isolate the single most meaningful cause of Crystal’s hardship? That seems quite impossible, as the lives of the poor are characterized by correlated and compounding disadvantages. Should we conduct a survey or analyze big data in the form of administrative records? Our most vulnerable citizens often are left out of survey samples and infrequently show up in administrative databases. Should we conduct fieldwork? Ethnography comes with its own set of analytical and ethical challenges, especially when studying the poor. These questions have led several contributors to this issue to develop methodological innovations to capture the complexities of poverty, including the ethnographic approach of Megan Comfort and her coauthors, who fully integrate clinical social work.

Besides these methodological challenges, the very language of “poverty” can be fuzzy and imprecise. This problem is accentuated by the fact that our analytical concepts have never been innocent of politics and moralizing (Gans 1995; O’Connor 2009). Our current terminology groups all families below a certain income threshold into a single category: the poor. But

doing so can flatten crucial differences in how material scarcity and psychological turmoil are experienced. How can our concepts be refined or redefined? How can we capture with more precision variations or degrees of hardship and social suffering among low-income families? And what do we mean by “poverty” anyway?

SEVERE DEPRIVATION

These challenges motivated this journal issue on severe deprivation in America. By “severe deprivation,” we mean economic hardship that is (1) acute, (2) compounded, and (3) persistent. Let us unpack these three components.

Acute hardship: Life far below the poverty line, characterized by a scarcity of critical resources and material hardship. No rich democracy matches the United States in the depth and expanse of its poverty. As of 2015, almost 50 million Americans lived below the federal poverty line. If America’s poor founded a country, that country would have a bigger population than Spain. In 2010, 20.5 million people in the United States lived in deep poverty—that is, on incomes below half the federal poverty threshold—up by almost 8 million since 2000.² That same year one in every fifty Americans reported living in a household with an income consisting only of food stamps (DeParle 2010; Edelman 2012). Crystal lived on \$25 a day before expenses and far less after she paid her rent.

Compounded hardship: “Poverty plus,” or correlated and compounded adversity. This idea speaks to the clustering of different kinds of disadvantage across multiple dimensions (psychological, social, material) and institutions (work, family, prison). Although the literature on development economics has grappled with the problem of measuring multidimensional hardship (Alkire and Foster 2011; Sen 1976), students of poverty in America have only begun thinking through the conceptual and methodological challenges of this approach. The essence of poverty is not simply an economic condition but the *linked ecology* of social maladies and broken institutions. To this end, the articles in this issue develop new ways of combining—rather than isolating—dif-

2. In 2010 the number of Americans in deep poverty fell to 15 million after accounting for all public benefits. Most of those people were lifted into mere poverty (Edelman 2012, 82).

ferent forms of disadvantage, including Claire Herbert, Jeff Morenoff, and David Harding's analysis of the nexus between the prison and housing markets and Kristin Perkins and Robert Sampson's method of measuring "compounded disadvantage" that unites individual and ecological hardship (see also Sampson 2014). If, in the end, it comes down to *all of it*, then thinking that one institution or condition has supreme explanatory priority—that "the most important thing" is the family, the neighborhood, housing, employment, or education—may be the wrong direction for poverty research. This point applies to statistical methods that promote isolationist thinking as well as to qualitative approaches that tend to focus on a single dimension of a disadvantaged group instead of "studying the whole" (Desmond 2014; Halle 1984).

Persistent hardship: Enduring disadvantage often stubbornly impervious to change. This component of our definition focuses attention on three interrelated matters. The first involves the lasting effects of *early-life trauma*, including abuse, hunger, and violence experienced as a child or even as a fetus (Shonkoff et al. 2012). Many people below the poverty line speak of the traumas that set them on certain paths. Just ask Mrs. Lana of Eastwood, whose madness after her son's murder is captured by Laurence Ralph. The second matter is deprivation *experienced over long stretches*, even lifetimes. Here, questions regarding the coping strategies and effects of long-term social suffering come into play (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; Jencks 1992). The third element of persistent deprivation deals with *generational* poverty passed down from parents to children (Sharkey 2013). When we focus on generational deprivation, we not only recognize the resiliency of past wrongs on present-day problems but we may also find explanations for why some children born into poverty manage to climb out of it.

A critic might accuse the social scientists in this issue of "scraping the very bottom" and object to building a research agenda, let alone a public policy, this way. To this criticism we have three responses. First, thinking about severe deprivation is not just a matter of studying the poorest of the poor. Our collective proj-

ect is to develop a set of analytical commitments that go beyond narrow and tidy approaches to economic vulnerability. It is more about a perspective, a certain intellectual posture, than about a specific population.

That being said, it may be just as orienting to speak of the "severely deprived" as a population as it was when scholars spoke of "the underclass" (Myrdal 1963; Jencks 1992; Wilson 1987), before that term became saddled with so much cultural baggage that researchers and journalists eventually let it die. We know startlingly little about life at the bottom of society (Gans 2014), even if many social problems we care about—from crime and violence to homelessness and teenage pregnancy—largely involve not simply "the poor" but people whose lives are characterized by economic hardship that is acute, compounded, and persistent. In fact, researchers who focus exclusively on, say, educational inequality, housing instability, legal entanglements, or neighborhood disadvantage often are studying the *very same families* whose lives are marred by severe deprivation. Our second response speaks to the need to develop an approach that encourages researchers and policymakers to understand those families holistically instead of specializing in one vector of their lives.

Third, we note that not only does severe deprivation rest at the heart of many social problems, but that it may not be as rare as scholars often think. When Americans compare the poverty of their fellow citizens with the desperation that grips the slum dwellers of Lagos or Caracas, or with the swollen-bellied families in the villages of rural India or inland China, they sometimes conclude that American poverty would be considered downright abundance in other parts of the world, that ours is an unfortunate but ultimately lesser hardship. On some key measures, this is undeniably true. But this line of thinking can cause us to overlook just how desperate the situation is for those Americans living at the very bottom. Sometimes such comparisons lead to the presumption that nobody in the United States lives "that bad." "Four billion people in the world earn less than \$2 per day," write a group of scholars in the pages of a leading academic journal (Walsh, Kress, and Beyerchen 2005, 473). "No one in the U.S., Japan,

or Germany lives in such poverty.” No one? This is tragically far from true, at least as far as the United States is concerned. Luke Shaefer, Kathryn Edin, and Elizabeth Talbert find that the number of American children who experienced chronic extreme poverty, living on no more than \$2 a day for seven months or more, has increased by over 240 percent since 1996.

A NEW POVERTY AGENDA

Poverty researchers from across the social sciences have the opportunity to reach collectively toward a new paradigm—not just a new way of thinking but a whole different approach to the study of vulnerability, violence, and marginality, one that carries methodological, policy-relevant, and normative implications. Most research is rooted in theories now a few decades old. These theories have stood the test of time because they are incisive, sweeping, and validated. But they also were developed before the United States began incarcerating more of its citizens than any other nation; before urban rents soared and poor families began dedicating the majority of their income to housing; before welfare reform caused caseloads to plummet; and before the crack epidemic tore apart poor minority communities. In recent years, the very *nature* of poverty in America has changed, especially at the very bottom. A new poverty agenda is needed for a world that is itself quite new.

America’s social policies have changed. Some forms of public assistance, like housing assistance and cash welfare, have been scaled back, while others, like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), have grown substantially. Large-scale changes in federal poverty policy have created new winners and losers. Households just above and below the poverty threshold receive significantly more help today than they did twenty years ago—but those far below the poverty line receive significantly less (Currie 2008; Moffitt 2015). The inequality debate focuses mainly on the growing divide between the rich and the middle class. But there is a growing divide *below* the poverty line as well, between the stable, typically working poor, who benefit significantly from today’s safety net, and the unstable, typically nonworking

poor, who receive fewer benefits or who are even disconnected, as was the case for the women with whom Kristen Seefeldt and Heather Sandstrom spoke.

The growing rift between the working and nonworking poor is driven almost entirely by public policy priorities, not rising security or wages in the workplace. The last three decades have been marked by impressive economic growth, but increases in productivity have not translated into broad social uplift. At the bottom of the labor market, compensation has stagnated in both the private and public sectors, while the economy has expanded. By one estimate, the federal minimum wage in 2013 would have been \$18.30 (not \$7.25) if it had increased at the rate of productivity (Cooper 2013). “When it comes to an economy that is working for working families,” write Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto (2005, 34), “growth in and of itself is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The growth has to reach the people.” Roughly 30 percent of the American workforce labors for “poverty wages,” and most low-wage workers are not teenagers but adults, including many parents. One study estimated that one in five children in America has a parent who would receive a raise if the minimum wage were increased (Cooper 2013).

Labor market policies designed to shake loose regulation and facilitate market flexibility have weakened organized labor and replaced long-term employment with temporary jobs. Today most workers are not unionized, and half of all new jobs end within the first year (Farber 2010; Western and Rosenfeld 2011). As the service sector has eclipsed manufacturing, the United States has witnessed an increase in “bad jobs” offering low pay, no benefits, and little certainty (Kalleberg 2011). Although no sector of the economy is untouched by precarious work, bad jobs are disproportionately staffed by the working poor. Scholars now speak of the “age of layoffs” (Uchitelle 2006, 124) and have begun to study new forms of instability among workers, including schedule unpredictability designed to maximize productivity. A recent study by Susan Lambert, Peter Fugiel, and Julia Henly (2014) found that 41 percent of early career hourly employees (ages

twenty-six to thirty-two) learn about their work schedule one week or less in advance of the coming workweek. Those who are parents of young children report that their hours fluctuated in the previous month by an average of 40 percent, compared to normal hours.

The location of disadvantage also is shifting. Owing to rising housing costs in cities, an aging population, shifting patterns of immigration, changes in federal housing programs, and patterns of downward mobility, it is not far-fetched to imagine a future in which the poor do not live on the other side of the tracks but in entirely different municipalities and counties. Indeed, we need not imagine this: it already has become a reality as poverty has skyrocketed in American suburbs throughout the country (Kneebone and Berube 2013). Although disadvantage and violent crime are less severely concentrated in the suburbs than in many inner-city areas, these low-density neighborhoods are characterized by isolation and loneliness, especially among the elderly and nonworking poor. Access to key institutions—social services, grocery stores, hospitals and health clinics, schools—also is a key issue for poor suburban families, as is the growing distance to employment centers. Increasingly, the suburban poor are either living their lives on buses and trains or on foot, enduring long commutes, or enduring life alone in neighborhoods never designed for community (Murphy and Wallace 2010; Murphy, forthcoming).

The severely deprived today also pass through different institutions than they did in previous generations. The prison, for one, has become a major poverty institution, especially in the lives of poor black and Hispanic men (Pettit 2012; Western 2006). The violence and isolation of incarceration, as well as the mark of a criminal record, have steep consequences for mental health, employment, family life, and social mobility (Pager 2007; Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014). And many disadvantaged minority neighborhoods are today characterized by heightened surveillance and police presence, which has altered everyday life and the community fabric. A generation ago, poverty scholars would not have needed such a sharp focus on the nexus between punishment and poverty. The articles by John

Hagan and Holly Foster and by Bryan Sykes and Becky Pettit demonstrate that a comprehensive picture of inner-city poverty is incomplete without a serious consideration of the police and incarceration—and the millions of people released from prison each year.

The family has changed. The number of American children living in single-parent homes nearly doubled between 1960 and 2010. In 1970 only 12 percent of children lived with one parent. Today one-third of all American children are not being raised by two parents, and the majority of them live in single-mother households (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2013). Family complexity has increased, especially within low-income communities, and as a result, children are being raised by multiple parent figures and the family safety net is fraying (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011; Cherlin and Seltzer 2014). During the first years of the War on Poverty, destitute families often relied on extended kin networks to get by. But the family may no longer serve as a reliable source of support (Desmond 2012; Stack 1974). Understanding why is crucial for understanding the texture of severe deprivation as well as for building effective policy.

A new poverty agenda also entails returning to problems long ago considered ameliorated: elderly poverty, for example. Large-scale programs have led to a significant decrease in poverty among the aged. And politicians long ago learned that their constituents hated the idea of senior housing a lot less than the idea of public housing intended for poor families. When public housing construction for low-income households ceased, it continued for the aged: high-rises originally built for the poor have been converted for elderly use (Schwartz 2014; Vale 2009). And yet, as Helen Levy's and LaShawnDa Pittman's articles show, the elderly may not be as shielded from deprivation as is largely presumed. Their vulnerability snaps into sharpest view after new hardship measures sensitive to the lived experience of poverty in old age are applied.

It is important to notice, too, what is not in this issue—that is, what we do not write about. We have not written about poor people's politics or social movements. A generation ago,

these issues were central to the study of poverty (Drake and Cayton 1945; Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]). With some exceptions in the fields of sociology (Oliver 2008), history (Katz 2012), and political science (Burch 2013), the political sociology or political science of poverty remains severely underdeveloped, even as Robert Sampson's (2012) novel work on "collective efficacy" in disadvantaged communities has laid a solid foundation on which to build a new research agenda. Basic questions about inequality within the civil sphere, political nihilism and capability, and uneven resistance to marginality remain unanswered. The vast majority of poverty researchers take as their audience policymakers, not publics. Do we still believe, I wonder, in the political capabilities of low-income communities? Is a revised civil rights movement or refashioned labor movement possible? And if so, what should the roll of intellectuals be?

We also do not talk about exploitation—the fact that some people make a good living off the poor. Crystal's landlord, for example, owned thirty-six units squarely in the inner city, rented exclusively to tenants below the poverty line, and netted roughly \$10,000 a month, more than what Crystal took home in a year (Desmond 2016). Poverty research today pivots on the concept of a *lack*. Structural accounts emphasize the inner city's lack of jobs, lack of social services, or lack of organizations. Cultural accounts emphasize the inner city's lack of role models, lack of custodial fathers, or lack of middle-class values (Satter 2009). In fixating on what poor people lack, we have neglected to notice the powerful ways in which exploitation contributes to the reproduction of urban poverty. In several realms, public-private partnerships have been championed as an effective vehicle through which to address social problems. But this approach not only leaves the relationship between poverty and profit intact but also relies on the American taxpayer to shoulder the burden when employers refuse to provide workers with a living wage or when landlords drive up

rent to maximize their rate of return. Inequality and poverty march together in lockstep. Addressing one without paying attention to the other results in a watered-down, inefficient antipoverty policy at best. Our policies should view exploitation as a serious impediment to saving, social mobility, decent housing, and self-reliance. But what might a public policy that effectively addresses exploitation look like?

PUBLIC POLICY AND MORAL URGENCY

What does the severe deprivation perspective mean for public policy? By way of conclusion, let me offer three policy implications that correspond to the three components of severe deprivation.

Acute Hardship

The severe deprivation perspective calls attention to what might be called "policy skimming": simultaneously increasing aid for working families and withdrawing some forms of support for the very poor.³ In 2012 the federal government spent \$54 billion on the Earned Income Tax Credit and \$17 billion on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Aron, Jacobson, and Turner 2013). Many analysts associated with the political left have pronounced that a broad retrenchment of aid to the needy has occurred since the 1980s. But the evidence tells quite a different story. Per capita spending on means-tested programs—even excluding Medicaid—almost doubled between 1986 and 2007. Spending on welfare programs for the poor has increased substantially, but the beneficiaries of this spending have been the working poor and families just above or just below the federal poverty line. Three decades ago, the poorest families in America received most (56 percent) of the transfers going to families with private incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold; in recent years, those families received less than one-third (32 percent) of the transfers (Moffitt 2015). Today the distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving"

3. When President Johnson set out to see American poverty, he visited coal miners—workers. Today, to see the neediest cases, a lawmaker seeking to launch a renewed war on poverty would visit families on welfare or SSI, or the disconnected.

poor carries with it a real cash value. Some parts of the safety net have been patched with cloth taken from other parts.

The question, then, becomes not, *how* do we solve poverty, but *whose* poverty are we solving? And why? This rephrasing helps us adjudicate between our need to emphasize how effective the safety net truly is (and has been) and the fact that so many people are falling through its holes (Bailey and Danziger 2013; Edelman 2012). As Liana Fox and her co-authors demonstrate in their article, in the absence of programs, things would be considerably worse. And yet, ours remains a country beset by severe deprivation.

Compounded Hardship

Our perspective is decidedly anti-silver-bullet. If severe deprivation is by definition the clustering of multiple disadvantages, then going singularly after one thing would be inefficient at best. We can give a working single mother a tax credit and see returns, but what about her abusive boyfriend? We can plant a charter school in a low-income neighborhood, but will the poorest children benefit when landlords respond by raising the rent? The desire to somehow outsmart poverty with a new innovation—to discover a cure—is strong both within and outside the academy. But the severe deprivation perspective gestures more toward an “all hands on deck” approach. This is easier said than done.

For one thing, budgetary allocations encourage policymakers, especially at the federal level, to emphasize the importance of their pet issue rather than the necessity of cross-system collaboration. Changes in resource allocation that slacken competition between offices and incentivize interdepartmental policy design are fundamental to building a more holistic antipoverty policy. Second, the complexity of poverty is extremely difficult to communicate. Findings from a randomized control trial that evaluate a program intervention on a particular outcome—such as a study showing that a jobs program decreases youth violence (Heller 2014)—are beautiful and powerful in their simplicity, and the policy implication seems clear. But when the focus moves to the gnarled prob-

lems of poverty, the sell to policymakers and the public requires a new kind of language and framing.

A third challenge is one of scale. Interventions that adopt a multidimensional approach to deprivation tend to pour an enormous amount of resources into bounded neighborhoods. For example, President Barack Obama’s Promise Zone initiative promotes job creation, economic growth, educational opportunity, and safety in twenty neighborhoods around the country. Can such an approach reach beyond those twenty neighborhoods? Can we—should we—imagine a multidimensional poverty agenda that is not rooted in poverty places? Whatever the challenges, considering the compounded nature of severe deprivation allows us to see the problem and its solutions in a new light and to rethink the ends for which our nation should strive.

Persistent Hardship

“Persistent” is another way of saying “generational,” which is another way of saying “historical,” which trains our attention on past wrongs: from systemic racism and the bleeding of black wealth to the rise of “tough on crime” policies (see, for example, Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Western 2006). Any hard look at past wrongs and their lingering effects reveals that addressing poverty is not only a matter of effective policy design and expanded economic opportunities but also a matter of justice and fairness. In policy circles, however, emphasis on what *can* be done supersedes what *should* be done. A spirit of pragmatism prevails. Researchers in a previous era used their skills to build a case for visionary change encapsulated in landmark rulings (for example, *Brown v. Board of Education*) or major pieces of legislation (the Great Society). Today many seem satisfied to advocate for “nudges” and incremental change. Fundamental reforms, from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Act, were advanced by normative arguments about what was right, not by cost-benefit analyses. As the sociologist David Grusky (2014) recently said, “If we’re serious about winning a second War on Poverty . . . we need to shake off the shackles of the seemingly realistic.” Somewhere along the way, being a hard-nosed, rigor-

ous, data-driven researcher became linked with being disinterested and “realistic.” The normative impulse of social science was scrubbed out. But as a National Academies report on mass incarceration recently recognized (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014, 320), some of our most pressing policy questions “cannot be resolved by reference to evidence” or “by weighing narrowly quantifiable costs against benefits.”

The severe deprivation approach engages in an empirically driven values conversation about poverty in America, one that is transparent about the moral principles undergirding research and policy, that specifies and reimagines desirable ends, and that rigorously assesses whether we are living up to our professed values. Bearing witness to severe deprivation in one of the richest countries on the planet and chronicling the lives of the poor in their full complexity and humanity requires both intellectual and normative commitments.⁴ The articles in this volume demonstrate that we can hold ourselves to the highest scientific standards and still inflect our work with a spirit of moral urgency.

This volume is a collective attempt to model a different way of doing poverty research, one that embraces the full complexity of poverty (realizing that the noise sometimes is the signal), advances a research agenda that subscribes fully to both the scientific and the normative project, and looks squarely at the trauma of poverty, its sadness, without reducing people to their hardships alone.

One day when homeless, Crystal and Vanetta were eating lunch at a McDonald’s and a boy walked in. He was maybe nine or ten, in dirty clothes and with unkempt hair. One side of his face was swollen. The boy didn’t approach the counter. Instead, he wandered slowly through the tables, looking for scraps.

Crystal and Vanetta noticed him at the same time. “What you got?” Crystal asked, riffling through her pockets. The women pooled what they had to buy the boy dinner. Staring up at the

menu, Crystal wrapped her arm around the boy like she was his auntie or big sister. She made sure he was okay, handed him the food, and sent him on his way with a hug.

“Reminds me of when we was kids,” Vanetta said, shaken.

Crystal watched the boy dash across the street. “I wish I had me a house. I would take him in.”

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4. The same is true for the most ostensibly disinterested, scientific study barren of empathy. Normative commitments invade. We might as well be transparent and intellectually serious about them.

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