

Conferring on Homelessness

New Frontiers in Poverty Research

By Alyson Silkowski

Researchers at the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness regularly attend conferences across the country in order to keep abreast of developments in the field. Below we offer UNCENSORED readers an overview highlighting the “New Frontiers in Poverty Research” conference at the Columbia University School of Social Work in New York City.

On May 21, nearly 100 social scientists, students, foundation staff, and representatives from city government convened at the Columbia University School of Social Work in New York City for the “New Frontiers in Poverty Research” conference, sponsored by the Center on Poverty and Social Policy and Columbia Population Research Center (CPRC). The day-long conference, organized to celebrate the launch of Columbia University’s Center on Poverty and Social Policy, featured a dozen speakers discussing new research on the impact of social policies on low-income households.

After opening remarks from Columbia School of Social Work Dean Jeannette Takamura and CPRC Co-director Irv Garfinkel, the conference began with a panel discussing the current findings from “The New York City Longitudinal Survey of Well-being.” The Robin Hood Foundation and CPRC created the survey in order to better understand the breadth of poverty in the city. Since 2012, they have asked the same New York City households questions every three months about their economic security, health, and access to social supports, providing a dynamic view of city residents’ well-being. The study’s initial findings indicate that

disadvantage is much more pervasive in the city than traditional poverty statistics suggest. According to the survey, 37% of New York City households experienced at least one severe material hardship, such as loss of housing or another critical resource, in 2012. However, only one in five New Yorkers are officially considered to be poor. More negative life shocks, which CPRC researchers defined as a negative change such as an illness or a decrease in income, were associated with more entries into material hardship and fewer exits out of hardship (e.g., regaining housing), underscoring the persistence of poverty. For more information on the survey results, visit <http://povertytracker.robinhood.org>.

The second panel of the day highlighted the work of several Columbia School of Social Work faculty members. Professor of Social Work and Public Affairs Jane Waldfogel presented research she and colleagues have conducted utilizing the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which, unlike the official poverty measure, takes into account in-kind benefits and credits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known

as the Food Stamp Program) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a tax benefit for low-income working families and individuals. By producing historical estimates of the SPM, their analysis found that poverty nationwide has fallen by 40% since 1967. This differs markedly from traditional analyses using the official poverty measure, which show poverty increasing slightly over the same time period. Waldfogel's and her colleagues' findings show that government benefits are highly effective in reducing poverty, especially for children and the very poorest families; the EITC alone reduced child poverty by 5% in 2012. Waldfogel and her colleagues also found that the impact of government benefits in reducing poverty is especially profound during economic downturns.

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The third and final panel of the conference, aptly titled "Moving Beyond the Numbers," featured two speakers who have conducted ethnographic research on poverty—New York Times reporter Andrea Elliott and Harvard University Assistant Professor of Sociology and Social Studies Matthew Desmond. Elliott authored the New York Times' 2013 five-part series, "Invisible Child," which followed the daily life of Dasani, an eleven-year-old homeless child living in a family shelter in New York City. While the series was notable for spurring New York City officials to address some city shelters' deplorable conditions, Elliott's presentation focused less on the impact of her reporting and more on her experience of it. Elliott discussed her aims in writing the series—she wanted to understand and make accessible the "21st century American experience of poverty"—as well as the delicate challenges inherent in writing about poverty, given the common and often false perceptions of who "the poor" are. In Dasani, Elliott said, she found a child who could articulate the experience of being poor as a child. For Elliott, one of the most notable aspects of

Dasani's experience of poverty was that it was defined by living with no space; Dasani, who lives in a single room with seven younger siblings, said there was no room to breathe in her crowded surroundings. "Invisible Child" can be read at <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/invisible-child>.

In the final presentation of the day, Desmond shared some of the findings from his groundbreaking research on evictions. After analyzing eviction records and living among families experiencing eviction in two poor neighborhoods of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Desmond found that eviction is not simply a symptom of being poor, but is itself a cause of poverty. He explained that families who are evicted are more likely than similar families who have not experienced eviction to later lose their jobs and encounter material hardship. Families who experience forced moves also face housing discrimination in their efforts to secure stable housing as some landlords do not want children as tenants. One evicted mother Desmond met spoke to 90 different landlords before she found one willing to rent her and her young sons an apartment. Eviction itself presents its own obstacle. With open record laws, landlords can check if prospective tenants have been evicted and can avoid renting to them; Desmond likened the social stain of evictions to that of having a criminal record. If evicted families are able to find private housing, Desmond's research revealed that they tend to move to poorer neighborhoods with worse living conditions, further entrenching them in poverty. Desmond closed his presentation with a bold idea and call to action, arguing that every American should have a right to a home and that Housing Choice Vouchers should be made available to every family in need. The federal resources used to provide tax breaks for higher-income homeowners, Desmond noted, could be reallocated to accomplish this.

In the coming months, the Center for Poverty and Social Policy will host additional gatherings and engage in research on the effects of public services and programs on vulnerable families, consistent with the ongoing work of Columbia School of Social Work faculty and students. To learn more, visit <http://cupop.columbia.edu>. ■