'Just Leave Me Alone': Social Isolation and Civic Disengagement for the Small-City Poor

INTRODUCTION

The sprawling desert community of Riverway[1], Washington is neither a booming city nor a persistently poor one. For its small size, it enjoys a relatively healthy economy, and has few identifiable pockets of high-density poverty. Yet, like most of the nation, it suffered significant job loss during the economic downturn of 2007-2009 (Washington State Employment Security Department 2012). Once a collection of small farm towns, Riverway had undergone rapid population growth and unmitigated sprawl in recent decades, as suburban housing developments, apartment complexes, strip-malls, and big-box stores spread into land that had been orchards and vineyards. As it grew, low-skilled individuals from both bigger cities and smaller rural communities flocked to Riverway in search of low-cost housing and job opportunities in its expanding construction and service sectors; many of them struggled when the recession hit. Although many came to Riverway specifically because of social ties there, a combination of social, cultural, structural and spatial barriers contributed to isolation amongst this population, limiting their options for survival as well as capacities for and interest in social and civic life.

This paper, based on qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation, looks at the social repercussions of job loss and poverty in a type of community where they are rarely studied (Norman 2013): a small, postagrarian (Salamon 2003), sprawling Western city. Despite the tendency for sociological inquiry on poverty to focus on high-density and persistently poor communities, there is evidence that since the recession poverty is

becoming an increasing problem in small metropolitan areas and suburbs (Fessler 2013; Kneebone and Garr 2010). While existing literature suggests that individuals and families living in mixed income areas should be advantaged compared to those in high-poverty areas (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999; Small and Newman 2001; Smith 2010; Wilson 1987), I find that this setting does not result in participants having significant access to social support. Rather than being absorbed into the networks of the better-off around them, participants reported experiences of exclusion and isolation from formal and informal social networks, shame around low income and financial need, low levels of interest in pursuing social ties, and lack of interest in civic participation. In this paper I explore the causes of this isolation and its consequences for low-income and unemployed residents of Riverway. I find that a combination of spatial, structural, and social factors can isolate the poor from the better off even when they live in close proximity, undermining the development of social networks and the accumulation of social capital.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Isolation and Exclusion

The concept of social isolation has a long history within sociology, dating back to Emile Durkheim's (1951) work on suicide and its relation to social integration and anomie. Definitions of the concept range from those that focus on individual ties and a "relative lack of social interaction" (Hughes and Gove 1981:50) to those that focus more on lack of participation in social institutions (Barry 1998) and lack of ties to the formal labor market (Elliott 1999; Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998; Wilson 1987). For these latter researchers, social isolation is problematic because it limits access to resources

including social networks and social capital (Barry 1998; Elliott 1999; Tigges et al. 1998; Wilson 1987), while for the former researchers focus more on poor mental health and lack of emotional support (House, Umberson, and Landis 1988; Hughes and Gove 1981; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006).

While individual level isolation can occur by choice, this is not always the case, and "levels and content of social involvement are determined by more macrosocial structures and processes, which are subject to purposeful, as well as unplanned processes of social change" (House et al. 1988:313). Lack of social relationships can occur due to individual behaviors, as well as issues outside a person's control, including length of time in a neighborhood or community and degree of social acceptance encountered (Hughes and Gove 1981). For individuals, social isolation contributes to a lack of social support and limited access to societal resources (McPherson et al. 2006; Tigges et al. 1998).

Isolation from social institutions also has significant detrimental impacts, for groups as well as individuals. Isolation from mainstream institutional resources and opportunities results in exclusion from job networks and employment opportunities (Elliott 1999; Wilson 1987). Early participation in social institutions has been shown to be an important determinant of later-life political involvement and interest (McFarland and Thomas 2006). Brian Barry (1998:15) argues that social isolation also results in political exclusion, "in that political networks tend to grow out of social networks."

Barry (1998) further distinguishes between social isolation, which may be either voluntary or involuntary, and social exclusion, which is "the dynamic processes of being shut out, partially or fully, from any or all of several systems which influence the

economic and social integration of people into their society" (Commins 2004:68). Mark

Shucksmith and Kai Schafft (2012:101) explain, "The concept of social exclusion focuses

primarily on relational and historically embedded patterns of labour market detachment,

low political and civic participation, social isolation and especially the distribution and

exercise of power, and how these phenomena intersect with gendered, ethnic, racial

and/or other social identities."

Drawing on the above literature, for the purposes of this paper social isolation will

be defined as a lack of social ties and social relationships and/or a lack of participation in

societal institutions, while social exclusion will be used to refer only to processes that

occur outside of the individual's control. This definition of social isolation allows for the

concept to encompass multiple forms of disadvantage, including a lack of social

interactions, as well as isolation from mainstream institutions. Social isolation occurs

both through individual choices and decisions as well as through processes of exclusion

at the social structural and interpersonal levels. As the preceding discussion illustrates,

the negative impacts of social isolation and social exclusion are far-reaching and

substantial, making them important concepts to interrogate, particularly as they relate to

the perpetuation of poverty and social disadvantage.

Social Networks and Surviving Poverty

Among the results of social isolation at the individual level is a lack of social

networks, understood as groups of people connected through ties of friendship,

commerce, institutional affiliation, or kinship. Economic need and lack of resources have

long been found to encourage heavy reliance on one's social networks for economic

survival and emotional support (Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003; Nelson 2000, 2005; Newman 1999; Roy and Burton 2007; Sherman 2006, 2009). Carol Stack's (1974) classic ethnography of a poor African-American community documented the intricacy of social and kin network ties that were required for survival. In her field site poor individuals relied heavily upon friends, kin, and fictive kin for food, clothing, housing, and childcare. The ties were found to be so necessary for survival that they undermined romantic relationships that might threaten the kin network, and acted as barriers to either geographic or upward mobility. Even when some extra income or resources were acquired, they were shared with the network rather than utilized by individuals, because failure to share today could cause others to turn their backs later. In this way strong social networks facilitated survival, but hindered escape from poverty (Stack 1974).

While numerous researchers since Stack have found that informal aid from social and kin networks is vital to survival, few have uncovered networks as pervasive and developed as those she documented. Instead, often social networks are secondary or latent sources of support. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (1997) found that social networks were crucial, but supplemental sources of income and support for poor urban single mothers, who frequently turned to friends, family, children's fathers, and romantic partners when facing shortfalls between income and expenses. Subsequent researchers have found similar patterns of social network reliance among urban low-wage workers and welfare recipients, for whom social networks are critical sources of housing, childcare, goods, and cash that facilitate survival, but are seldom their main or primary survival strategies (Hays 2003; Newman 1999; Roy and Burton 2007). Social networks

play important roles amongst the rural poor as well, who rely on friends and family to make ends meet as part of a patchwork of survival strategies (Brown and Lichter 2004; Hofferth and Iceland 1998; Nelson 2000, 2005; Sherman 2006, 2009; Tickamyer and Henderson 2011).

Despite evidence of the importance of social network support to the poor, there is a growing body of research suggesting that social network support is waning in its occurrence and importance, particularly within racial and ethnic minority communities. Karin Brewster and Irene Padavic (2002) find that kin support for childcare is decreasing amongst African-American populations over time, but that those with fewer resources are still more likely to rely on kin networks for childcare. Colleen Heflin and Mary Pattillo (2006) find that poor blacks are less likely than poor whites to have networks with sufficient resources to help in substantial ways. Sandra Smith (2010) finds that African American job-seekers are often reluctant to ask for help from friends and family, and job-holders are reluctant to offer it for fear of jeopardizing their own employment situations. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas' (2005:34) study of urban poor single mothers discovers that trust "is astonishingly low – so low that most mothers we spoke with said they have no close friends, and many even distrust close kin." Matthew Desmond (2012a) finds that social ties are utilized by the urban poor when in crisis, but that commonly the ties are non-kin, short-term and "disposable," rather than persistent. These studies all argue that social networks are not universally available to poor urban populations, suggesting that multiple factors may influence the degree to which they form or are engaged.

In rural settings research also finds inconsistent evidence for social support amongst the poor. Cynthia Duncan (1999) argues that the development of social capital differs depending on the class system of a rural community, with significant disadvantages in communities with high levels of stratification. Jennifer Sherman (2006, 2009) and Sarah Whitley (2013) find that within rural communities some poor individuals and families may be highly socially connected and reliant on network support, while others who are deemed less worthy by the community may experience exclusion and lack of support. Margaret Nelson (2000, 2005) argues that social context and the nature of relationships impact the degree to which poor rural single mothers call upon others in their social networks for material, emotional, or childcare support.

As these studies suggest, there is still much left unknown regarding how and why social network support develops and is sustained for low-income populations in different settings. Despite abundant evidence illustrating the importance of social support for those at the bottom of the income spectrum, our understandings of the factors that impact the development and activation of support networks in different settings are still underdeveloped. Questions remain regarding why some populations appear to be less connected than others, as well as how community context and social cleavages facilitate or hinder the creation and utilization of social networks for different types of support.

Social Networks, Social Capital, and Civic Engagement

Social networks can be vital beyond their contributions to material survival, impacting mental and physical health as well as efficacy. Theorists have argued that without inclusion in social networks, social capital cannot be accessed even in

communities with relatively high amounts of it. Within sociological literature there are differing definitions of social capital, most of which encompass social networks as an important part of the concept (Bourdieu 1986; Carpiano 2006; Mouw 2006; Portes 1998; Putnam 2001). According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), social capital consists of network-based resources that can be accessed by those within the social networks in order to procure benefits including economic capital or other types of symbolic capital. Alejandro Portes (1998:6) defines social capital similarly as "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures." Robert Putnam (2001:21) defines social capital more simply, as "social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity," arguing that the level of connectedness within a society is itself a resource and social good. Despite their differences, these classic conceptualizations have in common an understanding that social network inclusion and utilization are key to accessing the benefits of social capital within a community (Carpiano 2006).

Social capital is vital to an individual's ability to fully participate in society. Social capital based in formal settings, such as religious or volunteer affiliations, can contribute to civic engagement and empowerment, as well as to health and happiness (McFarland and Thomas 2006). Chaeyoon Lim and Robert Putnam (2010) argue that the correlation between religious attendance and life satisfaction is explained not by religion itself, but by the social relations forged through religious congregations. Religious activity is also connected to greater involvement in other types of civic activity, such as volunteering (Lim and MacGregor 2012). Researchers find that participation in civic life, including organized groups and volunteer activities, has positive health outcomes across

the life-course (Cornwell, Laumann, and Schumm 2008). James Samuel Coleman (1988) finds that social capital accumulated through civic associations often has benefits not just for individuals and families, but for the larger communities and neighborhoods in which they reside. Exclusion from social networks and institutions limits access to these types of social capital, with multiple negative consequences.

Social capital is also important for safety, trust, and efficacy within one's society (Carpiano 2006; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998), and is vital in encouraging and facilitating engagement in the political process (McFarland and Thomas 2006; Putnam 2001; Verba et al. 1993). A lack of social capital is believed to be a key factor contributing to lowered civic engagement and voting amongst the poor (Piven and Cloward 2000; Rosenstone 1982). Steven Rosenstone (1982) argues that financial strain that disrupts social relationships will contribute to disinterest in civic life, "Because coworkers, friends, and one's spouse are sources of political information and they encourage participation, [thus] a breakdown of these relationships will reduce turnout" (Rosenstone 1982:42).

Social integration is important to the poor not simply because it can aid in survival on a day-to-day basis, but because social networks and institutional affiliations contribute to social capital that can impact quality of life in numerous ways, including civic engagement, health, and happiness. Thus social isolation can be expected to further disadvantage populations that are already facing financial struggles. Given the importance of social integration, it is necessary to improve understandings of barriers to it amongst low-income populations, as well as the economic and noneconomic outcomes of social isolation for disadvantaged populations in diverse settings.

Community Setting, Mobility, and Social Isolation

Low-income populations tend to experience high levels of residential mobility due to pull factors such as improved housing and neighborhoods, and push factors like gentrification and rising housing costs, evictions, and housing instability (Desmond 2012b; Schafft 2006; South and Crowder 1997). Mobility and turnover can disrupt social connections, reducing social capital and undermining community cohesion (Hughes and Gove 1981; MacTavish and Salamon 2001; Pettit and McLanahan 2003; Sampson et al. 1999; Schafft 2006; South and Crowder 1997). There is evidence that the impacts of social capital disruptions can be mitigated by movement into neighborhoods with improved schools and institutions (Mendenhall, DeLuca, and Duncan 2006; Pettit and McLanahan 2003; Sampson et al. 1999), but minorities are less likely to move into better neighborhoods than are whites (South and Crowder 1997). Furthermore, concerns remain regarding the impacts of geographic mobility on families' abilities to forge and maintain social networks and access social institutions.

The effects of residential mobility on receiving communities can also be negative. Increasingly, smaller communities have attracted in-migrants in search of low cost housing in settings believed to be safe and quiet (Burton, Garrett-Peters, and Eason 2011; Clark 2012; Fitchen 1991; Foulkes and Newbold 2008; Foulkes and Schafft 2010; Schafft 2006). Newcomers often remain poor in the new communities, straining existing services and visibly altering the social landscape rather than being easily integrated into it (Burton et al. 2011; Clark 2012; Crowley and Lichter 2009; Schafft 2006). Instead of improved access to social capital, in-migrants to small towns often experience social exclusion and

moral judgment by established residents who see them as threatening to the community (Burton et al. 2011; MacTavish and Salamon 2001; Schafft 2006; Whitley 2013).

Larger and better off communities are not immune to these forces, and both high turnover and rapid growth can destabilize social relations (Sampson et al. 1999). Growth attributed to in-migration is not associated with improved quality of life for either rich or poor in small cities and suburbs (Norman 2013), or with high levels of social capital amongst newcomers (MacTavish and Salamon 2001; Salamon 2003). Newer styles of development, such as suburban housing and low-income trailer parks, are found to create barriers to social capital, turning once tightly-knit towns into "bedroom" communities where little social interaction occurs (MacTavish and Salamon 2001; Salamon 2003).

Thus, while low-income individuals and families may fare slightly better in communities with lower concentrations of poverty, there is reason to question how much better. As existing research suggests, the quiet and safety associated with small towns and suburbs are not necessarily accompanied by social acceptance or integration into social networks and institutions. Without access to networks and social capital, survival options and civic participation may be curtailed for vulnerable populations. As this paper will argue, high mobility, sprawl, and rapid growth, coupled with cultural understandings of poverty and unemployment as shameful, can generate and reinforce social isolation for low-income populations regardless of the resources of the larger communities.

FIELD SITE AND METHODOLOGY

Field Site

This research, conducted by the author, took place from August 2010 to August 2011 in the four adjoining communities in Eastern Washington that make up the Riverway region.[2] The research focused on the experiences of low-income and poor populations in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011a). Riverway, now a sprawling city, was until recent decades a collection of small towns, mostly tied to the agricultural industry and military complex. The last fifty years have seen immense growth there, and suburban style housing developments, strip-malls, and big-box stores have taken over farmland and orchards. Yet the area retains vestiges of its agrarian past, and many homeowners with larger lots keep horses and livestock in fenced pastures, often overlooking housing developments with names like "The Orchards" or "Cherry Hill," where suburban lawns and private parks are irrigated by canals originally built to serve agricultural needs. Disorganized development and a lack of urban planning result in low-income families not being concentrated into specific neighborhoods, but rather clustered in low-cost and subsidized apartment complexes, trailer parks, and rental houses that are dispersed throughout the region and frequently adjacent to more costly housing and neighborhoods (See Table 1 for breakdown of housing types). The area is organized around auto traffic versus pedestrian use, and its large distances require vehicles to traverse. Yet local public transportation is limited in both range and frequency, making it inconvenient at best for the bulk of residents.

<Table 1 about here>

With the area's sprawling growth came significant in-migration, increasing the economic and racial diversity of the region, which now includes a sizable Hispanic

population. Riverway now has a reasonably diverse economy and plentiful retail services. Nonetheless, many of the area's jobs are concentrated in the "new economy" characterized by the low-end services sector (Norman 2013), which was among the hardest hit during the Great Recession (Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011b).

Methods and Sample

The research consisted of 55 recorded, open-ended, in-depth interviews and six months of ethnographic fieldwork, all focused on low-income populations. Interviews lasted from one to four hours, with most being about an hour and a half. Most participants were interviewed alone, although in several cases pairs chose to be interviewed together.[3] The bulk of interviews took place in the participants' residences, although interviews were also conducted in public spaces including private study rooms at public libraries, fast food restaurants and cafés, and a local food bank during non-distribution hours.

Descriptive statistics for the interview sample and Riverway as a whole are listed in Table 2. The sample was 62 percent female and 38 percent male, and the average age was 44 years. About 70 percent of participants were white and 13 percent were Latino, while 9 percent reported a mix of white and Native American heritage, 7 percent were African American, and 2 percent were Asian. About a third of the sample was currently married, including numerous participants who had been divorced once or more prior to the current marriage. About a quarter of respondents were cohabiting, including several who said they were engaged, but did not have set wedding dates. The other 44 percent of the sample were currently single and not living with a romantic partner, whether never-married, divorced, separated, or widowed. Despite this relatively low level of marriage,

the majority of participants were parents, although not all had young children and not all parents of young children had either full or part-time custody.

<Table 2 about here>

Forty-five percent of the sample was currently employed, although many worked in low-wage, part-time, and contingent positions. Respondents were not asked to report exact incomes, but were asked numerous questions about making ends meet and their qualification for and receipt of aid and subsidies from federal, state, local and private sources. Using this information they were categorized into three groups: middle-class, low-income, and poor. The middle-class category included participants who felt they had adequate household income, owned homes, reported few to no problems in making ends meet, and received no aid. Low-income participants included those who reported income from low-skilled or low wage jobs; no home ownership[4]; qualification for limited social programs with higher income thresholds (i.e. WIC); and consistent problems making ends meet, but not chronic inabilities to meet very basic needs. Poor participants generally had little to no earned income, and relied heavily on means-tested social programs such as TANF, SSI, SNAP[5], Social Security, subsidized housing, and other subsidies, and reported chronic problems in meeting basic needs including food, housing, utilities, and transportation. According to these definitions, roughly 15 percent of the sample was middle-class[6], 33 percent was low-income, and 53 percent was poor.

Interviews were focused around themes including history in the community; family history; work history; leisure; relationships and family; religion and faith; political interests and voting behaviors; and demographics and background information. There

was also completely unstructured time at the end of the interview for participants to discuss any issues that were important to them or that they felt should have been brought up in the interview. Interviews were semi-structured, but open enough for participants to take them in their own desired directions and bring up unanticipated issues or themes.

Participants were recruited through multiple means, including the efforts of local social service providers who passed out fliers to their clients; recruitment from the social networks of several undergraduate research assistants with extended histories in the area; snowball sampling from the social networks of interview participants; and through my own ethnographic participation as a volunteer with a local food bank. Participants were offered incentives in the form of $25 gift cards to Wal-Mart and WinCo, and most accepted them. Through these various recruiting strategies I was able to achieve a diverse sample of low-income residents that drew from varied and unrelated social networks.

Although the bulk of the research is focused around the interviews, I also engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in the low-income community, including six months of participant observation as a regular volunteer in a local food bank as well as extended observations in multiple settings frequented by low-income and poor individuals and families. The volunteer work in particular allowed me to engage in longer-term relationships with many members of the community and helped me to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives and day-to-day challenges, thoughts, and struggles. It also provided insight into how the poor community interacted with and perceived one another, including cleavages based on race, ethnicity, values, and behaviors.

Interviews were digitally recorded (with the consent of the participants), transcribed verbatim, and analyzed and coded for both anticipated and new themes that arose repeatedly throughout the interview sample. Ethnographic observations were recorded through both handwritten notes and text notes taken on a smart-phone during the observation process, and were later used to generate more detailed field notes, generally within 24 hours of the observations. These notes were also later analyzed and coded for themes prevalent in the data.

RESULTS: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

> I'm a loner down here. I mean, yeah, I'm around everybody [at the food bank],
> but I am pretty much a loner. So it makes it pretty tough.
> - Jill Carter, 61 year-old unemployed, divorced mother and grandmother, 4 years
> residence in Riverway

Mobility and Spatial Barriers to Social Ties

Riverway is a place characterized by transplants and transience. Most participants had moved many times prior to their interviews, and had lived in multiple locations both in Washington State and across the U.S and Mexico. Their reasons for moving to Riverway varied, but mostly clustered around three overlapping themes: family concerns such as safety or proximity to extended family; economic reasons such as jobs or low-cost housing; and escape from problems elsewhere. Although many people had some friends or family in the region, the theme of social isolation was pervasive throughout the interviews, emerging consistently throughout the narratives of low-income and poor participants in particular. Many had moved there for a combination of economic and

family reasons, yet they often had very limited social ties outside of their immediate families; frequently even these family relationships were strained and difficult.

Low-income and poor residents often described difficulties in forging or maintaining social ties in Riverway, including struggles to make and keep connections to friends, family, and community members, as well as challenges to gaining acceptance in institutional settings. Poverty acted as a barrier to social interactions in multiple ways, combining with spatial issues and structural constraints to undermine the formation and continuation of social ties. These structural constraints were much less likely to impact middle-class residents, who did not describe social isolation and exclusion as often in their interviews, and were more likely to have frequent interaction with friends and family, as well as to be integrated into school and church communities.

Middle-class participants were also more likely to live in neighborhoods and developments with neatly maintained parks and lawns that encouraged outdoor use, while low-income residents were dispersed in a variety of housing options, none of which was particularly conducive to getting to know one's neighbors. Most apartment complexes and trailer parks where low-income residents lived had no common spaces for either adults or children to gather in groups, and generally when I observed these settings there was little sign of life outdoors, regardless of the time of year. The lack of a centralized downtown or pedestrian areas further limited the likelihood of meeting new people in public spaces, while the city's sprawl and lack of convenient or reliable public transportation often made it difficult for participants to access social networks even when they existed. Laura and Peter Barnes, an unemployed married couple in their 20s who had

lived in Riverway for seven years, were members of a religious congregation that potentially provided support for them. But their lack of working car and gas money made it difficult for them to attend their church regularly and engage in this community:

Laura: It is hard to even go. Often we don't have enough gas to get there.

Peter: That is a big, big thing because all we own right now—

Laura: The '76—

Peter: And over the last year we have borrowed other people's vehicles almost the entire time.

Cohabiting middle-aged couple Christine Gorman and Tony Perez, who had lived for nearly two years in Riverway, experienced the same type of dilemma. When they first moved to the area, homeless, unemployed, and living in a tent, a North Riverway church had helped them get back on their feet. Now living in a subsidized apartment, and having completed a vocational training program, Tony had found some temporary work. Unfortunately their new apartment was in South Riverway, 15 miles from the church and the only social contacts they had made in the area. Christine explained that despite the congregation's help, they were unable to afford the drive:

Even though we haven't gone to church for a while— they came— like a month ago with another gas card for 100 bucks because they knew he couldn't look for a job without gas… But, now, we are tryin' to get more in a cycle where we can go every Sunday an' have gas in the car, 'cuz it's to North Riverway. And just that little far, you know, it's hard for us to go sometimes. We gotta make sure he makes it to work.

For these respondents, who were lucky enough to be welcomed into religious institutions, structural barriers limited their ability to participate in the available communities.

The same processes could hinder individual relationships as well. Sue Reed, a divorced, disabled 59 year-old who had lived in Riverway off and on for most of her life, had two grown children in the area. However, between her own financial problems and theirs, she experienced a similar squeeze when it came to seeing them. When asked if she spent a lot of time with her grandchildren, she answered:

> As much as I can. They used to live here in South Riverway, so it was easier. But now they live up in North Riverway, so I don't get up there as much as I want. Especially with the financial hardship that I am having, and having gas in my car— getting up there to see 'em… I probably did more with the first grandson.

Riverway's sprawl combined with the cost of transportation to create insurmountable barriers to social interactions for the poor, even when some ties existed.

For those who did not have friends, family, or community already established in the area, it was often very difficult to forge social connections in Riverway. Nick Woods, a nomadic 28 year-old, sporadically employed married stepfather of one, described the same sorts of problems in making friends there:

> *Has it been hard to make new friends living here?*
>
> Yeah. Well, especially with a kid. 'Cause you can't just drop everything and go out and do something. You have to make sure you have a babysitter and you have to be on time, and you have to have a — and especially with your vehicle not

working right, you know? It's like, you have to rely on other transportation and this and this. So it's hard.

For Riverway's low-income and poor residents, the spatial (dis)organization of the city created numerous barriers to the creation or maintenance of social network ties. While the lack of easily accessible public spaces meant that few had much chance to engage in social activities close to where they lived, the lack of convenient public transportation inhibited their access to other potential sources of social interaction and inclusion. For those with limited finances, the money required to drive to social events was a strong disincentive to participation. Instead, most participants made few friends after moving to Riverway, and often failed to maintain existing connections. The organization of the city itself, combined with a lack of investment into public transportation infrastructure, thus contributed to both individual isolation and exclusion from mainstream social institutions such as churches. These processes in turn limited low-income residents' formation of network ties and access to social capital.

Social Barriers to Network Development: Self-Protection and Social Boundaries

In addition to logistical and financial constraints, social isolation also frequently was a result of self-protection. As is common amongst low-income populations, many participants had been through bouts of hard living (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Rubin 1977; Western 2001; Wilson 1996). While some were still engaged in these activities, the majority were trying to avoid these types of temptations and people who took part in them. However, in many cases participants had few social connections beyond those they had made through their addictions. When they attempted to forge new friendships with

less troubled people, participants often found that Riverway's better-off families and the social institutions that served them had little interest in newcomers with low incomes and questionable pasts. Although some were welcomed as Lisa and Tony had been, more often those who attempted to engage in social activities or communities felt excluded and snubbed, including several who had attended local churches for extended time periods.

Cohabiting stay-at-home mother Kaylee Anderson, who had moved to Riverway from a small town in Idaho five years earlier, found she had trouble making friends after she stopped using crystal meth:

> You know, just, well see, when I first moved up here, um, I was using. And the people that I met and knew were all drug heads. And so when I got clean and got out of treatment, I didn't know anybody at all. And so I only know very few people.

Jessica and Matt Mitchell, a married couple in their mid-twenties with three children, had lived in the area three and ten years respectively. They were trying to leave their past drinking behind, but similarly found that this meant losing most of their old friends:

> Matt: Most of my other friends just— I mean, they like to drink. I don't really want a bunch of drunk people around the kids…
>
> *Do you feel like you have enough social interaction?*
>
> Jessica: Not as much. Not as good as it used to be.

Unfortunately, Matt and Jessica had little success in making new friends who might have more appropriate interests:

> *Have you found that you met other parents through being parents?*

Jessica: HmMmm [no].

Not at all?

Jessica: No.

Matt: No, not so much.

For those recovering from addiction and abuse, it was rarely easy to make new friends among the clean and sober. Donna Chavez was a 55 year-old divorced mother of three grown children who had lived in Riverway since the early 1980s, and worked at a low-wage care-work job. During much of her life she had struggled with alcoholism, but she had been sober for several years since a religious rebirth. She had cut ties with her friends who "partied," but she now found herself with few friends and social connections beyond her immediate family. Instead, she had refocused on faith and religion:

Do you feel like you have enough people to talk to when things are hard?

Uh huh.

Your family?

I don't talk to family. I talk to God.

Donna was now a devout member of a local nondenominational church. Yet despite regular attendance at both services and social events, she had not made many friends within the church community:

Do you feel like you have a real sense of community there?

Just the pastor.

Are you close to other people who go to that church?

Not really. I'm not really, really close to other people, but when they do have functions, [my son and I] go to other functions and we talk to everybody. You meet people every single time, but you don't stay connected is the thing.

This experience of exclusion from religious institutions was not uncommon for low-income and poor residents, particularly when they attended large Christian and Catholic churches. Barbara Arnold, a 51 year-old divorced, disabled mother who had lived in Riverway for 14 years, had experienced bouts of hard living before moving there. In Riverway she wanted to make sure that her daughter was integrated into what she believed to be wholesome social networks. However, she also found that local church communities were less than fully welcoming. She'd had trouble making friends in the region after moving there, and complained that the people she had met in the community were, "Not earnest. And when you think they are, then you find out later they are not and it is really heartbreaking." She had joined a nearby church, which she felt provided positive activities for her daughter, but insufficient social support for her:

> *For you, is the church a source of community? Are you friends with people there?*
>
> Am I friends with people through there? I don't know that I would call these people friends… Are they friends? That is a term that is hard to put there, okay? Do you understand what I am getting at?

While these participants experienced marginalization from church community members, in some cases even church administrations kept struggling congregants at arms' length. Maria Gomez, a 52 year-old divorced mother of two grown children who had lived in Riverway for 14 years, had been let down by the church that she turned to for

support. Although she had siblings in Riverway, they were not close, and she had few

friends upon whom she could rely. After moving there she began to attend a Spanish-

speaking church, but her later disappointment discouraged her from continuing. She

described a very difficult time after a serious workplace accident left her badly injured.

Although she had been a regular church member for some time, she was unable to rely on

either the pastor or the congregation for help during the recovery period that followed:

> I was by myself and not being able to like take a bath by myself and, you know,
>
> move around and cook. And oh my God, I was really stressed out.
>
> *Nobody helped you?*
>
> Nobody, not even the church where I was going to. They never, ever helped me or
>
> came. Or, you know, "Do you need help or do you?" – you know, anything.
>
> That's what really, really upset me.

Although she eventually recovered somewhat, Maria was left unable to work, and thus

found herself needing help to make ends meet. This time she actively sought help from

her church, but again was let down:

> I needed somebody to help me with the deposit for the light [bill] because it was
>
> $200. And I asked the pastor, I go, "Oh, can you talk to the members and ask
>
> them if they could help so I can give the deposit?" And he told me, even his wife,
>
> they told me, "Well, we really don't like getting into the funds because if we give
>
> to one person, then everybody wants." And I was like, "I give my ten percent, you
>
> know." I go, "That's why the people give to the church so we can help each other,
>
> you know."

For participants desiring to put troubled pasts behind them, Riverway's middle-class community generally remained elusively out of reach. While occasionally a respondent found acceptance within the larger community, more often they described experiencing ostracization from mainstream social networks and institutions, including those connected to schools, daycares, and even church communities. Thus they not only experienced isolation, but also frequently felt a sense of judgment and rejection from the community that both resulted from and contributed to the exclusion they experienced.

Yet even within the low-income community, making social connections was not easy. Although a number of older participants – particularly those who lived in subsidized housing for the elderly – had made close friends amongst their low-income neighbors, the majority of participants had not. Stephanie Wilson, a 57-year old divorced, disabled woman who had lived in Riverway for eight years but made few friends outside of her immediate family, complained:

> I think one of the biggest problems [here] is people not knowing their neighbors. Not knowing other people have closed people off too much. I mean, we grew up to where you walked down the street, you would know most of the people and know what's going on, and go watch out for them. Here, it's everybody keep to their own selves and stuff like that. I think that has caused a lot of problems.

The food bank was another potential source of social ties for its clients, many of whom returned regularly and thus interacted with the same people again and again. Yet rather than being a lively location where friendships were forged, people similarly appeared "closed off" from each other. Its crowded waiting area was generally subdued,

with clients talking in hushed tones to children and family members, and rarely

interacting with strangers. Clients self-segregated by race and ethnicity, often openly

judging other groups and complaining about their perceived habits and behaviors.

Commonly members of different racial and ethnic groups would disdainfully comment

about others, accusing them of lacking hygiene, being poor parents, or stealing food and

misrepresenting their own need. My long-term observations suggested that over time

clients who started out friendly and outgoing became increasingly withdrawn, refusing to

acknowledge or make eye contact with either workers or fellow clients (Field Notes,

5/20/11). One client, a recent in-migrant from a small town in Idaho, waxed nostalgic for

her hometown food-bank, which she described as kinder and friendlier (Field Notes,

1/28/11). For many low-income participants, judgment and symbolic boundaries

(Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont 2000) hindered their chances of

building relationships with those who were more fortunate, as well as those in similar

situations and facing similar constraints. As will be discussed more in the following

section, cultural understandings of poverty as shameful contributed to this process, acting

as both external and internal barriers to the creation and maintenance of social ties.

Cultural Barriers to Social Networks

      In addition to spatial and social barriers, for many participants cultural norms

regarding reciprocity, as well as pride in self-reliance and shame regarding need further

discouraged them from pursuing social relationships. Concerns about inability to

reciprocate, as well as fear of judgment by others, have been found to prevent families in

need from drawing on potential social network support (Nelson 2000; Smith 2010). Both

participants who were chronically poor and those who were experiencing recent un- or underemployment generally had internalized cultural judgments of poverty as immoral and shameful (Gans 1996; Hays 2003; Sherman 2009, 2013; Steensland 2006; Woodward 2008). For many, dependence on others clashed with their senses of pride, self-sufficiency, and masculinity. While some participants relied on their families in particular for help through difficult times, many others preferred to hide their need than to reach out. Nick Woods, the 28 year-old married stepfather who had been laid off from his security guard position, explained that he didn't like having to ask others for help, "'Cause I don't – it just makes me feel like I am not doing my job as a parent, nor as a husband, to supply for my family, so. It's like somebody else is doing it for me."

This type of shame created an additional barrier to social engagement with either friends or family. David Owen, a 45 year-old divorced ex-convict who had lived in Riverway for eleven years, was unable to find work there and thus reliant on General Assistance as his only source of income. He described feeling that his lack of resources made him less valuable as a friend and unable to engage in reciprocal relationships:

> I'm still a little guarded about making friends and getting involved with people's lives and – well, not involved, but I tend to isolate myself. I don't – it's easier for me that way at times, 'cause then I don't have to be involved with other goings-on, and feel obligated to other people … 'Cause I like to help people, but I – and right now financially or being able to give them rides, or, you know, go out and do things for them or, you know, be able to fix their car, I don't have the tools to do that, you know. I don't have the resources to, in my opinion, to be able to help.

Even those who felt that they would be able to eventually reciprocate favors or pay back debts often found asking for help to be humiliating to a degree that discouraged them from reaching out. Recently unemployed forty-two year-old Doug Stark had lived in Riverway his whole life, and his 26 year-old partner Savannah Lewis had moved there four years earlier. The cohabiting parents of three were struggling financially, yet rather than turn to family for help, they chose to limit interactions in order to avoid judgment:

Doug: I don't want to ask my family – I won't ask my family for money because–

Savannah: – Me either.

Doug: I just don't like to. It's just, we'd just rather deal with it ourselves, however that may be… I've gotten money from them before, and I even paid them back fast, and I still hear it. And I just don't want to hear it.

Riverway natives James and Bethany Hoffman, married parents of two, expressed a similar reluctance to turn to their family in times of need, preferring the anonymity of public aid to the shame of asking for help from people they knew well. James described his family, who lived locally, as "kind of a minor support system— not like I really rely on them a lot." They explained:

Bethany: We went [to the food bank] one time, because we never want to ever ask people from like our families for money—

James: I hate doing that.

Bethany: So we were like, you know, we probably could have made it but it was just kind of—

James: It was so tight.

For many of Riverway's low-income residents, feelings of humiliation and disgrace around poverty and need acted as an individual-level barrier to social interactions and the maintenance of social ties. For some shame due to unemployment, poverty, and the inability to reciprocate favors fully made them feel unworthy of friendships, and thus reluctant to pursue social connections. Thus, even when they had better-off individuals in their social networks, participants repeatedly discussed choosing to cut themselves off from their friends and family rather than ask for help and risk being judged for their inability to survive on their own.

This self-imposed isolation combined with the previously discussed structural and social barriers to limit social network ties and the creation of social capital. While high geographic mobility, financial constraints, and lack of transportation contributed to underdeveloped social networks and limited access to social institutions, for many a lack of confidence to actively pursue connections, and a desire to avoid the social problems that are endemic to low-income communities further contributed to isolation. Those who attempted to overcome these barriers and to forge new social connections often found themselves excluded from middle-class institutions and communities within Riverway through a combination of logistical hurdles and rigid social boundaries. For many of the participants this meant that they spent the majority of their time at home, and their hobbies and interests tended to focus on activities such as television and movies, video games, and computers. For most of them this lifestyle served to further limit their chances of making friends locally, maintaining existing friendships, or expanding their social networks. As the following section will briefly illustrate, it also contributed to their

feeling alienated from the larger society in which they lived, resulting in a sense of

ineffectiveness and pessimism with regard to civic engagement more generally.

Civic Disengagement and Disempowerment

The types of social isolation described in the previous sections had multiple

repercussions for participants. Having limited sources of support limited options for

surviving poverty to those formally available through programs and charities[7]. Beyond

impacts on their material survival, however, isolation and exclusion also impacted their

senses of efficacy and connection to the larger society in which they lived. Although

some still attempted to engage in social and civic activities, many had given up on trying

to participate in the larger community in any meaningful way. They discussed lack of

time, energy, and interest in taking part in social activities, and expressed little desire to

be integrated into social or civic life in Riverway.

Their inward focus influenced their interest in social issues as well, including

political and policy issues that might directly impact them. For many a lack of education

made such issues confusing and opaque, and they often complained that they didn't

understand much about local or national current events or political issues. Beyond their

lack of comprehension, numerous respondents voiced a sense of disinterest in trying to

engage with the political or policy spheres. Less than a third (n=16) of interview

participants had voted in any recent elections[8], and many of those who had voted recently

did not do it consistently. This compares to the Washington state average of 66.8 percent

of citizens voting in 2008 (File and Crissey 2010). For many, high geographic mobility

contributed to their lack of interest in voting, because they needed to re-register with each

new move. Additionally, most ex-convicts in the sample mistakenly believed they were unable to register or vote because of their past felonies[9], and there was no outreach within the community to educate them on their rights and register this population.

Although participants' reasons for not voting varied, they tended to focus on feelings of insignificance and inability to affect meaningful change. A sense of powerlessness or nihilism was pervasive in many explanations, such as the following:

My one vote isn't going – in my opinion, isn't going to be a deciding factor, and things are going to …. Other people have more control of it than I do, and I don't think that my one vote is going to really matter, so I don't prioritize it or feel that it's necessary. Things are going to be the way they're going to be.

- David Owen, 45 year-old, disabled, divorced, 11 years residence in Riverway

I probably will [vote] sometime but I'm just not – I don't know why. I just don't care. And when people get on me about it, I'm like, I just don't care. Just leave me alone.

- Lindsay Wilson, 33 year-old waitress and single mother of three, 6 years residence in Riverway

I just don't think they really matter. I don't even vote for the president 'cause— I just— my opinion is that it's all rigged anyways… I just don't vote 'cause I don't think it matters.

- Nick Woods, 28 year-old security guard and married stepfather of one, off-and-on resident of Riverway

Despite repeated statements regarding the ineffectiveness of voting and declarations of disinterest, when pressed, most participants did express concerns regarding issues that affected them. The issues that mattered most tended to be related to their own experiences and needs, including economic issues, health care, religious and cultural concerns, and control and prosecution of specific crimes. Yet even when they felt strongly about an issue, a combination of lack of information and sense of ineffectiveness tended to keep them from acting on their interests even in the form of casting a vote.

Edward Greene, a 67 year-old divorced ex-convict, didn't vote regularly. He had spent many years in prison on drug charges related to his longtime heroin addiction, and had only voted once in his life. Clean for more than a decade now, he had moved to Riverway three years earlier to be closer to his girlfriend, and now lived alone in subsidized housing and had few social connections besides her. Although he expressed a lack of faith in the political process, he showed a significant amount of interest in the issues that affected him, particularly given his age and current ill-health. Nonetheless, he expressed only fear with regard to making sure his needs were met:

> It's frightenin' to see that all the politician— I mean, the big time politicians— congressman and senators — are dyin' to get their hands on Social Security and, uh, Medicare, you know? And that's a scary thing, you know. It's scary when your life depends on it, you know? So, you know that — you know, where some people may not have a fear about stuff, that's about the only thing that I focus on.

Although they expressed significant apathy regarding the political process and social concerns, respondents frequently had some awareness of the ways in which

political and social issues impacted their lives. Yet they generally also saw themselves as marginalized outsiders to the political process, which they believed to be rigged in favor of other, more important or powerful people. Their lack of social networks or social interactions reinforced this sense of alienation and disempowerment, and they rarely saw themselves as a part of any type of organized constituency or defined social group with common needs or goals. Their disinterest in the process, in turn, served to further reduce their ability to express or fight for their own interests in any social arena.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the ways in which structural, social, and cultural factors combine to create different forms of social isolation for low-income residents of a small, sprawling city. For many low-income and poor participants, structural conditions, along with both external and internal judgment of those experiencing financial struggles, result in isolation from social institutions and lack of access to social networks, social capital, and the sense of personal efficacy they promote. These processes serve to continue and reinforce a cycle of disadvantage for many of Riverway's low-income and poor residents.

Despite the long-established finding that social network support is key to survival for most low-income populations, research has been inconsistent with regard to when, why, and how social networks tend to play significant roles. While it is clear that not all poor populations have access to social network support, the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder its creation and maintenance in different settings are unclear. Furthermore, literature on poverty often focuses exclusively on communities that are characterized by high-density poverty, for obvious reasons. The assumption has generally been that the

experience of poverty is easier in communities with lower overall poverty rates due to their superior resources, including both institutional sources and the presence of social networks with high levels of real and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, as this research suggests, mixed-income communities and geographic proximity to middle-class families and social institutions do not necessarily translate into greater social inclusion or social support for low-income individuals and families. Given the recent increase in poverty in suburbs and small cities (Fessler 2013; Kneebone and Garr 2010), this lack of support may be of growing concern in communities throughout the nation.

As this paper has illustrated, a number of factors appear to impact the creation and maintenance of social ties and social capital, including the spatial, social, and cultural settings of communities. The high mobility that is often associated with poverty, and is increasingly pervasive amongst low-income populations in small cities like Riverway (Foulkes and Newbold 2008; Foulkes and Schafft 2010; Norman 2013; South and Crowder 1997) puts these populations at a deficit with regard to forming and maintaining social network ties. In-migrants needed to forge new social relationships in Riverway, but faced multiple barriers. For many, time did not improve their situations, and even after a decade or more in the community they found it difficult to make and sustain social ties.

Far from creating a haven for low-income families to easily integrate into a mixed-income community, the sprawling disorganization of cities like Riverway can hamper the development of social networks for the poor. Structural barriers like those described here combine to create isolated, atomized living environments in which both in-migrants and longtime residents face challenges in maintaining existing social ties and

forging new ones. Beyond the structure of the community, social forces and cultural norms further discouraged social interaction and the creation of strong social networks for the poor, hindering the accumulation of social capital. This research has illustrated that despite its relatively low concentration of poverty, Riverway's physical and social environment can limit access to networks with high levels of social capital. Participants regularly found that regardless of proximity to non-poor neighborhoods, the middle-class community remained remote. Coupled with a culture that condemns unemployment, poverty, and dependency, these social forces can further entrench isolation.

The consequences of lack of social integration and social support are serious for Riverway's poor. Participants discussed not only struggles in making ends meet, but also mistrust and frustration resulting from the various ways in which they'd been excluded or rebuffed by potential social connections. They also expressed a sense of powerlessness and disinterest in friendship, civic participation, and participation within the larger society. Alienation from the larger community translated into a sense of ineffectiveness in accessing societal resources and getting needs met, and the belief that even voting was not worth the effort. Thus, they remained disenfranchised from their society, and lacked motivation, information, and social capital necessary to change their situations.

This research illustrates the depths of social isolation and exclusion that can occur when low incomes and poverty are combined with high mobility, low community cohesion, disorganized urban development, and cultural norms that demonize need and dependency. The social isolation that Riverway's low-income residents experienced is part of a larger set of cultural trends in the U.S., in which judgment of the poor is both

external and self-imposed. The American cultural context, with its focus on independence and self-sufficiency (Bellah et al. 1996; Hays 2003; Lamont 2000; Sherman 2009), creates an environment in which poverty and need are considered individual problems with individual causes, and those who experience it are seen as unimportant and unnecessary to the health of the collective. Judgment of those who experience financial stress, even due to a large scale structural problem like the recession, is so severe as to limit any identification with others in the same boat.

In December 2011, just months after this fieldwork ended, then Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum was quoted as saying, "I'm for income inequality" (Johnson 2011). A month later, his rival Mitt Romney stated even more bluntly, "I'm not concerned about the very poor" (Johnson 2012), and later in that year the candidate was caught reiterating the sentiment in a video clip (Shear 2012). Although Romney was widely criticized in the media, and later protested that his comments were taken out of context, there was reason for presidential candidates to believe that such declarations might improve their chances of being elected. Low voter turnout amongst the poor has been a problem for decades in the U.S. (Piven and Cloward 2000; Rosenstone 1982), and this research suggests that social isolation and resulting disempowerment are among the mechanisms by which it is perpetuated. For much of the nation, regardless of their geographical proximity to those in need, the poor remain isolated "others" of little consequence either socially or politically, and alienating such a group comes with little social cost. For the low-income and poor residents of Riverway, it remains an individual problem and an individual condition, to be suffered alone in virtual silence.

[1] All names, including those of people, places, organizations, and institutions, have been changed in order to preserve the confidentiality of participants.

[2] Referred to here as North, South, East, and West Riverway.

[3] In all, six couples and one pair of non-romantic friends were interviewed jointly, while the remaining 41 participants were interviewed individually in separate households.

[4] Generally this was the case, although there were several cases of respondents being placed in the low-income or poor category despite owning a trailer of their own; most of them experienced this ownership as precarious, however, and feared losing their homes in the near future.

[5] Temporary Aid to Needy Families (commonly known as welfare); Supplemental Security Income for disabled low-income individuals; and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps).

[6] Due to the snowball sampling techniques used, some individuals were referred into the study who were employed and/or middle-class, but believed by others in their social networks to be experiencing some amount of economic stress or hardship.

[7] See [author] (2013) for a more detailed discussion of the ways in which social isolation and shame around aid impacted survival strategies.

[8] The 70 percent of the sample (39 individuals) who did not vote included three Jehovah's Witnesses for whom religious beliefs dictated that they should not vote or take sides in political debates.

[9] According to the Secretary of Washington State, "If you were convicted of a felony in Washington State, your right to vote is restored as long as you are not under the authority

(in prison or on community custody) of the Department of Corrections (DOC). Once your

right is restored, you must re-register to vote in order to receive a ballot" (Washington

State Office of the Secretary of State 2013).

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Table 1: Housing Breakdown

Housing Type	Sample N	Sample %	Riverway %
Subsidized HUD or Section 8 Apartment	13	24%	NA
Unsubsidized Apartment in Complex or Building	13	24%	15%*[+]
Apartment in Duplex or Four-plex	2	4%	6%*
Mobile Home	8	14%	12%*
Rented Single Family Home	8	14%	NA
Owner-Occupied Home	9	16%	68%**
All Renter-Occupied	44	80%	32%**
Homeless	2	4%	.1%***

* Source: (U. S. Census Bureau 2012). Based on available units.

[+] Includes all large apartment complex housing (> 4 units), whether subsidized or not.

** Source: (U. S. Census Bureau 2012). Based on occupied units.

*** Source: (Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington 2013).

Table 2: Sample Statistics

	Sample N	Sample %	Riverway %*
Mean Age	55	44	33
Female	34	62%	49.5%
Male	21	38%	50.5%
White	38	70%	78.8%
Latino	7	13%	28.7%
Native American	5	9%	1.7%
Black	4	7%	2.2%
Asian	1	2%	3.2%
Married/remarried	17	31%	76%
Cohabiting	13	24%	NA
Single (including divorced)	24	44%	28%**
Have children	49	89%	55%
Less than high school	12	22%	16.9%
GED/high school degree	17	31%	26.3%
Some college	13	24%	24%
AA	8	15%	9%
BA	3	6%	14.2%
Employed	24	45%	60.4%
Middle-class	8	15%	NA
Low-income	18	33%	NA
Poor	29	53%	11.7%***

* Source: (U. S. Census Bureau 2012).

** Census figures for "female householder" plus "male householder"

*** Census figure uses official poverty threshold.