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

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Welcome, you are listening to a UC Davis Center for Poverty Research Conference podcast. I'm Lisa Pruitt, a Center Faculty Affiliate and the organizer of our November 2014 Poverty and Place Conference. This conference brought together scholars from across the social sciences to present and discuss new work on how space and place inflect various dimensions of poverty.

In this presentation, Jennifer Sherman discusses her work on social isolation and barriers to social and civic life for those who live in poverty in a small city in Washington state. Sherman is an assistant professor of sociology at Washington State University.

>> Thank you Lisa, thank you so much for having me.

It's really great to be back in Davis. I actually started my career here. My first job out of college was in Davis, I worked for the Institute for Rural Studies here for three years. So it's very nice to be back. And I'm really excited about the way the papers in this first section of the day sort of are in dialogue with each other.

And I feel like mine is really talking to both of yours in different ways. So I'm gonna be presenting a paper that, it is based on qualitative interviews. And it looks at the social repercussions of job loss and poverty in a type of community where they really haven't been studied much so far.

This is a small, what I call post-agrarian, sprawling Western city. And I'm gonna look in depth at the causes of social isolation and some of its consequences for low income, unemployed and underemployed residents of a community I called Riverway, which is this small city in eastern Washington. And I was looking at it right toward the end of the Great Recession.

What I found was that a combination of spatial, social, and cultural factors served to isolate the poor from the better off, even when they lived in pretty close proximity to each other. And it's undermined the development of social networks and the accumulation of social capital, as well as participation in civil society in this community.

So I wanna define a couple of my terms before I get into the paper itself. So first of all, social isolation. Definitions of this concept range from those that focus on individual ties and a relative lack of social interaction, to those that focus more on a lack of participation in social institutions or lack of ties to the formal labor market.

For some researchers, social isolation is problematic because it limits access to resources, including social networks and social capital. While for other researchers, social isolation's negative effects tend to be understood more in terms of lack of mental health or lack of emotional support. Among the attributes of social isolation at the individual level is of course a lack of social networks.

Economic need and lack of resources, lack of economic resources, have long been found to encourage and usually require heavy reliance on one's social networks for survival. As has been found by generations of sociologists, including myself. But there's also a growing body of research these days that

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really questions whether social network support is still as important to the poor or whether it's waning in its occurrence and its importance.

And questions remain regarding why some poor populations do tend to be less connected than others, as well as how issues like community context and social cleavages facilitate or hinder the creation and utilization of social networks. Social networks are vital for a number of reasons beyond just their contributions to material survival for the poor.

Theorists have argued that without inclusion in social networks, social capital can't be accessed even in communities that contain relatively high amounts of it. And social capital is important, not just to economic survival, but also to safety, trust, and efficacy within one's society. It's also found to be vital in encouraging and facilitating engagement in the political process.

And a lack of social capital is believed to be a key factor contributing to lowered civic engagement and voting rates amongst the poor. So as all these authors suggest, 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 contribute to social capital that can impact quality of life in numerous ways, including access to economic and human capital but also civic engagement, health, and happiness. So while social capital itself is generally found to be somewhat higher in better off communities. It's not clear from existing literature whether low income populations can easily access it simply through moving into them.

The literature suggests that geographic mobility itself tends to create barriers to social networks and social capital. High geographic mobility is common amongst low income populations for a number of reasons. And these include pull factors like the search for better housing, or say for neighborhoods. Push factors like gentrification, rising housing costs, evictions and housing and stability.

Mobility disrupts existing social connections and can lower social capital, which of course can undermine the gains we might expect due to improved living conditions in neighborhoods in near communities. For receiving communities, low income in-migrants can strain social services. And often it can experience pretty cool receptions from established residents who see them as threatening.

Sending communities are also often damaged by high geographic mobility as both high turnover and rapid growth can destabilize social relations and undermine community cohesion. So that's, while low income individuals and families may fare slightly better in communities with lower concentrations of poverty, there are reasons to question just how much better.

The quiet and safety associated with suburbs and smaller cities are not necessarily accompanied by social acceptance. Or integration into existing social networks and institutions. Without access to those networks and to social capital, survival options, and civic participation may be curtailed for these vulnerable populations. What I found through my qualitative work here, was that high mobility, sprawl, and rapid growth, coupled with cultural understandings in the US of poverty and unemployment as shameful, can generate and reinforce social isolation for low income populations.

Really regardless of the resources of the larger communities. All right, so I'm gonna introduce you to the field site and the methods, hopefully briefly here. So all the names in this work are pseudonyms,

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including the names of people and places. So this place I called Riverway, it's basically a sprawling, small city at this point.

But it was, until recent decades, a collection of small towns mostly tied to the agricultural industry as well as the military complex. The last 50 years have seen really rapid and immense growth in Riverway and suburban style housing developments, strip malls and big box stores have taken over much of what was once farmland and orchards.

So this is a place that really feels like a suburb, but you can't call it one cuz it's not connected to a place. It's just a suburb of nothing.

>> And at the same time, the area really retains vestiges of its agrarian past. And many homeowners with larger lots keep horses and other livestock and fenced pastures, often overlooking these sterile 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 and actually irrigate the orchards that are no longer there. The population was just about 250,000 across the four regions of this place, which I just call North, South, East and West River Way.

The poverty rate was just below 12% at the end of the recession. So about average for the state at that time. It has a pretty diverse population and economy for the eastern side of Washington, which is known for not being particularly diverse. But jobs in this area were concentrated in the low end service is sector which suffered quite a bit during the recession.

Disorganized development in riverway and a lack of urban planning have resulted in this interesting pattern where low income families really aren't concentrated into specific neighborhoods or regions, but tend to just cluster in low-cost and subsidized apartment complexes, as well as trailer parks and various rental houses that are dispersed throughout the region.

And frequently adjacent to more costly housing and neighborhoods. The area however is organized around auto traffic versus pedestrian use and it's large distances require vehicles to traverse as you can see in some of the pictures here. At the same time, public transportation is very limited in both range and frequency, making it not that easy to rely upon.

The research itself consists of 55 recorded, open-ended, in-depth interviews that took place in River Way from August 2010 to August 2011. Focused on low income populations, although as you'll see in a minute, a few middle class people found their way into the sample. The interviews lasted from one to four hours, with most being about an hour and a half.

They were focused around several thematic areas, including history in the community, family history, work history, leisure, marriage, relationships in family, religion and faith, political interests and voting behaviors. And then demographics and background information as well as open time for the participants to bring up their own issues and concerns.

The participants in whatever way were recruited through a number of means including the efforts of local social service providers who passed out fliers to their client basis. There was recruitment from the social networks of a couple of undergraduate research assistants with extended ties in the area. There was snowball sampling from the social networks of the interview participants.

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And then also, I recruited through my own work as a volunteer with a local food bank. The participants were offered incentives in the form of \$25 gift cards to Walmart and Wimco, two of our favorite big box stores and most of them did accept them. So, these are just some brief sample statistics.

About 60% female and close to 40% male despite my valiant attempt to get more men into the sample. The average age was about 44 years. About 70% of the participants were white and 13% were Latino, while 9% reported a mix of white and native American heritage. 7% were African American, and 2%, which I should point out is a whole one person, was Asian.

About a third of the sample was currently married, including numerous participants who had been divorced once or more prior to their current marriage. About a quarter of them were co-habiting, including several who said they were engaged but didn't have set wedding dates. The other 44% of the sample was currently single and not living with a romantic partner.

Whether never married, divorced, separated, or widowed. Despite this relatively low level of partnership in marriage, the majority of the participants were parents, although not all of them had young children and not all parents of young children had either full or part-time custody of them. There were relatively low education levels in the sample, as more than three-quarters of the respondents lacked a college degree.

The modal category was a high school diploma or equivalent, which almost a third of participants had as their highest degree. Nearly a quarter hadn't finished high school, and another quarter had taken some college classes but failed to finish a degree. While 15% had completed an associate's degree, just 6% had a BA.

45% of the sample was currently employed, but a lot of them worked in low wage, part-time or contingent positions. And a lot of people had seen some drop in their wages or hours since the recession. Respondents weren't asked to report their exact incomes, but they were asked a number of different questions about making ends meet.

Their qualification form, receipt of aides and subsidies, for aide on subsidies from federal, state, local, and private sources. And then using this information, they were categorized into three rough groups, middle-class, low-income, and poor. Roughly 15% of the sample was middle-class, 33% was low-income, and 53% was poor. So, as I mentioned, I wasn't actually looking for middle class participants but because I was asking about the impacts of the recession and people's sense of economic need, several middle class people got recruited into the sample through the snowball techniques.

And they provided a pretty interesting point of comparison that I can discuss in the Q and A if anyone's interested. But there weren't that many of them. All right, so to get into the results. The theme of social isolation was really pervasive throughout the sample. This was something I really wasn't looking for.

Most of my previous work has been in rural communities, so I'm used to people being really socially connected. So, I was struck early on by just how disconnected people were here. And later try to figure out why. Often participants, poverty acted as a barrier to social interactions in a number of ways.

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Often combining with issues like geographic mobility, spatial issues and structural constraints that may, or may have not, been unique to River Way to create logistical barriers to the formation and continuation of social connections. So first of all, there was very high geographic mobility in this sample. Most of the participants had moved many times prior to their interviews and had lived in multiple locations across Washington state as well as the US and Mexico.

Many had moved to Riverway for a combination of economic and family reasons, so they often did have some family connection to the place. But they often had pretty limited social ties outside of their immediate families, and frequently these family relationships ended up strained and difficult over time. Participants described numerous difficulties in forging or maintaining social ties once they were in Riverway, including struggles to make and keep connections to friends, family and community members as well challenges to gaining acceptance and institutional settings as I'll illustrate.

So, spacial barriers, that's one of the first things that I really noticed was that these were creating a number of barriers to making and keeping friends there. So, in general, low income neighborhoods and housing options in Riverway were not particularly conducive to getting to know your neighbors. Most of the large, low rent apartment complexes had no common spaces, so unlike the middle class, the higher income apartment complexes which are common there, there was no pool, there was no work out room, there was no community space you could use for parties and generally when I observe these settings there was very little sign of life outdoors regardless of the time of year and despite the mild climate of the place.

The high turnover of these tenant populations I think contributed to difficulties in getting to know neighbors and fortune ties. Stephanie Wilson, a 57-year-old divorced disabled woman who had lived in Riverway for eight years, but made very few friends outside of her immediate family, complained about her subsidized apartment complex, saying, 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 and 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. Additionally, the lack of centralized downtown in this sprawling place and a lack of pedestrian areas limited the likelihood of meeting people in any kind of public space. While the city sprawl and lack of convenient or reliable public transportation often made it really difficult to access social networks even when they existed.

Laura and Peter Barnes, an unemployed married couple in their twenties who had lived in Riverway for seven years. Were members of a religious congregation that potentially provided some 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.

So they explained, it's hard to even go to church. Often we don't have enough gas to get there. That's a big, big thing because all we own right now, the '76. And over the last year, we've borrowed other people's vehicles almost the entire time. So, this kinda adds a wrinkle to your talk.

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Access to vehicles wasn't the issue here, it was the money to run them, it was, you know, upkeep. It was keeping them going. And you see this in a number of these quotes here. Here you have 73 year old Sophie Brenner who'd grown up in Riverway but spent most of her adult life in a larger city.

She'd recently sold her house there, though, and moved into subsidized housing in Riverway in order to be closer to her daughter from whom she'd since become estranged. The move was hard for her, and she said of her small apartment quote, I mean, you feel lost really, but this is home now.

Sophie's one potential source of social support was a local church, which she described as a source of both spiritual and social rejuvenation for her. Sadly the distance that she needed to travel and the inadequacies of public transportation combined with her age and her disabilities to limit her ability to engage in this community.

She explained, I'm having trouble with cataracts, so I can't drive. When Dial-A-Ride would go at night, I went at night. Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, but they don't drive on Sunday's anymore. Sue Reed, a divorced, disabled, 59 year old, had two grown children living in the area.

But between her own financial problems and theirs, she experienced a similar squeeze when it came to actually seeing them. When I 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'm having and having gas in my car, getting up there to see them, I probably did more with the first grandson. So for participants like these, the spatial sprawl of the city combined with the cost of transportation to create pretty insurmountable barriers to social interactions, even when some ties had been established.

For those who didn't have friends or family already established in the area, social isolation was unsurprisingly even more pervasive. And they often had very difficult times making any kinds of connections in Riverway. Nick Woods, a nomadic 28 year old, sporadically employed, married, step father of one. Described the same sorts of problems in making friends in Riverway.

I asked has it been hard to make friends here. And he said, yeah, well, especially with a kid. Because you can't just drop everything and go out and do something. You have to make sure you have a baby sitter, and you have to be on time, and you have to have a.

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. So for Riverwoods low-income residents, the organization of the city itself combined with the lack of investment into public transportation infrastructure contributed to both social isolation and exclusion from mainstream social institutions like churches.

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. These processes in turn limited low income residents formation of network ties and access to social capital.

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For many of them it meant that they spent the majority of their time at home and their interests tended to focus on activities like television, video games, and computers and this lifestyle, of course, further limited their chances of making new friends locally, maintaining existing friendships, or expanding their social networks.

In addition to these logistical and financial constraints caused by the city sprawl and structure, social isolation was frequently a result of social processes, including self protection and the desire to protect one's family and children from unhealthy influences. So it's pretty common with low income populations to have somewhat troubled pasts.

Many participants here did, and they were trying to put a lot of these issues behind them. But a lot of them had very few social connections beyond those they had made through their addictions. When they attempted to forge new friendships, participants often found that Riverway's better off families had little interest in low income adults with questionable pasts.

Co-habiting stay-at-home mother Kaylee Anderson, who had moved to River Way from a small town in Idaho five years earlier, found that she had trouble making friends after she stopped using crystal meth. She said just, well see when I first moved up here, I was using. And the people that I met and knew are 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 20s with three children between them, were similarly trying to leave their past drinking and drug use behind.

However they found that this meant losing most of their old friends as well. Matt said, 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. I said do you feel like you have enough social interaction and Jessica said, not as much, not as good as it used to be.

Unfortunately, Matt and Jessica had also had little success in making new friends who might have more appropriate interests. I asked have you found that you met other parents through being parents and Jessica said no. I said not at all? She said, no. And Matt said, no not so much.

For those recovering from addiction 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, and was currently employed at a low wage care work job. During much of her life she had struggled with alcoholism, but she'd been sober for several years now since a religious rebirth.

Since she had cut ties with her old friends who partied however, she found herself with few friends and social connections beyond her immediate family. Instead, she'd refocused her energy on faith and religion. I said, do you feel like you have enough people to talk to when things are hard?

She said, huh. I said, your family? She said, I don't talk to family, I talk to god. Donna was now a devout member of a local non-denominational church, yet despite regular attendance at both services and social events. She hadn't made many friends within the church community. I said do you feel like you have a real sense of community there?

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And she said just the pastor. And I said are you close to other people who go to that church? And she said 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 wasn't uncommon for low-income and poor residents, particularly when they attended large Christian and Catholic churches. Maria Gomez, a 52-year-old divorced mother of two grown children who have lived in Riverway for 14 years was a domestic violence survivor who had been let down by the church that she turned to for support after finally breaking free from her last abusive partner.

Although she had siblings in Riverway, they weren't close. And she had few friends upon whom she could rely. She attended a Spanish speaking church for several years. But her disappointment discouraged her from continuing. She described a very difficult time after a serious work place accident left her badly injured.

Although she had been a regular church member for some time at that point, she was unable to rely on either the pastor or the congregation for help during the recovery period that followed. She said, I was by myself and not being able to take a bath by myself, and move around, and cook.

And oh my God, I was really stressed out. I said, nobody helped you? And she said, nobody, not even the church where I was going to. They never ever helped me or came. Or do you need help, or do you anything. That's what really, really upset me. So for participants desiring to put troubled pasts behind them, Riverway's middle class community generally remained elusively out of reach.

While occasionally our respondents found acceptance within the larger community. More often they described experiencing exclusion from more mainstream social networks and institutions. Thus they not only remained socially isolated but also frequently felt a sense of judgement and rejection from the larger community that further contributed to the isolation that they experienced.

In addition to those spatial and social barriers, for many participants cultural norms regarding reciprocity, as well as pride and self-reliance and shame regarding need, discouraged them from pursuing social relationships. 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 rather than to reach out.

David Owen, a 45 year old divorced ex-convict, was unable to find work there. And thus relied as general assistance as his only source of income. He described insecurity and feeling that his lack of resources made him less valuable as a friend, and unable to engage in reciprocal relationships.

He said, 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 cuz then I don't have to involved with other goings on and feel obligated to other people.

At this point I'm having difficulty with socializing, I guess. He further explained that he avoided his family in order to avoid the shame of being in need. He said, through my time being homeless, I didn't talk to my parents at all, either one of them. I didn't want to tell them I was in that situation.



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Brothers and sisters, I don't interact with like I should because I feel that I haven't set a good example and I just don't want to burden them with my situations or whatever. 42 year old Doug Stark and his 26 year old partner Savannah Lewis had three children between them.

And they were struggling since Doug had been laid off from his job with a local boat manufacturer. Rather than reach out to family for help, they also chose to limit interaction with better off family members in order to avoid judgement. Doug said, I don't want to ask my family, I won't ask my family for money because 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 wanna hear it. So for many of Riverway's low income residents, particularly those with long work histories and pride in their own self-sufficiency.

Feelings of humiliation and disgrace around poverty and need, acted as an additional barrier to social interaction and the maintenance of social ties. Participants repeatedly discussed choosing to cut themselves off from friends and family rather than admit to need or ask for help, and risk being judged for their inability to survive on their own.

So the social isolation that I've just described had a number of repercussions for the participants. Having limited sources of support obviously meant that they had few options for surviving poverty beyond those formally available through government programs and other charities. Beyond it's impact on the material survival however, social isolation also impacted their senses of efficacy in connection to the larger society in which they lived.

Numerous respondents voiced a sense of disinterest in trying to engage with the larger community. Including apathy regarding seeking friendship, group activities and even churches. They also had mostly no interest in the political or policy spheres at all. Less than a third of my interview participants had voted in any recent elections and many of those who had voted recently didn't do it consistently.

Although there are reasons for not voting varied, they tended to focus very heavily on their feelings of insignificance and their inability to effect any kind of meaningful change. This sense of powerlessness was just came out throughout their explanations such as the following three. First, David Owen said, other people have more control of it than I do and I don't think that my one vote is gonna really matter so I don't prioritize it or feel that it's necessary.

Things are going to be what they're going to be. Nick Woods said I just don't think they really matter. I don't even vote for the President, cuz I just, my opinion is that it's all rigged anyways. I just don't vote cuz I don't think it matters. And then finally, Lindsey Wilson, a thirty three year old waitress and single mother of three said, 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, I just don't care. Just leave me alone. But despite these repeated statements regarding the ineffectiveness of voting and declarations of disinterest, when pressed, most participants did express concerns regarding issues that affected them. Although 70% of the sample didn't vote, 50% of participants expressed strong opinions when asked follow up questions regarding whether or not there were any specific issues that they cared about.

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For example, Edward Green, a 67 year old divorced ex-convict and recovered addict didn't vote regularly. Although he expressed a lack of faith in the political process, he showed a significant amount of interest in the issues that affected him personally, particularly given his age and his ill health. Nonetheless, he expressed only powerlessness and fear with regard to making sure that his needs were met.

He said it's frightening to see all the big time politicians, Congressmen and Senators, are dying to get their hands on Social Security and Medicare, and that's a scary thing. It's scary when your life depends on it. So where some people may not have a fear about stuff, that's about the only thing that I focus on.

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 more powerful people. Their lack of social networks reinforces sense of alienation, and they rarely saw themselves as part of any organized constituency or defined social group.

Their disinterest in the process, in turn, served to further reduce their ability to express or fight for their needs in any kind of social arena. So within a literature on poverty, we often as we talked about focus pretty exclusively on communities that are characterized by high density poverty for pretty obvious reasons.

The assumption has generally been that the experience of poverty is easier and 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. 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, this is of some amount of concern. Despite the long established finding that social network support is key to the survival of most low income populations, this research provided pretty striking evidence of its lack. The participants expressed powerlessness and disinterest in friendships, civic participation, and participation within the larger society.

The high mobility that is associated with poverty and that's increasingly pervasive amongst low income populations in small cities like Riverway undercut the creation and maintenance of social ties there in migrants needed to forge new social relationships in Riverway but faced multiple barriers. For many, time really didn't improve their situations.

And as you saw here, even after a decade or more in the community, a lot of them found it difficult to make and sustain social ties. The research really illustrated for me the depths of social isolation that could occur when low-incomes and poverty are combined with low community cohesion, disorganized urban development, and cultural norms that demonize need in dependency.

In this case, the city structure combined with social boundaries and cultural judgment of need and poverty to create really insurmountable barriers to the formation of, and maintenance of social

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networks and social capital. Despite its relatively low concentration of poverty, Riverways physical and social environment limited access to networks with high levels of social capital.

And participants repeatedly found that, regardless of proximity to non-poor neighborhoods, the middle class community and its advantages remained inaccessible to them. The social isolation that Riverway's low income residents experienced, I would argue is part of a larger set of cultural trends in the US in which judgement of the poor is both external and self-imposed.

The American cultural context with its focus on independence and self sufficiency creates an environment in which poverty and need are considered to be individual problems with individual causes even during the Great Recession. And those who experience it are seen as unimportant and unnecessary to the health of the collective for the low income and poor residences of Riverway, poverty was instead this individual problem.

An individual condition that was suffered alone in virtual silence. And I'm going to end there on that high note. I'm Ann Stevens, the director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis, and I want to thank you for listening. The center is one of three federally designated poverty research centers in the United States.

Our mission is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on domestic poverty, to disseminate this research and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Core funding comes from the US Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the center, visit us online at [poverty.ucdavis.edu](http://poverty.ucdavis.edu).