

CALL FOR ARTICLES

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

ISSUE AND CONFERENCE ON SEVERE DEPRIVATION IN AMERICA

Request for Articles: Severe Deprivation in America

Since 2000, the U.S. poverty rate has increased and the poor have become poorer.¹ Along with hardships brought on by the Great Recession, welfare reform, the prison boom, the rise of short-term and low-wage jobs, political decisions at the federal level, declines in union membership, and stubbornly high rates of joblessness in disadvantaged communities have all contributed to deepening poverty in America.² The 2000s aptly have been called the "lost decade" because they witnessed an increase in overall poverty that all but wiped out the poverty reductions made in the previous decade.³

At the same time poor families saw their incomes drop or stagnate, their cost of housing rose substantially. Median asking monthly rent for vacant units has increased by more than 70 percent since 1990.⁴ As housing was becoming more unaffordable, fewer new households were receiving government assistance. Today, only one in four households that qualifies for housing assistance benefits from it.⁵ As a result, millions of low-income households are devoting the vast majority of their income to housing costs, and millions are evicted each year.⁶

The sharp drop in new households receiving housing assistance is but one example of a larger trend involving the retrenchment of some forms of public assistance to the needy.⁷ Cash assistance caseloads have fallen from 12.3 million recipients per month in 1996 to 4.5 million in 2011. Today, only one in ten adults living below the poverty line receives cash assistance in the form of welfare.⁹ On the other hand, some federal programs have grown substantially over the last two decades: namely, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Large-scale changes in federal poverty policy have created new winners and losers. Some low-income families now fare much better; others fare much worse.

If in recent decades conditions have become decidedly worse for many poor Americans, how do they endure conditions of severe economic deprivation? What is life like on the fringes of the economy? What are the coping mechanisms and survival strategies of families with very low incomes, and what are their consequences? What are the effects of poverty-related traumas on adults and children?

The fact that millions of Americans are living on so little and experiencing various forms of severe deprivation presents several analytical and methodological challenges to policy-relevant research. When it comes to documenting the complexity and effects of severe material hardship, explaining how and why different disadvantages cluster, or comparing sub-populations of the poor with similar incomes but vastly different lived realities-standard social-scientific methods, theories, and concepts often are ill-equipped. Many statistical methods favor isolating the effect of a single treatment on a single outcome, but the lives of the extreme poor are characterized by

correlated and compounding disadvantages. And much social-scientific data do not sufficiently capture the experiences of our most vulnerable citizens, who often are left out of survey samples or infrequently show up in many administrative databases.

The language of "poverty," meanwhile, can be fuzzy and imprecise. Social-scientific 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 is experienced. Some Americans fell into poverty from relatively stable backgrounds; for others, poverty courses through the generations. Some low-income Americans have experienced incarceration, hunger, violence, addiction, and eviction; others know nothing of these traumas. What, then, do we mean by "poverty"? How can this term-central to both social science and social policy-be refined or redefined? How can we capture with more precision variations or degrees of scarcity and social suffering among low-income families? And what are the implications of widespread severe deprivation for urban ethnography, measurement, survey design, causal inference, or experiments?

In devoting a full issue to Severe Deprivation in America, RSF: The Russell Sage Journal of the Social Sciences is interested in publishing research that investigates these questions. We are interested in studies-from multiple disciplines and employing multiple methods-that analyze the causes, conditions, and consequences of severe deprivation in the United States. By severe deprivation, we have in mind economic hardship that is (1) acute, (2) compounded, and (3) chronic.

(1) *Acute*: deep poverty; the poverty of those far below the poverty line characterized by scarcity of critical resources and material hardship.

(2) *Compounded*: poverty "plus" or correlated adversity; the clustering of different kinds of disadvantage across multiple dimensions (psychological, social, material) and institutions (work, family, prison).

(3) *Chronic*: enduring disadvantage; the lasting effects early-life trauma or deprivation experienced over long stretches, lifetimes, or even generations-and therefore often stubbornly impervious to change.

Proposals could focus on the following kinds of issues, this list being non-exhaustive.

- *Housing Insecurity, Rent Burden, and Homelessness*. How do families with very low incomes deal with the high cost of housing? What do these families go without if housing takes the vast majority of their income? What is the frequency, experience, and consequences of eviction or homelessness among low-income households? How have changes in housing policy or housing law hurt or helped very poor tenants?
- *Cost of Living*. Ever since David Caplovitz published *The Poor Pay More* in 1967, it has generally been accepted that low-income families pay a premium for goods and services. Recently, however, some have suggested that large-scale changes (globalization, for example) actually have reduced prices for the poor. Do the poor still pay more for basic items? What about banking services and access to credit? How has the consumer price

index evolved over time for low-income households? How have these households been affected by rising costs of transportation, electricity, or heat?

- *Hunger*. How common is food insecurity and hunger among poor households? How do families cope with food scarcity? How does food scarcity affect family dynamics, school performance, or community relations? What has been the success of federal or local programs designed to combat hunger and malnutrition?
- *Working Poverty*. Since the 1970s, the United States has witnessed an increase in precarious work offering low pay, no benefits, and little certainty. Today, half of all new jobs end within the first year, and permanent terminations have become routinized restructuring strategies.⁹ How does working poverty vary across geographic areas? What are the survival strategies of the working poor? What explains job loss among the working poor?
- *Families*. Relationship instability has increased in the United States in recent years, and family disruption can push people, especially women and children, into poverty.¹⁰ How are low-income families affected by severe economic constraints? How do family dynamics buffer or exacerbate severe deprivation? How do negative income shocks affect family structure and dynamics? Why do some families stay together in the face of extreme hardship while others fall apart?
- *Children*. What are the effects of material hardship on children as well as on childrearing practices? How are children socialized to having very little? How does coping under conditions of economic deprivation affect the amount and quality of time parents spend with their children?
- *Extended Kin and Social Networks*. 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 for the poor.¹¹ To what degree are very low-income people connected or estranged from their extended family? What do their support networks look like?
- *The Elderly*. A common narrative is that Social Security has protected older Americans from poverty and that the elderly are far less likely to be poor than children. But recent research suggests that this success story may be prematurely celebratory. Over a million Americans ages 65 and above live at or below 50 percent of the poverty line, and the rate of extreme poverty among elderly Americans appears to be increasing.¹² What is the state of severe deprivation among older Americans today? What unique challenges do elderly people face when coping under conditions of extreme hardship?
- *Prisoner Reentry*. In 2008, for the first time in American history, more than one in one-hundred American adults were in prison. For black men between the ages of 20 and 34, that ratio jumps to one in nine.¹³ A comprehensive picture of inner-city poverty is now incomplete without serious consideration of the police and incarceration-and of the millions of people released from prison each year. What is it like to be released from prison? What obstacles do ex-offenders face when trying to find jobs, secure housing, or rekindle old relationships? What explains why some ex-offenders are able to reintegrate back into larger society while others sink into poverty? Have policies at any level of government been deployed to help inmates reintegrate into society?
- *Immigration*. Many recent immigrants to the United States-and particularly those who are undocumented-confront severe deprivation. What are the unique challenges and opportunities facing recent immigrants trying to survive in America? How do

undocumented migrants cope with limited access to the social safety net? And how can social scientists better capture the experiences of this vulnerable population?

- *Decision Making and Mental Health under Scarcity*. Recent psychological research has found that scarcity impairs cognitive functioning.¹⁴ This research suggests that it is the experience of scarcity itself that often leads the poor to make costly decisions that reinforce their poverty. How does living with few resources impair judgment, attention allocation, and moral decision-making? Is there a link between exposure to severe deprivation and psychological functions that oversee impulse control, aggression, or depression?
- *Addiction*. How is drug or alcohol addiction experienced? How do addictions begin, how are they sustained, and what are their consequences? Does severe deprivation affect risk behaviors, like smoking or drug use; if so, why?
- *Violence*. What does violence do? What is the role of past or current family violence or abuse in perpetuating social disadvantages? What are the effects of personal exposure to street violence or to living in a dangerous neighborhood?
- *Disconnected*. The proportion of poor families receiving neither earnings nor cash welfare—the disconnected—has grown in recent years.¹⁵ One in every fifty Americans lives in a household that reports an income consisting only of food stamps.¹⁶ Many Americans disconnected from the safety net are disconnected from other core institutions as well: e.g., work, family, health providers, community organizations, neighborhoods. How are multiple forms of disconnection related; how does one form of disconnection lead to another? Who are the disconnected? How do they get by? And how might they get back on their feet?
- *The Geography of Severe Deprivation*. Rates of social mobility vary widely across the United States, and the same policy intervention can have drastically different effects in different locales.¹⁷ Where is severe deprivation in America? How does it vary across cities, countries, or states—and why? Are some municipalities better equipped to address this problem than others?
- *American Exceptionalism*. Although often compared with advanced European countries, America may more closely resemble Latin American and African nations with respect to the extent and depth of its poverty. Severe deprivation in the United States has no real equivalent in Europe and other parts of the developed world. Why is this so? What role does social policy play in explaining the prevalence of hazardously low incomes in the United States? Does national culture also play a role? Are Americans uniquely predisposed to accept or rationalize stark economic inequality? Do Americans view poor people in a distinctly different light than their European counterparts?

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract of up to two pages of their study **no later than February 24th to journals@rsage.org**. Please put Severe Deprivation in the subject line and address the email to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications. Only abstracts submitted to journals@rsage.org will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. The journal issue is being edited by Matthew Desmond, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Social Studies at Harvard University, but all questions should be directed to journals@rsage.org.

A conference will be organized at RSF in New York City in early fall of 2014. The contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present preliminary findings and receive feedback from the other contributors. Travel costs, food, and lodging will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. Contributors will be asked to read each paper and come to the workshop ready to tender feedback. Each paper also will be assigned a respondent responsible for giving the paper a deep read. Besides improving each individual paper, the goal of the conference will be to arrive at broader themes about severe deprivation and to develop a bigger take-home point both for researchers and policymakers.

After the conference, the authors will submit their final drafts on or before November 15, 2014. The papers will then be sent out to two additional scholars for peer reviews. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers before March 15, 2015. The full and final issue will be submitted for publication in the fall of 2015.

Papers will be published open access on the foundations website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Project Muse.

Notes

¹Heidi Shierholz and Elise Gould, *Already More than a Lost Decade: Poverty and Income Trends Continue to Paint a Bleak Picture* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2012).

²Jeffrey Thompson and Timothy Smeeding, "Inequality in the Great Recession: The Case of the United States." Chapter 8 of *The Great Recession and the Distribution of Household Income*, edited by Stephen Jenkins, Andrea Brandolino, John Micklewright, and Brian Nolan (New York: Oxford University Press, *forth.*); H. Luke Shaefer and Kathryn Edin, *Extreme Poverty in the United States, 1996 to 2011* (Ann Arbor, MI: National Poverty Center, 2012); Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld, "Unions, Norms, and the Rise in U.S. Wage Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 76 (2011): 513-37; Arne, Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

³Shierholz and Gould, *Already More than a Lost Decade*.

⁴Anthony Downs, "Introduction: Why Rental Housing Is the Neglected Child of American Shelter." Pp. 1 - 13 in *Revisiting Rental Housing: Policies, Programs, and Priorities*, edited by Nicolas Retsinas and Eric Belsky. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

⁵Alex Schwartz, *Housing Policy in the United States*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2010); Douglas Rice and Barbara Sar, *Decade of Neglect has Weakened Federal Low-Income Programs: New Resources Required to Meet Growing Needs* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2009).

⁶Barry Steffen, *Worst Case Housing Needs 2009: Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, 2011); Keith Wardrip, Danilo Pelletiere, and Sheila Crowley, *Out of Reach, 2007-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2008); Matthew Desmond, "Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty." *American Journal of Sociology* 118 (2012): 88-133; Matthew Desmond, Weihua An, Richelle Winkler, and, Thomas Ferriss, "Evicting Children," *Social Forces* 92 (2013): 303-27; Matthew Desmond and Tracey Shollenberger, "Poverty, Housing, and the Mechanisms of Neighborhood Selection." Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, New York: August 9 - 13, 2013.

⁷Joel Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Shaefer and Edin, *Extreme Poverty in the United States*.

⁸H. Luke Shaefer and Kathryn Edin, "Rising Extreme Poverty in the United States and the Response of Federal Means-Tested Transfer Programs," *Social Service Review* 87 (2013): 250-26.

⁹Henry Farber, "Job Loss and the Decline in Job Security in the United States." Pp. 223-62 in Katharine Abraham, James Spletzer, and Michael Harper, eds., *Labor in the New Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*.

¹⁰Kathryn Edin and Rebecca Joyce Kissane, "Poverty and the American Family: A Decade in Review," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010):460-479; Andrew Cherlin, "Demographic Trends in the United States: A Review of Research in the 2000s," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010):403-419.

¹¹Matthew Desmond, "Disposable Ties and the Urban Poor," *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (2012): 1295-1335.

¹²Joan Entmacher, Katherine Hallagher Robbins, Julie Vogtman, and Lauren Frohlich, *Insecure and Unequal: Poverty and Income among Women and Families, 2000-2012* (Washington, D.C.: National Women's Law Center, 2013).

¹³Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Adam Liptak, "1 in 100 Adults Behind Bars, New Study Says," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2008.

¹⁴Anuj Shah, Sendhil Mullainathan, and Eldar Shafir, "Some Consequences of Having too Little," *Science* 338 (2012): 682-85. Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having too Little Means So Much* (New York: Times Books, 2013).

¹⁵Pamela Loprest, *Disconnected Families and TANF* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2011); Lesley Turner, Sheldon Danziger, and Kristin Seefeldt, "Failing the Transition from Welfare to Work: Women Chronically Disconnected from Employment and Cash Welfare." *Social Science Quarterly* 87 (2006): 227-49

¹⁶ason DeParle, "Living on Nothing but Food Stamps," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2010.

¹⁷Raj Chetty, John Friedman, and Emmanuel Saez, "Using Differences in Knowledge across Neighborhoods to Uncover the Impacts of the EITC on Earnings," *American Economic Review*, forth. Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, *The Equality of Opportunity Project* (Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, 2013).