

University of Mississippi

eGrove

---

Honors Theses

Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale  
Honors College)

---

Spring 4-28-2020

## Separate and Unequal: The Causes and Effects of Economic Inequality in Our Communities, and What We Must Do About It

Jonathan Payne

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon\\_thesis](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis)



Part of the [Income Distribution Commons](#), and the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Payne, Jonathan, "Separate and Unequal: The Causes and Effects of Economic Inequality in Our Communities, and What We Must Do About It" (2020). *Honors Theses*. 1366.

[https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon\\_thesis/1366](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1366)

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL: THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC  
INEQUALITY IN OUR COMMUNITIES, AND WHAT WE MUST DO ABOUT IT

by  
Jonathan Daniel Payne

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2020

Approved by

---

Advisor: Professor Mark Dolan

---

Reader: Professor Cynthia Joyce

---

Reader: Professor Anne Cafer

© 2020  
Jonathan Daniel Payne  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so grateful for the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Mark Dolan, who first showed me that a journalist can also be an artist, and without whom this thesis would have never gotten off the ground. His guidance in this project, as well as my entire journalism education, has given me the tools to create thoughtful, worthwhile works — and I am forever grateful for these tools.

The people who entrusted their stories with me and other journalists to improve their communities deserve the upmost respect and gratitude, both from me and their entire community for their vulnerability and courage. The people that I met and interviewed for this project, especially those who lived at Riverside Place, are some of the most inspiring people I've met during my time in Oxford.

My parents and grandparents, who supported me in so many ways through my entire education, have given me more of themselves than imaginable, always with generosity and love. For their kindness and dedication to me and my work, I am eternally thankful.

I hope this project represents the best of the skills I have been taught through my time at UM and at the SMBHC, for which I am privileged and grateful.

## ABSTRACT

### Separate and Unequal: The Causes and Effects of Economic Inequality in Our Communities, and What We Must Do About It (Under the direction of Mark Dolan)

This project seeks to create a deep understanding of some of the key causes and effects of economic inequality. In it, I review a wide variety of research and reporting on inequality as well as interview people that have been impacted by inequality in my community, Oxford, Mississippi. This information, as a whole, is not meant to create a complete, comprehensive understanding of income and wealth inequality, which would be impossible. Instead, it is a meditation on the origins, cycles, outcomes and ethical implications of the phenomenon. In it, I contend that the vast majority of negative outcomes of inequality, which impact everyone, can be solved with the tools already available to governments and communities; change does not occur largely because cultures consider human dignity on the scales of income and market value. Our collective role in creating and upholding this harmful culture of classism should disturb communities and challenge them to change their ideas about and policies affecting individuals with lower levels of income or wealth.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	1
SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL.....	3
A SURVEY OF INEQUALITY .....	9
VOICES IGNORED.....	36
A CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL.....	56
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	63

## PREFACE

This project is not a definitive, airtight case against economic inequality. There are so many aspects to inequality — causes and effects — to ever create a comprehensive argument against economic injustice. Instead, this a sort of reported, researched essay about the root from which inequality grows, which is basically treating people experiencing poverty with less dignity than others. The project also seeks to consider how you and I might be compelled to act in our own communities, as well as what action would benefit that community most.

This, the first section of the project, gives a roadmap and points to the underlying thread that is woven throughout: inequality. More than just tracking inequality, though, this project works to create an understanding of inequality that is both abstract and personal, quantitative and spiritual. Getting a grasp of this issue in any meaningful way must include an accurate picture of the economic data as well as a vision into the lives of people affected by the phenomenon. The five parts of this project, together, build that sort of understanding, which is useful for comprehending key elements of inequality as well as acting thoughtfully on that knowledge.

The second section of this project gives a basic orientation of the state of inequality in America. It discusses the state of those in poverty today, including the surrounding culture that often defines them and the connection that their lives have to a larger system of economic inequality. The third section explores that larger inequality

further: where it comes from, how it operates and is perpetuated, the ways it shapes American culture, how it is pervasive around the world, its impact on many large groups of any given economy. The fourth section listens to, considers and contextualizes the voices in my community, Oxford. It follows the voices of the people who experienced this inequality to evaluate a recent change in policy as well as the state of the culture as it contributes to existing economic inequalities. The fifth and final section of the project takes all of the previous information and considers what it means for the community of Oxford, and even more, each community. It is the culmination of information in terms of action — what are we to do with the economic inequality that is pervasive in every American community?

A key benefit of exploring the topic of inequality through a more subjective perspective is the ability to address the facts and data associated with the issues as well as the response that should follow. As I was reading to understand inequality and its consequences, I found that addressing just the morality of economic inequality alone felt empty while considering only the economic causes and effects were cold and uncaring. It is only with information and conviction that we can understand economic injustice in a useful way.



## SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

### Covering poverty in America

If America's original sin is racism, classism wasn't far behind it. And while there has been some progress in race relations in the United States at least in some ways, classism — as far as inequality of wealth and income is concerned — has worsened.<sup>1</sup> The two are intertwined, of course, but classism has become a dominant, somewhat accepted form of oppression in developed nations with liberal market economies, meaning free, open markets.<sup>2</sup> More than that, it is readily measurable and visible. David Shipler, a journalist who reported extensively on economic inequality, concludes that the United States has the skill to fix the poverty with its borders, but it has no will — political or otherwise — to do so. “Workers at the edge of poverty are essential to America's prosperity, but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole,” he writes in *The Working Poor*. “Instead, the forgotten wage a daily struggle to keep themselves from falling over the cliff. It's time to be ashamed.” Where there's racism, there's classism; to some extent the two intertwine. Whether with or apart from other types of inequality, large differences in income and wealth are the root of many problems for people, and the systems that they rely on around the world.

This thesis explores two aspects of race and class in Oxford, Mississippi: first, the experiences of low-income and low-wealth communities as they try to live in places are traditionally created for relatively high-income, high-wealth people; and second, as the

United States' welfare structures are reworked to rely on vouchers over physical buildings, the impact of this overarching policy change on individuals, especially in lower-density contexts, such as Oxford and Lafayette County. Moreover, this discussion attempts to contextualize the specific developments of Oxford's public housing within America's welfare state, its Housing and Urban Development policies, and the economic goals of its local governments.

### **Types of inequality**

Examining important, accessible information about one aspect of the inequality that surrounds Oxford and to tell a story meaningful to that community – a story of people affected by inequality and uprooted because of economic differences – such an approach helps us understand types of inequality and reduce the risk of oversimplifying marginalized communities.

Inequality is examined here through two lenses. The first is inequality that affects a person's economic circumstance, which is the primary form of income and wealth inequality studied. In this type of inequality, severe, fundamental differences between groups of people are observed and studied. Money, especially in the United States, makes a great deal of difference in the lives of all people. Money buys most things, after all, including life expectancy, better legal outcomes in criminal proceedings and better resources for raising children.<sup>3</sup> Even if money is not actively determining these things in the lives of citizens, it is a constant, nagging concern, as families plot their futures and how to care for themselves.

The second form of inequality is inequality of opportunity. When considering the

generational cycles of poverty, it is important to recognize that much economic inequality is not just a disparity in outcome, but a disparity in what may be possible because of a birth status. Children who grow up in families with fewer resources have fewer opportunities, not because they have worked any less, but because they were simply born into a given family, and thus a status. Reducing the education and healthcare a person receives because she or he was born into a different family follows the same patterns of treating someone different because of something they cannot change, like sex, race or nationality.

An insidious reality of classism is that many see it as a dimension of a commonly-held belief: that harder work is directly correlated with better outcomes.<sup>4</sup> This assertion may, part be true, but isn't the whole truth. Working hard does give obvious advantages within some segments of some markets.<sup>5</sup> A person who works more hours will sometimes make more money, and will at least be more valuable to the company than someone who isn't working as long, even if both people have the same level of experience. This leads to the false assertion that harder workers will get more money, more benefits, larger scholarships, more prestigious degrees, more upward mobility.<sup>6</sup>

The truth is much more complicated, and this complicated reality is the heart of research on economic inequality. The messy reality links inequality to injustice. A host of factors determine the success or failure of a community. Though economists and sociologists try to isolate variables, each geography and social group have distinct cultural climates and economic profiles, and ways of interacting with markets. These differences, just as much as social policy and economic prosperity, determine the ways that an electorate may see people or craft policy that may affect them.

A case in point: the anti-immigrant rhetoric of nationalists around the world. Anti-immigrant rhetoric in relation to income inequality is not new. George Orwell, who wrote about being destitute while living in Paris, included many anti-Semitic arguments for his poverty. Orwell did not speak French and still considered Jewish Parisians as outsiders.<sup>7</sup> Understanding poverty can be difficult enough without all of the cultural factors that play such a central role. Even today, the United States does not have a reasonable way to track poverty within its borders.<sup>8</sup> The measurements used for poverty are ineffective at best, and classist at worst. The current system of measurement discounts government assistance, skewing the political considerations of anti-poverty campaigns and making the treatment of the real problem more difficult.

### **Importance of discussing economic inequality**

Gaining an understanding of inequality is difficult, though a necessary journey, if we are to make societal progress. Many of today's biggest challenges are directly related to the widening gaps between the richest and poorest. Often, the most important structures in an economy — from stock markets to tax breaks — widen that gap. In the United States, as the 2020 presidential election approaches, the fight against income inequality is a priority, though addressed differently and along party lines. The Democratic candidates address the problem through increased social policies and spending that equate to wealth redistribution via the federal government. Wealth redistribution is the approach taken by all contemporary countries, at least to some extent, but the candidates further to the left want more planning by the government in the economy, especially when it comes to guaranteed healthcare and higher education. The

Republican incumbent, President Donald Trump, on the other hand, deals with the problem of income inequality by focusing on nationalizing the economy. This means renegotiating trade deals, promising more manufacturing jobs, tariffs and a focus on eliminating working people that have immigrated illegally. This approach, which may be found all over the western world, especially in Europe as immigrants pour into the continent. Racially charged nationalism makes for an effective, though extremist campaign.

The irony may be that inequality, especially at today's levels, damages the global economy. Especially in the United States, wealth does not lead to as much economic growth as it would in the hands of people with lower levels of wealth or income.<sup>9</sup> This is an argument entirely separate from one of compassion and justice, but even in the realm of pure economics, this level of inequality isn't helpful. Reporters strive to tell the big story that matters.<sup>10</sup> Data is deeply important in doing this, but sometimes, finding the biggest story can come from the particulars of smaller, hyperlocal situations. By seeing into the life of one person, we may better understand the situation than we would with comprehensive data sets about each person. A great responsibility of journalism is to take the best available information in order to make the world a better place via storytelling.

This project considers a single policy change and how it impacted one specific community within a larger history of inequality. It addresses how the federal policy promotes moving away from owning or operating buildings to allocating vouchers for people with low incomes to pay for rent. I will focus on a few individuals whose lives were changed by the policy, with supporting documents and interviews to give additional context. The first chapters explore what is already known about markets and policies, and

contextualize the latter half of the project, which seeks to uncover new information about policies that deal with economic inequalities via housing differences. Following this introductory first chapter, chapter two provides a research backdrop for which inequality in Oxford, Mississippi can be placed. Chapters three and four explore the stories and arguments of people affected by the new national policy, using anecdotes, data sets, photographs, historical documents, audio recordings, and anything else that could be translated into this publication. Chapter five seeks to bring the larger context of inequality and the events around Oxford's public housing complex closure into a focus on the future of the welfare state, both nationally and locally.

This project is moreover rooted in the belief that people understand their own situations better than anyone. People living with inequality are experts on inequality, economics and culture, in a way no one else can be. No researcher can understand the ways that cycles and systems of inequality affect day-to-day lives, but journalists should consider the experiences of those affected by policies as having equal weight with the economic and policy experts. By focusing on the interviews and histories of individuals that had to move because of local and federal policy changes.

## A SURVEY OF INEQUALITY

### Key causes and effects of the growing chasm between rich and poor

The research and reporting below are an attempt to broadly review and express the many complex, interwoven issues that create a fabric of economic disadvantage. Though they span time periods and are multi-faceted, this diversity creates a single focus; that is, many factors create the deepest impacts of poverty as they work in tandem to create more impactful outcomes than a single factor would create. More than this, the considered together, the sources make clear that both the causes and effects of poverty are complex and omnipresent.

This section is about the ways that inequality began between nations, the ways that people with low incomes have been used as laborers and economic resources, the ways that inequality affects people with less economic privilege, the ways that media adds to the narratives of shame around inequality, the ways that this shame mirrors and interacts with racism, the ways that those narratives came into existence in the U.S., the ways that those narratives damage the larger economy, the ways that all of those concepts impact housing policy in America.

Economist Thomas Sowell, more than most of the other researchers, considers the multitude of forces that come to create the foundations of economic inequality between large groups,

especially nations.<sup>11</sup> He contends that the reason that some of the earliest societies prospered while others did not was largely related to random environmental forces. Different biomes provided different ways to farm, and different farming techniques created differences in needs and outcomes. These differences gave way to early inequality. Fruit, vegetable and livestock varieties led to certain differences, while rainfall levels and soil qualities created challenges for some groups more than others.<sup>12</sup> Diseases that were in some places were absent in others. Drinking water was more accessible, and shelter was also a concern for the earliest societies.

Much of the formation of these groups are random; the factors that led to inequalities between the earliest communities are too complex to track effectively. If so many factors created inequality in the most basic communities, it should follow that understanding economic inequality today — with globalized markets too complex for any person or algorithm to understand — is a difficult task. What is more easily grasped are a few specific consequences of a globalized economy; workers having lower relative incomes in developed nations, for example. They may suffer job loss or endure pay cuts, and workers in less developed nations have their lives restructured around the market needs of more robust economies.<sup>13</sup>

Katherine Boo, in *Behind The Beautiful Forevers*, lays out the other side of global inequality in a liberal global market, where droves of cheap labor — children, in this particular depiction — do whatever another nation collectively wants. In this particularly nightmarish tale, children scavenge for recyclable materials to sell, because sorted recyclables can create products that may be produced and sold more easily across the world.<sup>14</sup>



Many other accounts of poverty recognize the loss of jobs in more developed countries or the increased pressure for higher productivity at lower costs.<sup>15</sup> For many, these developments have brought about nationalist and xenophobic sentiments. Far-right populist politicians have found a foothold in anti-immigrant and anti-globalization rhetoric, largely because low-income individuals do not experience the benefits of the economic benefits of a liberalized market, which many economists argue brings about more efficient economies and more productive markets.

In the world stage, many countries find this power in the world economy, namely Japan, have used economic status as a way to maintain status on the world stage, not unlike the way that the United States uses its military to control its international relations. Economies are powerful tools, sometimes even weapons. They determine the daily lives of most people around the world as well as the policies on the desks of the leaders of the most powerful institutions on earth.

### **Inequality, individual psychology and media influence**

With the power and stakes of national and global economies in mind, one notable place to understand the deeper factors of poverty that emerge in the experience of individuals that become resources to serve those economies is the writing of George Orwell, who illustrates the emotions and psychological effects of poverty on a person as he experienced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Orwell considered poverty and systemic inequality during his time in Paris and London. His investigation on the matter, which was largely personal and anecdotal, considers life for those with little economic power during the economic collapse of the

1920-30s. He observes the lives of the poor from the perspective of a poor resident in two cities with considerable wealth and power. Though there is no mention of national policies or global strategies to retool workers or industries, the omnipotence of the economy is clear.

Perhaps the most striking — and disturbing — aspects of Orwell's accounts is his pervasive antisemitism. His focus on race and racism is in sharp contrast to his otherwise clear-sighted understanding of being poor at that time in those places, or what he calls "crust wiping." Published the same year that Hitler was appointed chancellor, Orwell considers Jewish people to be outcasts of even the outcast class. His identity of not being Jewish evidently makes him feel superior and entitled over those who were different from him — even those that were experiencing poverty as deeply as he was.

In this example, the media's power in creating a toxic narrative is clear, as is the ability for the loathing of poverty and those experience it to powerfully affect the masses — including those in poverty — through media. The extensive, inseparable linkage between race and class is also evident. Orwell expresses a subtle hatred of lives spent in poverty, especially Jewish people. In becoming poor, he said that he had "given up trying to be normal or decent."<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, he is both an instigator and object of this classism. In his accounts, this is not abnormal: people in poverty are continually trying to act as though they are rich or better than the others in poverty. The motivation behind this is partly to increase the proposition of getting a better job in a scheme that both loathes and causes poverty. "All day you are telling lies, and expensive lies," Orwell says, describing the ways that those in poverty create a facade of economic excess. In the calculation of nearly every

person with little income or wealth, spending more money than needed to show that they are able to spend excess is more valuable in social capital than the actual money. One man shaves with a rusty, weeks-old razor and paints his ankles black so that his skin does not show through his tattered socks. Others are constantly trying to alter their appearances a to not look hungry or tired, though they are working all hours of the day for meager wages. This acting, of course, only adds to the plight — both economic and psychological.

With the importance of appearances at the forefront of Orwell's mind and those of his friends, they all participate in not trying to look as poor as the person next to them. The expensive lies that Orwell tells are not just for others. Even when low income people are out of the gaze of the upper classes, the narrative carries through. This behavior suggests an internalization of the narrative that to have a low income is to have less worth as a human. This, perhaps, is why Orwell differentiates himself from others in the lower class throughout his writing.

The self-imposed shame of experiencing poverty results in Orwell considering himself superior to another race or nationality of people in order to not fall to the very bottom of the societal hierarchy in his mind. It is an attempt to salvage his dignity from a society and self that do not fully recognize it. These, of course, are expensive lies for everyone.

One of the keys to Orwell finding a steady job, even one with a meager wage and long hours of hard work, is by knowing someone with a higher economic status. Reading Orwell today points to the power that an internalized attitude or set of symbols may bring in the media. Orwell's internalized classism and racism was reproduced in the

community of low-income people as well as in the writings that were later published, becoming a part of the mass media in itself. Even those who have experienced classism may internalize it and reproduce it through symbols in the media or in their communities.

As displayed in Orwell's observations and writings, the media plays an important role in establishing narratives and norms around societal relationships to income and wealth. The influence is three-fold: the ways that it sets symbols and dictates the ways in which they interact from day to day; the gratification, utility and market value that is sold through those narratives; and the framework in which the media operates as a business in the United States without much governmental interference.

The first influence is obvious in Orwell's writings. He denigrates the poor while doing everything he can to separate himself from his reality of living in poverty, especially the appearances of having a low income, even though he works harder than many others in the economy. He displays both the effect and cause of media bias against the poor — not in outright prejudice, but in reinforcing the cultural position of shame associated with experiencing poverty. The same attitude is displayed by many in other reporting on people experiencing poverty: some in a temporary housing shelter may insist that they are not like the others there, that they are simply passing between one permanent place of residence and another, even if that is not true. This self-denigration and denial is not far removed from the internalized racism that has been reflected via media for centuries.

As bell hooks argues, the media goes beyond setting the agenda of a society or government.<sup>17</sup> Media can affect the very core of a person's self-esteem, including beliefs about personal integrity, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, self-assertion, living

consciously and living purposefully. Media has long stoked racial fears and contributed to the harm of racial stereotypes, as it has done with classism and classist stereotypes. This leads to an electoral and legislative harm by bolstering policymakers with racist or classist ideas. Hooks adds too this long-standing knowledge with the idea that the symbols and meaning of those symbols — whether culturally recognizable objects, places or people — can actually affect the deep-seated beliefs people have about themselves, their entitlements and dignities, their sense of who they are and their place in the world. This effect, which comes from the deepest part of a person, will change the way the individual and community works at every level. When a person feels that they must hide who they are or where they come from, the ability to advocate for empowered, sustainable living conditions — which is already made very difficult because of political and social repressions — becomes all the more difficult. This is all done within the mind and psyche of the individual, and the internalized symbols and meanings create outward realities.

Unfortunately, the narratives surrounding people experiencing poverty have long, popular histories. Orwell is one relatively recent waypoint in a sordid history of classism and disempowerment of people with lower incomes or levels of wealth.

### **Inequality's deep roots**

From its founding, America has had strongly classist narratives and policies. People with less property or without the ability to make a steady salary were sometimes referred to as “waste people,” which eventually became “trash people.” This term has carried through to the present with the term “white trash.” Expulsion, sterilization, forced

servitude and a position of subservience and shame based on economic status were part of the United States at its inception. Many people with low incomes were forced out of England to North American colonies, being compared to manure or animal stocks, which could be added to land to increase its value.<sup>18</sup>

“As the ‘waste firm’ of America was settled, it would become a place where the surplus poor, the waste people of England, could be converted into economic assets,” historian Nancy Isenberg writes of the narrative behind the relocation to the new world. “The land and the people could be harvested together, to add to — rather than continue to subtract from — the nation’s wealth.”<sup>19</sup>

This narrative was not just from the upper class or on the surface of the culture at the time. The belief that people with low incomes and low levels of wealth were lesser humans was deep in many parts of the vision of the United States, as displayed in the inability of poorer Americans to vote or the theologies taught in American churches. Theologies at the time emphasized productivity as well as the impossibility of economic mobility. The poor and rich were fundamentally different beings in this view, by divine design. “God Almightye in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed the Condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich and some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjeccion,” Puritan leader John Winthrop wrote.<sup>20</sup> Even seating in churches was based on economic class.

This further emphasizes what has been suggested by numerous scholars in numerous ways: the myth of the American dream is not only made just for a ruling class of economically mobile heterosexual white protestant men, but it was made possible by

the other groups — which together, make up the majority of the nation — and the exploitation of that majority.

Within these narratives, there is another level of understanding: that these stories are not only affecting an audience, they are being sold to an audience. The transaction that is required to keep media companies afloat means that the amount of money a person has affects their position of power in what that media company produces. Poorer people are not the target audience of most media, which is obvious from the content and advertising involved in most news media, as well as the price of all media. Though this is necessary for media companies to survive, it creates a disadvantage for people with lower incomes to affect their media — local and national. In turn, the narratives that are created about economic inequality and poverty are often made for paying customers more than for the poor themselves. This is a reinforcing factor for narratives of shameful poverty being perpetuated.

Narratives about poverty and people with low levels of wealth or income being at fault for their positions in society are common, though the reality is always far more complex. At the very least, there is a shame that is imbued on anyone that cannot participate in society in the same ways that others may, and though this media isn't always made with those in poverty in mind, it still affects their views of class and inequality. The shame may persist though they have little choice in changing the narratives being told.

## **Selling shame in media**

The theme of economic shame for economic differences is displayed in American art, literature, music and storytelling. There are two primary elements to this system, which is both a market structure (to sell the art) and a narrative (the stories told in art) which reinforce one another. The first is that people with low incomes or levels of inherited wealth are not allowed to interact in many parts of society; the place a person lives, the establishments they frequent and the people that they meet in the first two. In a simplistic framework, this is the basis for class distinctions as they relate to actual differences in the way people live their lives. The second element — an important part of the narrative that has been told in the United States since its founding — is that people in the “lower classes” are there by their own fault. This is often said in a more moderate way: that people experiencing poverty have ways to get out by their own power.

In reviewing the data, both quantitative and qualitative, large and small scale, this idea is not founded in evidence. Though people experiencing poverty often do have ways to improve their own situations, it is almost never possible for them to do it alone, just as it is not the work of a wealthy person alone that conferred wealth to them. Instead, it is a popular notion that has changed form over time. In early American history, it was believed that people experiencing poverty were in their economic predicaments because God made them different (lesser) than upper classes. Over time, and perhaps in conjunction with changes in theology and worldview in the U.S., this has changed to a more individual-centered societies, though the blame is generally put on the shoulders of the people experiencing the hardships.



This is revelatory in understanding whom the narratives are made by and for. Media is often based on these narratives; both are based on gratification and positive group outcomes. An understanding of economic inequality that produces both comfort and gratification for people on the higher end of that divide. It also allows economic exploitation to continue with minimal guilt and a stable cultural model. In all elements, the narrative about those experiencing poverty often is oriented for a middle- and upper-class audience.<sup>21</sup>

The orientation of media toward an audience gives insight to its biases and reasons for its creation, but this is especially true when the stories are being sold in a free-market system in which storytellers must make a living to remain on the upper levels of the divide of inequality.

Simply stated, media is based on the consumer having money or the consumer having enough money for advertisers to be interested in the reader or viewer who would potentially purchase products. Because it is economically advantageous for those working in media and those owning media companies to sell a product that caters to their audience — mostly those who have enough money to be a viable consumer — telling stories in that framework is easier than telling disruptive stories, especially when those employed in media are, inherently, more prone to understand life as a person making a living wage.

This is not to say that people working in the media are trying to keep people in poor economic conditions in an exploitative position. In fact, reporters and editors may have fewer barriers to telling the unvarnished truth about the lives of people experiencing poverty when compared to others. If anything, the recognition of the deeply ingrained,

unavoidable class barriers that divide the nation can further the arguments for a larger separation between the business managers and editorial managers in the production of media. It should also encourage greater coverage and engagement of low-income and low-wealth communities. The understanding should also create a more thoughtful criticism of media production of stories about people being oppressed economically, especially narratives that implicate them in their own suffering. Another telling of this story may be a person that experienced poverty and escaped it by their own choices and work. It is obvious that the hard work of people experiencing poverty is vital to economic mobility, but focusing on that without any consideration to the responsibilities of a community or taxpayers to create conditions that allow human dignity for all people is a misdirection. It ignores a key to eliminating suffering from economic injustice: community action.

### **Reporting on inequality today**

With this brief history of media and economic inequality of the United States in mind, there are two excellent examples of long-form journalism about the economically disadvantaged in the United States. These works are important for the information included about poverty and inequality as well as the quality of the research and reporting methods included.

David Shipler's reporting in *The Working Poor* demonstrates that objective, quality reporting can do just as much — if not more — than advocacy journalism or arguments for greater attention to these issues. Objective reporting and pointed debates are both important in improving the lives of people in lower economic strata, but

reporting the facts and little more is a powerful force in informing and creating change without arguing for it — the situation is that dire in much of the country. Deconstructing simplistic explanations from large ideological bases can even push past political gridlock to compromises and bipartisan solutions. This takes a great deal of work, research and persistence, but Shipler's five years of reporting paid off in producing a useful look at inequality and the lives of the working poor in the early 2000s.

It may be hard to believe that inequality and welfare systems are not always at the forefront of American policy making and problem solving. Welfare systems are one of the main ways that citizens interact with government, so it would make sense that political candidates would discuss this at length during their campaigns. As reported time and time again, complicated tax and benefit systems make it more difficult to track the outcomes and changes in policies. This can act as a protection for policymakers that are not acting in accordance with the wishes or best interests of their constituents, allowing retrenchment, or the removal of social benefits, in some circumstances.

These complications make reporting on these topics all the more important. Many people with low income or wealth levels are not given the same opportunities to interact in the political system, partly for disengagement in journalism, as displayed above. Overall, Americans with less financial security vote less often and are less politically engaged than their counterparts with higher incomes or levels of wealth. Not only did they vote less often, they also had no partisan preference more often than other voters. Generally, when a population does not vote, they are left behind by politicians and are therefore left out of the policymaking process, both directly (helping form legislation) and indirectly (being considered when legislation is being written). Energy to give to

registration processes and multiple elections can take resources that many low-income workers do not have. Tom King, a subject of Shipler's book, lost his job, health and savings, along with his wife, Kara. "While the rest of the country was gripped by the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton, Tom let it all pass him by like a great storm beyond the horizon of his concern," Shipler writes. "'I don't do politics well,' [Tom] said simply." When there are large tax cuts for the rich or when vital benefits are cut, "the poor do not fight back," Shipler writes. Political change that would end desperate poverty would also take a serious rethinking of economic priorities as they stand in the United States. "The country's prosperity relies on badly paid workers — that's a fact that is not going to disappear," Shipler writes.

These insights make it all the more important for journalism to serve communities experiencing poverty in order to encourage political engagement. For this to happen, though, the journalism must be relevant to the communities. One project would send news to people in low-income housing news about the evictions that were going to happen that day via text message. It was accessible and useful information, which could eventually bring low-income communities into the broad political debate. Many of the problems that face these communities have viable, known solutions. There is not, unfortunately, the political will to get them implemented. Nearly fifteen years after the publishing of *The Working Poor*, Shipler gave me an interview for *The Globe Post*.<sup>22</sup> He explained that after working to cover poverty and economic inequality, he found that the national attitudes about it have largely stayed the same, though he tries to remain hopeful that the national mindset could change:

Well, one always has to have hope [that inequality and poverty rates will improve,] because if you don't, you give up on trying to solve the

problems. In the United States, because we have a myth about equal opportunity, not equal results, and it is a myth, it helps set a high standard for us that we need to achieve. So, we want to reduce the gap between the reality and the ideal. Americans are unique in the way we regard poverty, because in America, you're supposed to work your way out of poverty, and work is an ethic. In the U.S., there's an overtone of blame that is directed at the poor.

You see it in legislation, in the work requirements now being attached to Medicaid, maybe to the food stamp program. There's an implication that people that need this help are lazy, and somehow, the establishment has to enforce our ethics, which means going to work to earn these benefits. There are lots of benefits that people get at higher income levels that don't require work, so there's a certain punitive overtone to the Republican policymakers.

As I have found in my book, responsibility for poverty is distributed widely between societal and individual failings. You can't categorize a particular family or person neatly into a box and say that it's all their fault or it's all the society's fault. It's often an interaction between various issues along that spectrum. What we need in this country is to get beyond the ideologies, beyond the dispute, which is hardly a debate, and understand poverty in a nuanced and sophisticated way. It's not all the fault of the society, and it's not all the fault of the individual; it's a combination of both and the interaction between them. We have to address both.

We don't understand some areas, of course. By we, I mean the society. But we have the skills in many areas to understand what needs to be done. We often don't have the will to fix those problems though. We're in this together. We all have to work together to figure this out and not hate each other because of our own hardships.

Shipler's work covered the intersection of many issues that cause poverty, whether housing, healthcare or education. Matthew Desmond's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Evicted*, published in 2016, reveals many of the same issues that Shipler wrote about in 2004 by primarily considering the issues of poverty through the lens of housing insecurity.<sup>23</sup> He does this by spending multiple years observing and interviewing individuals experiencing income inequality, especially as it impacted their homes. If nothing else, *Evicted* is an indictment of the lack of solutions for impoverished communities that have been created

in recent decades. It is a vital work for anyone trying to understand housing or government benefits in the United States.

Though there is no need to go through all of the stories of those that Desmond writes about, he does give insight into the lives of those that live in Oxford by considering — in communities very different from Oxford — the effects of a national move to housing vouchers over brick-and-mortar public housing complexes. In the epilogue, he writes:

A universal voucher program is but one potential policy recommendation. Let others come. Establishing the basic right to housing in America could be realized in any number of ways — and probably should be. What works best in New York might fail in Los Angeles. The solution to housing problems in booming Houston or Atlanta or Seattle is not what is most needed in the deserted metropolises of the Rust Belt or Florida's impoverished suburbs or small towns dotting the landscape. One city must build; another must destroy. If our cities and towns are rich in diversity — with unique textures and styles, gifts and problems — so too must be our solutions.<sup>24</sup>

This perspective highlights the importance of Desmond's project as well as the importance of similar projects in different places. By listening to individuals affected by the changing policies and considering the many factors that create their circumstance, a more appropriate solution for the entire system may emerge.

When considering economic inequality in any community, it should be contextualized by the inequality in other spaces. A comparative approach to studying inequality can reveal certain factors — like government or charity programs — to be more or less effective. Though it is not an airtight approach, recognizing cultural, legal, governmental and religious differences in different places can allow a broader, deeper understanding of the problems and solutions in a particular context. For example, individuals in extreme poverty in Annawadi, a slum near the airport in Mumbai, give

context to this project. It's a common refrain that there is no substantial financial inequality in the United States because the poverty here is 'less severe' than poverty in other places. Though inequality does have different outcomes in different places, the comparison of wealth and income distributions and outcomes should be used to better people in all places, not disregard those in need in one place because the other is worse. One person's suffering does not negate another's. Principles of classism are often similar, even if the severity or other contexts differ.

Boo considers a group that is not all that dissimilar to people with low incomes and levels of wealth in the United States. In her reporting on Annawadi, the impoverished community is fighting against the Mumbai government, which wants to move the slums in order to develop the land near the airport. The people — especially children — that make money by collecting trash to resell find the current location of the slum advantageous, and many families have been there for generations.

In some respects, a similar thing is happening in Mumbai and in the United States, even in Oxford, Mississippi. The extreme imbalance of wealth and income in a community leads to the people with less money having to move — generally with little power in the decision compared to their wealthier counterparts. As many of these sources reveal, the inequality in almost every instance means people with less money have less access to decide where they want to live, make choices that lead to healthier lives, engage in a justice system that is just or decide which school is best for their children.

## **How inequality hurts everyone**

Though the effects of inequality may be the most difficult to accept when looking at its impact on individuals, the macroeconomic effects are important as well. Joseph Stiglitz, a Pulitzer Prize-winning economist, considers income and wealth inequality on the largest scales in this book, written largely as a warning of the large-scale consequences to economies and nations if inequality continues at its current, unprecedented levels.<sup>25</sup>

Largely, Stiglitz is considering and addressing the ways that economic policies and market outcomes have led to a few people having so much capital as well as the consequences of that inequality across the world. He argues that the excessive inequality that currently exists only benefits a tiny proportion of the population, and that redistribution of wealth and government oversight for those with significant economic power would benefit nearly everyone — even investors. (At the time of publishing in 2012, the top .01% of earners in the United States controlled a larger share of wealth than the same group did in the Gilded Age, and their share of the wealth had grown fivefold since the 1980s.)

The argument that extreme inequality is bad for nearly everyone, which is perhaps the most convincing in its ability to abstract a complex problem and lay out a solution that is best for the largest group of people, is easy to turn to as the primary issue in the consideration of economic inequalities. Considering this issue alone, though, would be missing the root considerations of inequality: human dignity and compassion. When those studying inequality see people with low incomes as market forces instead of people, the point of mitigating suffering by reducing inequality is lost. Cornel West made this



point much more eloquently on Joseph Stiglitz's tour for his book, The Price of Inequality. While Stiglitz can't be blamed too much for focusing on market forces over ethical drivers of human behavior (he is an economist, after all), West's point is poignant for journalists.

The extensive data presented by Stiglitz do not directly address subsets of people in poverty or the lives they live, but it does present a vision of the context that allows such extreme outcomes to exist. He describes a world with inequality so extreme that the systems that have guided and allowed centuries of human progress — economies and democracies — will not be able to withstand it.

A major contention of Stiglitz's argument is that the wealth of the superrich is not earned in the same way that others earn their wealth. In this framework, there are two common ways to accumulate wealth via income: rent seeking and contributing to society. The latter, in the marginal productivity theory, is a way of earning money that is proportional to the value that is added to society. Through the laws of supply and demand, markets decide what is and is not valuable, as well as the degree of value those products or services hold. Rent seeking, on the other hand, was a term created to show the difference between making money from working versus making money from owning capital. This, of course, has direct connections to the ways that landlords make money from their tenants, but it also includes many other ways that individuals or institutions get around the laws of supply and demand to make more money than their contributions are worth. Government subsidies, tax reductions, monopolies, and exclusive access to resources are among the many ways that wealth can be won outside of adding something to society in ways that market forces alone value. Stiglitz argues that many at the top are

not great at innovating products and services as much as they are good at exploiting flaws in the market that allow more wealth to be taken than is deserved. “To put it baldly, there are two ways to become wealthy: to create wealth or to take wealth away from others,” Stiglitz says.

The amount of economic privilege that someone is given is often considered to vary based on the amount of work someone puts into their economic status, especially in liberal market economies. This view, of course, is far from reality. Many random factors — available education, nationality, race, social environment, level of health — can affect economic advantage without any work on the part of an individual. There are some things, then, that may raise questions about what an acceptable amount of inequality is: Should healthcare access differ based on the amount of money someone makes? Should children be treated differently — in the way that they are taught, fed, parented and cared for — based on the amount of disposable income in their immediate vicinity? How much difference should money make in someone’s life?

Growing economic inequality is not just a problem within the United States or even individual nations in isolation. For example, the globalization of the labor market has been strongly encouraged by inequality between nations and communities within nations. Cheaper labor has caused corporations to move factories, redefining markets, both large and small, within communities and across the world. The benefits of globalization, especially a more efficient economy because of liberalization, go to the rich and to the larger economy. In the United States, this can be seen fairly clearly in the ways that gains in the stock market help the rich more than the poor. The benefit of systems to help the wealthy is particularly obvious in globalize, which has led to lost jobs

for many factory workers in developed countries with few governmental plans to replace the jobs.<sup>26</sup> In democracies, this means that many people are not incentivized to vote for policies and politicians that work for a country's overall economic well-being. Britain is an excellent example of this, with many people with less economic power voting to leave the European Union — a policy that does not spell safety for Britain, according to many experts.

It isn't just the economy that suffers in the backlash to globalization. The backlash has incited racist and anti-immigrant sentiments that have hurt everyone involved. The labor economy needs new workers in many developed nations, where demographic shifts have left a need for individuals from other places joining the labor force. This is clear across the board; though in different contexts, Britain, Japan, France, Germany and the United States have all experienced similar outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

The history of welfare law and social programs in the United States is varied and complicated, but there are some important takeaways for this project. Though discussions about the welfare state in the U.S. can feel like an exclusively theoretical exercise, the relatively short history of government benefits reveals a dynamic situation in which the popular zeitgeist and policy executions are subject to change at the whim of an election or administration. This is especially true considering the amount of political power that these systems hold for politicians and political parties, pointing to a reason for the large amount of rhetoric surrounding the policies.

In short, the ways that a country decides to handle its welfare system not only says a great deal about the way that the citizens see the purpose and goals of the economy that they participate in. Even more than that, however, is the importance of government-

guided or controlled benefits in the lives of almost all individuals in western democracies. Governments interact with swaths of their citizens directly, actively and powerfully through welfare distribution. Though there may be some ideological objections to government benefits, many political scientists agree that such programs are widely popular, making retrenchment politically treacherous for those running for office. For this reason, retrenchment is unlikely in large strokes. Even when Ronald Reagan and Margret Thatcher were in power, large rollbacks of social programs were kept to a minimum, despite rhetoric for it used in their campaigns.<sup>28</sup> This trend was perhaps most animated as Republicans campaigned widely on repealing the Affordable Care Act. In the end, without a nuanced plan to put in its stead, the Affordable Care Act survived with the help of some Republicans. Retrenchment has also proven to be difficult in times of financial downturn or budgetary crisis.<sup>29</sup>

The popularity of these programs in systems controlled by democratic institutions help explain the long arcs of a growing welfare state in the United States. The government has taken a larger role in distributing common goods over time, and it seems that this will continue into the future, especially as government intervention in the healthcare system becomes a topic with increasing importance in national elections. The recognition of this continual evolution gives perspective to a situation that may seem stagnant, with Republicans supporting a smaller welfare state and Democrats supporting a larger one, ending in gridlock. In reality, the benefits and the ways that they are distributed have changed a great deal over time and will continue to change. Benefits are one of the most direct forms of government that citizens experience, and politicians are sensitive to this outsized role of these programs in the political landscape.

### **Riverside closed in favor of vouchers**

Oxford, of course, is not the only place that vouchers have taken over as the new primary mode of housing assistance. Vouchers make up the largest portion of government housing subsidies, with over two million families using them. Theoretically, housing vouchers are supposed to make the housing market available to people in need of financial assistance. Instead of having to live in an assigned unit or home, people with vouchers would be able to live wherever they wanted, as long as rent cost less than the allotment from the voucher. This brings all people to the open housing market, which was supposed to bring all the benefits of participating in a free market. A prominent benefit of that is the ability to choose where to live. This would allow a system that once encouraged (and often caused) segregation by concentrating people with lower incomes into one area or a few complexes to spread out across town.

The promises of an open market full of choices are not always fulfilled in reality, though. As with many less-than-regulated markets, the theoretical ways that markets should work do not account for the prejudices and greed of economic actors. In the case of housing vouchers, it can be difficult for residents to find a landlord willing to allow them to rent outside of a few neighborhoods. Some towns and cities are difficult to enter altogether — a large concern for some advocates of those experiencing poverty in Oxford. No matter how well vouchers work in theory (and in practice, in some places), they are no match for municipalities that are determined to move people with housing subsidies out of their borders or into only a few neighborhoods.

The racism that often accompanies economic injustice also plays a large role in this phenomenon. With a deeply entrenched culture of segregated housing in the United States that continues today, voucher choice is limited even more. Black families have more difficulty in using vouchers than white families, though there is a certain universality to vouchers being rejected.<sup>30</sup> Still, vouchers are more successful in integrating families into communities than public housing complexes.<sup>31</sup> That is only true if the communities do not work to remove those people from the towns.

Some towns have worked to do just that. One example is Austin, Texas. In one study, only six percent of housing surveyed was available to people using vouchers. Out of the units that fell within the range of costs covered by the vouchers, only 12 percent accepted vouchers as payment.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes, landlords will not accept voucher holders as tenants outright, while others have requirements that keep voucher holders out by other criteria, like minimum income levels. In both instances, discrimination based on income is pervasive and within the rights of the landlords, under many laws that are currently enacted. With so few spaces for people experiencing poverty to live, sometimes (though it may be rare nationwide) moving to a voucher system gives residents less choice than they would otherwise have. Effectively, Austin has served as an example of a city that has used the move to a voucher system as an opportunity to move people out of the community by allowing landlords to play out their biases of public housing and those using subsidized housing assistance in their businesses, even when it makes little sense. This mirrors the arguments of Stiglitz on a smaller scale: people will give up choices with more economic benefits to fulfill their notions of need or prejudice. Landlords will leave

money on the table as long as it means they do not have to house people with low incomes or low levels of wealth.

It's not just Austin, either. Dallas has had similar issues, as has the entire state of Connecticut, where over half of voucher holders still live in areas of concentrated poverty.<sup>33</sup> Nevada has suffered similar problems, where residents using vouchers were priced out of their apartments when the subsidies did not keep up with rent.<sup>34</sup> Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago all have documented similar issues of those with vouchers being discriminated against for income levels, even when the voucher would pay for the housing.<sup>35</sup> Economic discrimination is rampant across the country, especially when it comes to housing. Some states have enacted laws incentivizing landlords to take the vouchers, while others have worked to pass laws that would allow subsidies to be included in a tenant's income when renting, which would essentially eliminate voucher holders from being rejected for their level of income as it relates to rent, unless landlords significantly increased income requirements.<sup>36</sup> Another proposed measure is ending income discrimination altogether, meaning if a tenant has the ability to pay for an apartment, they could not be kept from renting because they make a certain level of money. Many experts estimate that these measures would increase the effectiveness of vouchers, not only in improving outcomes of residents but also of increasing economic and racial diversity in the communities that adopt the measures.<sup>37</sup>

Out of all the data and studies, one clear picture emerges: the voucher system works. For all of the damage that discrimination may do to the system or how much better the system could be with additional measures to protect potential renters with vouchers, the system — as it stands today — improves the lives of people that are part of

housing assistance programs. The program may be underfunded, with long wait times for families with desperate needs, but when the funds are made available and a voucher holder can find a landlord, the vouchers often offer better outcomes than traditional public housing complexes.<sup>38</sup> It often increases access to neighborhoods that would have been out of reach, sometimes with better schools, and often with better economic outcomes.<sup>39</sup> People who use housing vouchers even have better health outcomes than those living in public housing complexes.<sup>40</sup> The program works, but it is up to communities to foster the improvements, both culturally and legislatively.

The discussion of these sources presented in this chapter, all taken together, should create a desire to benefit as many communities at the same time, with bold, ambitious solutions.

Journalism is a key to these solutions forming — namely through amplifying and contextualizing the voices of those in positions of poverty — as well as raising awareness about the issues that still plague the United States. This can be done as many authors have chosen to do it in the works listed above (though many of them do not fit into a traditional category of journalism), by creating a broad picture of the many issues that face many groups of people. The job of other reporters is to start considering these issues in their own communities in greater detail.

In this instance, I hope to do that by reporting on and analyzing the housing policies that have been implemented in Oxford; that is, a specific instance of the larger trend of moving from government-run public housing to voucher-based housing support. Reporting like this, even in nontraditional presentations, as this is, can inform a larger understanding of inequality by providing more specific information from more



knowledgeable sources that are in contexts with factors unlike any other. The story of every person experiencing poverty is an opportunity to understand the complexity of circumstances that can affect not just that person, but an entire country through economic inequality.

In this project, the factor primarily considered is housing inequality, specifically the ways that the tearing down of Riverside Place and the use of rent vouchers has affected two — and by proxy, many more — residents. With the policies and culture discussed above in mind, let us turn to the nucleus of this project: the narratives of the residents who are affected by them.

## VOICES IGNORED

### Narratives of those who experienced economic inequality in Oxford

After reviewing the larger context of class and economic inequality in the United States as well as a brief history of people with low levels of income and wealth in the first two chapters, it is clear that economic injustice is at the core of the U.S. economy, as it has been since its founding.

In the next two chapters, the focus shifts to the community of Riverside Place in Oxford. The context of race and class in America shows in fresh light the stories and perspectives of the people that had to move out of Riverside – namely, the voice of people experiencing poverty that has long been ignored is still not being fully heard. The stigma of not having access to as much money as others is constant, and the shame that was felt in colonial America still lingers in the stories of residents of Riverside.

Many former residents did not wish to be interviewed for this project because they did not want the stigma associated with housing subsidies. The social pressures to not appear poor are great enough for people to stay silent, even when they have strong feelings — as many residents did about Riverside being torn down. One of the former residents who was willing to talk, Lakeida Yates, speaks of the ways that she and others

felt the weight of not fitting the mold of Oxford. Even though it had a social cost, living at Riverside changed Yates' life. Similarly, the support that housing programs gave Kenzay Brown, a resident who lived at Riverside when it closed, gave him and his son many opportunities in Oxford — notably, the chance at a quality education for his son. Still, the loss of community that he and his son experienced when Riverside closed was significant, for both Brown and Oxford.

### **Lakeida Yates: Oxford Roots**

Twelve years after moving out, Lakeida Yates still remembers her way to her apartment, No. 40. She can still trace in her mind the way past the mailboxes, up the stairs, turning to the right, walking to the back of the corridor. For eight years, she walked to her screen door, opened it, and unlocked the door to her apartment. Unlocking that door — an experience that she savored — gave her a sense of place in Oxford while she attended the university from 1999 to 2007.

Inside, the apartment was enough. The walls were brick and cement, with a tile floor. There was a double sink, a stove, a refrigerator in the kitchen, a sparsely furnished bedroom through the small hallway. A small table and four chairs shared the open area with a couch, entertainment system and sofa. The trees outside shaded her side of the building, and in the warmer months, she would put a fan on the windowsill to bring in the fresh air. Her building was mostly quiet and calm. Only one neighbor, who was an Oxford native, had a child.

She remembered three other things from that apartment that made it her own: a painting that she still owns, a candle holder that she does not, and a thumb tack that she stuck in the wall next to her door to hang her keys on. She hated losing her keys.

As much as she enjoyed having a place that was her own, Yates never saw apartment number 40 at Riverside Place as a permanent home. “It was a temporary stop,” she said. “Only passing through.” Passing through, though, took time.

Yates was on the waitlist for her room in the public housing — River’s Hill, as most residents referred to it — for a year. There were only 16 single-bedroom units, and students almost always occupied them. Rent was adjusted for income, leaving Yates with a tidy \$50 bill for rent each month.

“I was a student. I didn’t have no money,” she said in retrospect, laughing. “Fifty dollars a month and not having to share it with anyone? I’ll take that, baby!”

Over time, though, she became concerned about her future at Riverside. She worried the complex would shut down. “I knew when they built that gas station and Kroger, it was only a matter of time,” she said. “Sure enough, a few years later, that’s what happened.”

The residents of Riverside Place received a letter in early 2016 informing them that the contract with the City of Oxford would not be renewed in 2017. The 87 occupied units would be vacated over the course of the next two years. The complex housed more minors than adults, with 97 percent of residents falling in the lowest income categorization, “extreme” poverty. The average family income was just under \$9,000. No one would be evicted without a plan of where to move and how to pay for it, but no one could stay.

Instead of sets of keys, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development would offer the residents Section 8 vouchers, which could be used anywhere in the

United States. Instead of personal income, housing vouchers are based on the number of bedrooms and the part of the country in which a household wants to live.

HUD's model has been slowly moving away from owning buildings where large groups of low-income residents to live together, according to Jonathan Hill, the Housing Director at Oxford Housing Authority (OHA). In its place, a voucher system has emerged. Those who qualify, most of whom are in families in Lafayette County making less than \$29,941 annually, are offered a voucher for rent to use with any landlord that approves them. In Oxford, families were allowed \$1,109 per month for a three-bedroom home when Riverside first closed. Last year, the vouchers covered \$1,150, but they sometimes don't keep up with rising rent prices.

"We have had a lot of good luck with those numbers," Hill said, acknowledging that in many parts of the U.S., the vouchers restrict residents to limited housing options. At Riverside, federal Section 8 vouchers subsidized rent payments — the \$50 per month that Yates paid.

The OHA have also had the fortune of a face-to-face relationship with most of their clients. In public housing systems that are larger, people can start to feel like numbers, Teasha Sanders, who worked on behalf of OHA with each family to arrange new housing through the voucher system, said.

Vouchers offer benefits to residents such as shopping around for an arrangement, single-family homes and living in more economically and racially diverse neighborhoods. The shift in policy also benefits landlords in the area, allowing them to pocket steady rent payments supplied by the government on behalf of low-income families.

Matthew Desmond, who studied urban low-income housing for years to produce *Evicted*, points out that poor tenants often offer the highest profit margins for landlords. He also describes situations in which housing vouchers do not cover the cost of living in certain neighborhoods, continuing economic segregation.

Even though he argues that the current voucher system has problems, the conclusion of *Evicted* insists that an improved system would “change the face of poverty in this country,” and that evictions could be rare occurrences. Hill said former residents of Riverside using vouchers has already led to a 50 percent reduction in evictions.

Segregation, both economic and racial, is at the heart of public housing’s legacy in the United States. The program was designed to exclude black people from government welfare. When nonwhite people were included, it was usually because the economy demanded workers in a certain location or field, according to historian Richard Rothstein.<sup>41</sup>

Hill saw Riverside Place as a sort of continuation of government housing’s segregationist history. The government was piling people, often from similar backgrounds and experiences, on top of each other to live away from the center of the town. The racial makeup of Riverside was more or less unchanging. When Yates lived there, she said white people only came around to buy drugs or as law enforcement officers. Hill, sitting across the room from Sanders was trying to remember the exact number of white tenants were part of the community of hundreds. He leaned toward her, his voice lowered for the first time in the conversation. “Was it one or two?”

When Desiree Hensley, expert in HUD policies and the director of the University of Mississippi’s Housing Clinic, heard about Riverside shutting down, she was outraged.

She thought the decision to close the apartments was suspicious, at best, saying Riverside had a B rating for inspections, which would not warrant it going out of service.

Hill said many of the buildings could not be repaired, some floors sagging eight inches below their correct positions. He said it was “beyond repair,” and that they “band-aided and piecemealed it to death,” especially before an inspection. There was not enough room between the ceilings and floors to install ducts for central air and heating.

Riverside Place, unlike most public housing complexes, was owned by a city, not the federal government. Moreover, the city — Oxford — had the building and property paid in full, putting about \$3 million into renovations. In 2013, the assets of Riverside exceeded the liabilities by over \$1 million, and the complex brought in over \$140,000 in revenues that year, according to an audit.

Hensley said she saw Riverside’s closure at “the worst kind of hypocrisy.” The city, which owned the apartments and had money for improvements, said the buildings were too deteriorated to continue being used. Oxford, where the median housing price is over \$200,000, could not afford improving its public housing by its own account.

Hill argued that the apartments couldn’t be renovated without building new facilities entirely. The city could have simply put up a new apartment and used the vouchers to keep the community together while collecting the HUD funds, though, Hensley rebutted. Instead, the city opted to split the residents up, sending them to the far reaches of the city, county and country.

Having to move from a place where they were near public transportation, a grocery store, a pharmacy and a public library, among other things, would be difficult for the residents, she said. When residents moved, they would be responsible for paying

rental and utility deposits. With few options, many looked to local ministries to cover the costs.

Hensley also said the disbanding of Riverside Place was linked to the segregationist past of public housing. The tight-knit community of residents, who used to meet on the sidewalk and on Facebook, would largely dissolve. Many would move out of the city; HUD invested almost \$600,000 in Oxford for project-based rental assistance before Riverside shut down. The year after Riverside residents moved, HUD invested under \$200,000. The neighborhood watch members that once stood on the curb patrolling the parking lots could not protect their neighbors from Riverside shutting down.

Even so, Hill and Sanders insisted that every person was satisfied with their new housing arrangements — most were much happier now than they were at Riverside, they said. Sanders now gets frequent invites to see the way residents have decorated their houses. For some residents who held onto their apartments at Riverside until the very end, Sanders visited ten properties to find one with enough yard space, the right school system, and convenient transportation. “She really went into realtor mode,” Hill said.

James Thomas, a sociology professor at the university, studies housing and economic inequality of Oxford and Lafayette County. When asked if the city is inclusive, he forcefully responded: “No. It’s just not.”

Yates, Hill, Sanders and Hensley all agreed. Oxford is not an inclusive community, especially for low-income individuals. It pushes the workers it requires for everyday operations outside of the city limits. Yates said the closing of Riverside was, at least in part, motivated by racist and classist prejudices.



“Oxford is greedy. They’re looking at the big bucks,” she said, adding that the city is always thinking of how it can capitalize on college students. “Riverside wasn’t making the city of Oxford money, so they got rid of it,” she said. “It could have been white folks up in there, they probably would have done it.”

Even though Yates believed money was at the heart of the decision, she recognized the barriers of race that also exist in the city. As a student at the university, she never attended a football game, saying they didn’t feel inclusive or diverse. She hated Dixie, and wanted to see them play a historically black university from the state. Basketball games, where students of many backgrounds came together to enjoy many types of music and a team that represented the entire school, she said, were more her style.

“At the end of the day, no matter what people say, Ole Miss is a white school,” she said, voice raised. “Blacks would never supersede whites at the school. That’s fact because that’s money.”

She said changing the mascot was the perfect example of white students holding all of the power at the university. Even if all the black students that ever attended the university voted to change the mascot, it would not have changed until white students wanted it to change.

Riverside, in her mind, was no different. Oxford Police had substations in each public housing complex, and some of them were large enough to house entire divisions of the force, like the DUI unit. “I know they didn’t do that in white communities,” Yates said. “Shutting down Riverside was a money move, as well as a skin tone one.”

Hill, who joined the Oxford Police Department the same year that Yates moved into apartment number 40, said their policy was once to never enter the property without an additional officer. Residents were known to throw rocks from the balconies at the police, he said. Hensley said there is no evidence that Riverside's crime was a problem or a reason for the closing.

Thomas said that Oxford, though it runs on low-income workers, is built to serve upper-class, white citizens. The city, like much of the world, is in the midst of a crisis of income and wealth inequality. The result is people being pushed out of the city based on economic class, creating a cycle of selective opportunity from generation to generation.

The market-driven discrimination is more difficult to track and eliminate than other forms of inequality, according to Thomas. He recalled Oxford's former mayor, Pat Patterson, talking about how more dollar stores on the square would make it more diverse. The racist remark is telling, in some ways, of the economic systems of Oxford, which maintain and grow levels of inequality by othering individuals based on race, class or both. "There's not a lot of local or institutional will to address that," he said.

Thomas came from working-class roots. His mother had a steady job as a librarian, but was raising two young children on her own, with debt from Thomas' father. He remembered riding the bus or walking everywhere they went in Kansas City, carrying bags of groceries every Sunday from when he was five years old, no matter the weather.

He thought about the relationships he had growing up in his neighborhood, and how similar relationships were broken when Riverside residents moved out of the complex. Living in a community that is clearly not made for people with your economic or racial background makes pockets of acceptance all the more critical.

Hill said low-income families have to consider bigger problems, though. Sanders gives speeches to each new resident in public housing, telling them this is a time to change their lives — that they need to transform themselves.

Thomas proposed a moratorium on building new luxury student or retirement housing in the city, saying many of the existing units are already vacant in those categories. Building new units only makes it more difficult for people with lower incomes to live in Oxford.

It isn't just market forces that discourage low income housing in Oxford — it's landlords, too. There is no law against discriminating against income or credit levels for housing in Mississippi, so many people use this as an excuse to discriminate based on other factors. When Sanders was trying to find landlords to house residents, many weren't interested simply because the tenants did not make as much money as the average resident in Oxford, even though rent payments would be guaranteed by the federal government.

When a few landlords began taking the guaranteed checks as rent payments for the residents, others followed suit. Even now, though, some landlords insist on being on Sander's private list of contacts so they can be specially matched up with a low-income resident. They consider section eight recipients suspect because different numbers on paystubs eventually becomes a shorthand for the worth of the worker. If the market values someone more than their neighbor, why should a landlord think any differently? They have to consider their own value, after all.

Many former residents of Riverside did not want to be interviewed this story. They did not want car decals to secure parking outside of their own apartments because

they did not want to be identified as low-income in public. Seeming poor, especially in the city, can be costly. They can't afford another expense.

Two new affordable housing developments are under construction in Oxford. Stewart Rutledge, a local developer, worked with the city and LOU-Home to relax building codes in order to make the developments cost-effective. Thomas, who is on the board of LOU-Home, said it is hard to imagine a development that would not be profitable in Oxford. Cost-prohibitive, he said, probably means an acceptable margin of profit for the developer. The new developments, Belle Rivers and Eastover, are expected to be rent-to-own apartments that cost \$689 per month.

The city hopes the apartments will help residents find their own hunger for economic stability and power while filling the pockets of the developer. The model relies on hunger — for every player to be most interested in itself. The city tries to grow its economy. Landlords try to grow their incomes. Tenants try to remain in their community. Some players have more advantages than others.

Yates moved out in 2007, before Riverside shut down. Her friends brought a truck and took her belongings to Jackson, where she took care of her great grandmother ten years earlier. It was that experience — “cleaning and smelling another person” — that convinced her to pursue a career other than nursing. “My stomach too weak for that,” she said, laughing.

She graduated with degrees in psychology and social work when she was thirty and left town. She worked for an apartment complex in Jackson for a while, saving money by staying where she worked. Yates found a job at the university medical center, moving around in Jackson. Her rent was \$600 per month, but she felt freer than ever.

After ten years in the city, she felt that she had outgrown Mississippi, saying “it felt like a standstill.” Even though she did not want to move, she loaded another truck and moved to Dallas. “This is the difference: look at Texas as a whole — there are so many opportunities here,” she said.

She now works for a system of hospitals and clinics in the Texas, filing paperwork to insurers on behalf of the providers. She pays \$1,200 per month for her apartment — twice the median rent in Oxford — and said she has never felt more financial freedom. A bonus is added to her paycheck after every evaluation.

The same painting from apartment number 40 hangs in her home today, and her mentality about settling in does not seem to have changed. She follows opportunity, she said. She leaves places that offer no economic promise, even when that means leaving behind a close community that she enjoyed for nearly a decade. Oxford has taught her that her worth to others and her freedom is dependent on the bottom line. She learned to adapt.

“Don’t ever get so embedded that you want to stay there for life,” she advised residents that had to move out. “But I think that should be on the individual, not the city of Oxford,” she added.

Yates followed the path that is planned by public housing: to assist individuals in finding housing, which may allow education and saving until they can climb the ladder of economic prosperity into the American dream. Yates simply realized that there was no American dream to be found in Oxford. Many can’t find it anywhere, no matter how hard they look.

Thomas, considering the data he has collected over the past years, explained that the chasm between the wealthy and poor was such that there were few paths out. He sees Yates' case as a product of chance as well as her hard work. Every so often, someone breaks through discriminatory hiring practices, housing policies and financial barriers to independence. "I kind of think it's probably more random luck," he said.

Yates believes her outlook and actions have led to her current position. Surely, she is at least, in part, right. She chased opportunity, leaving the rest in her past. She said when she moved from Riverside, she was happy and sad. "What I mean by that is... I don't know," she said, trailing off. "Do I miss it? Nah."

Yates knew that Oxford became more than "a hit-miss city — you blink and you miss it." She adapted, even when it meant having to leave part of her community. Oxford was hungry to become an economic success in a troubled state. She also knew it would lead to Riverside's closing when she saw buildings spreading roots out around the apartment complex and people renting their houses out for obscene sums on game days.

"If I had the means, I would have done that too," she said.

### **Kenzay Brown: Making a Home**

With an understanding of the importance of public housing for communities, Yates' story demonstrates the roots that so many people had in Riverside — both the place and the community that lived there. Some, like Yates, felt they had to leave to find a community where they could prosper — a more inclusive one.

Riverside was not only a community of understanding among residents facing similar economic challenges but also added diversity, culture and perspective to the city

of Oxford, which is perpetually and publicly at risk of homogeneity. Even though it is clear that much would be lost with the closure of Riverside, the question of what became of the 100 or so people that were living there remains. Kenzay Brown was one of the residents living there — with his son — for four years when the process of closing the complex began.

Brown was sitting in the corner of a crowded Oby's at lunchtime on a Friday in January 2020 when he sat down to discuss his experience in leaving Riverside for this project. He was picking at a wrap, saying that he's trying to be healthy so he can be there for his son. All of the staff of the restaurant know him; they stop to say hello when they pass.

He works here, coming back on his day off for this interview. He lived at Riverside for four of his six years in Oxford. "For me, I wasn't born in Oxford, I just moved to Oxford," he said. "For me, it still was my home."

Brown is from Sylvester, Georgia, a town with about 6,000 people in the southern part of the state. Sylvester has 260 public housing units; Oxford — a town with a population four times larger than Sylvester, has 212 public housing units, a figure that does not include rent voucher assistance.

"When I moved here, I moved here with two kids and a wife. When I moved into Riverside, I moved in with one child and an ex-wife," he said. "Living there... It was okay. It was decent."

Brown, 30, sees family as the center of his life — it's what he lives for.

"My main goal in life has always been to be a parent," he said. "I wanted to be a parent ever since I was 16. I always said that I wanted to struggle in my 20s and build in

my 30s. I always said that I wanted all my children to be before I turned 20.

Unfortunately, that did not happen. I always said that when I turn 40, I want to stop.”

He went to technical school after graduating high school but didn’t finish. “It just wasn’t for me,” he said. “When I quit technical school, I just wanted to be a father.”

Throughout the interview, Brown’s children and the other children that lived at Riverside, as well as Oxford, keep coming up. It’s what he thinks about more than his own circumstances or future. He sees his son’s future as his own. “I tell people that I have a life of my own — I mean that I have a life as a father.”

Brown has one son and one daughter, but only his son lives with him. His ex-wife and daughter live in Florida. “My divorce was a year before moving,” he said. “It was stressful, and it is stressful.”

Being under constant stress about how to be a good parent took its toll on him being a good father, he said. Being stressed about moving, raising his son, paying the bills made making progress on any of those fronts even more difficult. “Three things that, no matter what, in life you’ll be stressed about are moving, divorce and death,” he said.

Brown said the stress of moving was compounded by having the most important thing in his life — family — change in a major way. He also had to find a way to pay for legal fees for the divorce as well as moving fees, all at once.

The money that had to be paid for legal fees was money he didn’t have. Having children involved in his case added \$1,700 to his legal fees, he said. Brown offered joint custody to his then-wife. If she did not agree, he would have to spend more, so he said that he offered her more than he thought he should at first. His first lawyer didn’t believe



that men should be the ones raising children, so he had to find a new one — another expense.

“If you have a good family lawyer, you get what you want,” he said. “[Men] have to go through so many court issues and so many things just to have rights to a child, which is difficult and costly.” The amount of money he could pay, as well as his masculinity, would determine the kind of parent he would be allowed to be, he said.

Marriage is considered a civil matter in court, but Brown says it’s more political than it is civil. “Being a single father is controversial, and being a single father and being a struggling single father is even more controversial,” he said. “But being a single father, struggling, and being a black single father is where the problems really lie.”

Still, being a single father is Brown’s primary identity. His son is his world. “For me, I grew up without a dad. So when I took on the choice of being a single father, I had to take on basically being the mother, too,” his voice trailed off. “Everything that [my son] deals with, I have to deal with it by myself.”

In a precarious emotional and financial circumstance after the divorce, Brown had to find his way as a single father in a financially difficult position. This was all happening in Oxford, at Riverside.

“Oxford is a wonderful place, but you have to fit a mold,” he said. “In Lafayette County, you don’t have that pressure. In the city, you have to look a certain way, dress a certain way, you have to look professional, they don’t want you to look shabby, you have to keep your home in a decent manner. But in the county, it’s different.”

Riverside was going to be torn down. It had already been decided. The apartment complex, which had been home to some families for four and five generations, which was walking distance from a grocery store and a bus stop, which would host packs of children playing together outside of their homes, would be leveled.

A 2014 report from Housing and Urban Development determined that there were air quality, electrical, fire, waste and infestation hazards across the complex. Many units were also out of date, without central air conditioning, among other conveniences.

The residents, 41% of whom had an income below 30% of the median income, received letters saying their leases would not be renewed. The residents would be able to get Section 8 vouchers and would have a year to find a new place to live, but they couldn't stay in their homes any longer.

"They didn't leave nobody without something," Brown said, adding that every person had a home at which to use a voucher before the complex closed for good. In a community that had a suspicion that the city was only interested in serving students and the rich, though, this letter did not improve the image.

"It's hard to find people to talk to in Oxford about a sensitive subject in Riverside," Brown said. "A lot of people felt like [the city was] just throwing them out of their home and just sending them any kind of way. I understand how they feel, because when someone tells you, even though you give them stuff, that you've got to move and that they've got to tear this down... people don't like to move. It's like Oxford was saying 'forget about the poor and suffering; it's all about the rich,' I know I heard that a lot from people."

Brown did not agree completely with this sentiment because the vouchers were a boon for many. He and his son moved into a house much better than the apartment they lived in at Riverside. Still, he said that it was as if the government, from federal to local level, said “here you go,” with a decision. The people living there had no say in the decision, he said, and this was nothing new for people with lower incomes.

“My apartment at Riverside was a little shabby, but I liked the fact that I had a three bedroom,” he said. He turned the third room into a home office.

When he left Riverside, he moved to a two-bedroom unit just down the road from his old home into a quieter area. Built in the 60s or 70s, his new home has more conveniences and is much neater, he said.

“I like where I live now because it looks better, looks cleaner,” he said. “Everything is up to date. At Riverside — I don’t know what it was — the apartment could never stay warm. Now it’s warm. I’ve got an upstairs and downstairs. Riverside... [was] kind of creepy. But I liked Riverside because of the fact that it was home. Riverside felt like home. If you walked outside, you’d see all the children playing.”

The community, Brown said, was the true loss of Riverside being torn down. “You walk outside [at Riverside], and you’ve got the whole neighborhood playing and having a good time. Where I am now? It’s okay. It’s home, but not like Riverside was. Riverside [being torn down] was good and bad. Good for the community, and bad for the community’s memories... Riverside is deeply rooted in the community.”

Brown said that the community members did not stay in contact with one another as they moved. “When we went our separate ways, we cut ties,” he said. He does not know how to contact many of his past neighbors. They moved out one by one as the year

went on. Brown moved out in May so the move wouldn't interrupt the school year for his son, who moved from a head start program to Bramlett Elementary school. Many residents moved out in June, he said.

“I was never against them tearing down Riverside. What I was against them doing, mainly, was them tearing down the history of Riverside. It meant a lot to people. They could have torn it down and rebuilt it,” he said. “If they had torn it down and rebuilt it, it wouldn't be as controversial of a topic as it is when they just tore it down and left it.”

Even as the Riverside community dissolved, Brown said he thought of Oxford as a good place, fundamentally. It's his home. “I feel like Oxford is a wonderful place that's overpriced a lot — a lot, a lot. But it's still a wonderful place.” He has been particularly happy with his experiences with the school system in Oxford. His son was a part of the Pre-K program, which works to include children from low-income backgrounds.

Brown was also very happy with his interaction with the housing authority, but he said this was probably, in part, because of a connection he had with someone working there before he moved in to Riverside. Brown's biggest motivation for being in Oxford, it seems, is to better his son's life.

“You can just walk around [in Oxford] and see the scene. It's very peaceful,” he said. “Where I grew up at, it's small, and it's peaceful, but you have more children doing wrong than you have them doing right. And in Oxford, there's always something to do. The university has stuff that you can do. The school has stuff that you can do. There's always something for the children to do.”

He wants a better life for his son, but he also wants a better life for others in his same position. Later this year, Brown plans to go to real estate school and invest in real

estate as he saves money. “I feel like everybody deserves to have *that* home, and I want to be the person to give them that home.”

These narratives have shown the significance of policy changes in social services as well as the significance of how those policies are implemented. Though the public housing complex and rent vouchers provided vital support for the residents interviewed, the community of Riverside still felt that their voices were ignored in the process. Policy and culture are both important to promote inclusion and equity. The move to vouchers was a positive thing for many residents in that they had better housing, but the loss of community is still important.

Oxford is not an inclusive place by almost all accounts, and as long as this underlying culture of inequality is dominant, no policy will be enough to bring justice to the community. The changing of that underlying culture is slow, but knowing the stories of just a few individuals demands action. This is a primary role of media in a community: to tell the stories that are untold and unheard, to promote the voices that have been ignored.

A CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL  
Where Oxford and America can go from here

Like the United States' centuries-long battle with racism, classism has been an incessant and horrific blight on America's soul. People were denied countless rights because of the money that they did or did not have. People were forced to face the journey across the Atlantic Ocean because they did not have enough wealth, were denied marriage with some people because they did not have enough wealth, were stripped of their rights to start families because they did not have enough wealth, were denied the right to vote or be treated as a full citizen because they did not have enough wealth, were often left to die from the neglect of society — as if they were less than human — because they did not have the wealth that was expected of a full, honorable human.<sup>42</sup>

This is still the case today. Thousands of people die preventable deaths, if the money that exists in this country made its way to them.<sup>43</sup> Privilege can be difficult to transfer. White privilege is not something that can be taken off or transferred. Economic privilege, on the other hand, is perhaps the most transferable social asset — it's as easy as writing a check. That makes the issue of income inequality all the more disturbing. If Americans wanted this problem to go away — or at the very least, significantly improve — it would. It isn't getting better. Some research suggests that economic class is a more durable divide in society than other significant factors, such as culture and language, which does not promote inclusion and care of people experiencing poverty in the future.<sup>44</sup>

Oxford is at a critical place in its struggle to include people with lower levels of income and wealth. Now that the shift toward vouchers over brick-and-mortar government housing has come to the town, the question remains: will Oxford be like other towns that have used vouchers to integrate people experiencing poverty into the community to become full members, or will those using the vouchers eventually be pushed out because they no longer have a designated space in town? With a blatant disregard for the appearance of inclusion in town in some respects, like two Confederate monuments — one of which stands on a town square with businesses created for the affluent, it is not unthinkable that Oxford will soon become unlivable for people with vouchers. On the other hand, with apartments marketed toward students finding it difficult to remain afloat financially, perhaps those with vouchers will find apartments to rent. But it does not seem that money was ever the issue. Vouchers provide the most reliable form of income for landlords, and collection is easier than it would be for tenants not using vouchers.

Classism is largely about not treating people with dignity because a distorted marketplace has not allocated enough money to them for their work. It is deeply tied with racism and other forms of prejudice, because economic injustice and other forms of injustice are used to reinforce and reenergize each other. If you ask people who lived at Riverside if Oxford was their town, many would have said no. If you ask Oxford residents with economic power if the town is for those with lower incomes, many will say no as well. Everyone seems to know that Oxford is made for a certain group of people — the whiter, richer residents, mostly — and that does not bode well for the future of

vouchers being used in the city.

There are reasons for hope and signs of small progress, though. Oxford has public transportation that helps many without cars get from their homes to work and other parts of town. This collaboration between the town and university could serve as a model for other services to people in the community with financial needs. Oxford, now that the community of Riverside has been all but completely dissolved and the building destroyed, must consider how it may follow through in caring for the former residents. With the work of the Oxford Housing Authority, every resident found secure housing before Riverside closed, but that does not mean that those residents are protected for the next few years, and it does not mean that damage to their community was not done. There are a few ways that Oxford could fail to care for its residents — at least those that remain in Oxford today: by allowing them to be discriminated against for their income levels or race (as racial discrimination is often carried out under the guise of income discrimination) or by allowing the residents to be slowly priced out of an already-expensive housing market.

One easy solution to income discrimination is in the hands of the city's government: banning it through legislation. This would mean that voucher holders could not be turned away just because they use vouchers to afford housing. There are many policy solutions to encourage landlords to allow people with vouchers to rent properties, including tax breaks or insuring damages caused by tenants. The latter of these solutions perpetuates the idea that those with vouchers would cause damages more than the average renter, playing into the stereotypes that created the problem. The fact of the matter is that landlords are leaving money on the table because they have such an



aversion to people with less money, especially nonwhite people with lower incomes. Oxford has the ability to include people that are vulnerable to discrimination without costing landlords any money — it would actually be more money for them.

Outlawing discrimination based on income would not only benefit residents without affecting the profits of landlords, it could also help bring the community of Oxford to a place of more acceptance and inclusion of people from different backgrounds. There is a sharp divide between the income and wealth levels of those in the county and those in the city, and a legislative solution like the one described above could bridge the divide. This is beneficial for everyone in the same ways that other forms of diversity benefit everyone. The understandings of the world that create the city's culture would be broader and deeper; a wider range of perspectives and experiences would benefit every part of the town.

The voucher program was meant to give families with low incomes and levels of wealth the option to not be separated from all other income levels or other majorities, especially racial. When neighborhoods are diverse, not only do the residents benefit from a more diverse environment, but the overall amount and intensity of prejudice will diminish. When neighbors get to know each other, prejudices tend to dissolve. This is especially true in income discrimination, where economic advantages may be less obvious than racial differences. Laws may not come about until culture is ready for them, but they also play a role in pushing culture along, especially when it comes to the inclusion of minority groups.<sup>45</sup>

There are reasons to believe that Oxford's culture may be ready to create a more economically inclusive environment for itself. The public transit in Oxford is deeply

helpful in promoting the inclusion of people with low incomes and levels of wealth, as have the foodbank and the free services offered to the community by the university.

There is even hope on the front of affordable housing, largely being led by the group LOU-Home. The Belle Rivers affordable apartments, which will be in nearly the same location that Riverside was, will offer affordable housing for 48 families. Unlike Riverside, the families will be able to put the rent they pay toward owning the apartment, meaning that a resident who pays rent for 15 years will have over \$100,000 toward buying the unit, according to LOU-Home estimates. This model could help use vouchers effectively while also building home equity for individuals using those vouchers. Movement like this — if it continues could spell a bright future for affordable housing in the city of Oxford.

That does not mean that the closure of Riverside was a positive thing. There is a clear understanding that people with low levels of income or wealth are not as welcome in Oxford as others, especially if they are people of color. Though the policy of moving to vouchers allowed for better outcomes for residents as individual households, the cultural loss that happened when Riverside closed is significant. The disregard for that culture and of the voices of the people who would be affected by the policy represents an underlying classism and racism that still pervades the town. It may improve the lives of most of the residents, but the closure should also give residents of the town pause as to how the systems treat marginalized groups, even in small towns with seemingly inclusive cultures. Those cultures only seem inclusive for some populations. Yates sums up the sentiment of marginalized groups best: “Shutting down Riverside was a money move, as well as a skin tone one.” She knew it was coming for a long time, before the voucher

system was being widely discussed in the area. She knew because she knew the history of class and race in the city.

It isn't just in Oxford, though, or just the South. Economic and racial inequality are still alive and well all over the country, and the classist spirit that prevails causes unbelievable destruction in its wake. Should human dignity, human lifespan, everything about the human experience, be based on the number on a person's paycheck? According to the system set before us today, the answer is a resounding "yes!" Is that the genuine sentiment of people in the U.S., or is it a conclusion that has been quietly brought about by economic systems that have been thought to be unchangeable?

The crisis of economic inequality in the United States continues to grow, and the suffering that it causes is often seen as unsolvable, eternal problems. That view could not be further from the truth. It's important to understand the challenges that come with those issues nationally, but it's more important to understand how those issues affect an individual community, where change may begin. Most citizens cannot write national legislation, but many can lobby their local governments to end income discrimination or participate in organizations like LOU-Home to work for economic justice and equity. Even knowing the stories of people affected by economic inequality is a starting place. Many people don't know of the suffering that is happening all around them; listening is the place to start. When you start to see economic inequality, you can't stop — it's everywhere. We can fix it, and we've had the tools to fix it for decades.

Now, as the crisis grows, it's time to try. To stand by without action is a moral failure on the part of communities and countries alike. It is to watch preventable suffering — which we, collectively, have the ability to end — and do nothing. Inaction is the same

as considering people with less economic advantage as disposable economic resources, not human beings. The crisis is not a policy one as much as a moral one. That is why the Poor People's Campaign tags itself as "a national call for moral revival." Though the culture wars have argued that "moral decline" in the U.S. was a key issue for the national agenda, this issue, which has caused unmeasurable human suffering, was somehow omitted. The prejudice against people experiencing poverty is the same spirit as the prejudice against black people for the full history of America — what James Baldwin called "moral apathy, the death of the heart." Perhaps there is hope for ending classism and restoring dignity for people experiencing poverty, but it will take more than forming policies that are technically beneficial. It will take a change of heart, a recognition — regardless of paycheck, bank account or market value — of the inherent value, dignity and beauty of every person.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> While developed nations without liberal market economies also have inequality (inequality in the Nordics has grown considerably over time), planned economies often include safety nets that keep a minimum standard of care for all citizens in all areas of life. This is especially true in education; some countries measure inequality among children by birthday parties, because education and healthcare are so similar for all children.
- Aaberge, Rolf, Christophe André, Anne Boschini, Lars Calmfors, Kristin Gunnarsson, Mikkel Hermansen, Audun Langørgen, et al. *The Nordic Economic Policy Review 2018*, *The Nordic Economic Policy Review 2018* § (n.d.).
- <sup>3</sup> Hamer, Emily, and Sheila Cohen. “Poor Stay In Jail While Rich Go Free: Rethinking Cash Bail In Wisconsin.” Wisconsin Public Radio. Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, January 22, 2019. <https://www.wpr.org/poor-stay-jail-while-rich-go-free-rethinking-cash-bail-wisconsin>.
- Ehrenfreund, Max. “Poor White Kids Are Less Likely to Go to Prison than Rich Black Kids.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, March 23, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/03/23/poor-white-kids-are-less-likely-to-go-to-prison-than-rich-black-kids/>.
- Gibson, Kate. “Rich Americans More Likely to Live Longer than Those Lower down the Ladder.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, September 9, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/richest-americans-are-more-likely-to-live-longer-than-those-lower-down-the-ladder/>.
- Miller, Claire Cain. “Class Differences in Child-Rearing Are on the Rise.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, December 17, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/18/upshot/rich-children-and-poor-ones-are-raised-very-differently.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Shipler, David K. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. Bridgewater, NJ: Distributed by Paw Prints/Baker & Taylor, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Trattner, Walter I. *From Poor Law to Welfare State*. Simon & Schuster, Incorporated, 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> Orwell, George. *Down and out in Paris and London*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> “The Official Way America Calculates Poverty Is Deeply Flawed.” *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, n.d. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2019/09/26/the-official-way-america-calculates-poverty-is-deeply-flawed>.
- <sup>9</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.
- <sup>10</sup> “In Plain Sight: News on Poverty & Inequality in the U.S.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, n.d. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/in-plain-sight>.
- “Poverty In America: The Struggle To Get Ahead.” NPR. NPR, n.d. <https://www.npr.org/series/155932539/poverty-in-america>.
- “Our Kids Series: Narrowing the Opportunity Gap.” Our Kids Series. The Media Policy Center, 2018. <https://www.ourkidsseries.org/>.

- Desmond, Matthew. "Americans Want to Believe Jobs Are the Solution to Poverty. They're Not." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, September 11, 2018. [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/magazine/americans-jobs-poverty-homeless.html?action=click&module=Editors Picks&pgtype=Homepage](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/magazine/americans-jobs-poverty-homeless.html?action=click&module=Editors%20Picks&pgtype=Homepage).
- 11 Sowell, Thomas. *Wealth, Poverty and Politics: An International Perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.
- 12 Sowell, Thomas. *Wealth, Poverty and Politics: an International Perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.
- 13 "Globalization Has Lowered Wages for American Workers, New EPI Study Finds." Economic Policy Institute, March 22, 2013. <https://www.epi.org/press/globalization-lowered-wages-american-workers/>.
- Shieler, David K. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. Bridgewater, NJ: Distributed by Paw Prints/Baker & Taylor, 2009.
- 14 Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. London: Faber and Faber, 2015.
- 15 Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted*. Crown/Archetype, 2016.
- Shieler, David K. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. Bridgewater, NJ: Distributed by Paw Prints/Baker & Taylor, 2009.
- Axinn, June, and Mark J. Stern. *Social Welfare: A History of the American Response to Need*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2008.
- 16 Orwell, George. *Down and out in Paris and London*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- 17 hooks, bell. *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2004.
- 18 Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: the 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. London: Atlantic Books, 2017.
- 19 Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: the 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. London: Atlantic Books, 2017.
- 20 Winthrop, John. *The Humble Request of the Massachusetts Puritans, and A Modell of Christian Charity by John Winthrop. 1630*. Boston: Old South Association, 1916.
- 21 Hardt, Hanno. *Myths for the Masses: An Essay on Mass Communication*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.
- 22 "David Shieler: To Address Poverty in US, We Have to Understand It." *The Globe Post*, August 2, 2018. <https://theglobepost.com/2018/08/01/david-shieler-poverty/>.
- 23 Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted*. Crown/Archetype, 2016.
- 24 "David Shieler: To Address Poverty in US, We Have to Understand It." *The Globe Post*, August 2, 2018. <https://theglobepost.com/2018/08/01/david-shieler-poverty/>.
- 25 Stiglitz, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.
- 26 Stiglitz, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.
- 27 Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Radical Right," April 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315514574>.
- 28 Pierson, Paul. *Dismantling the Welfare State?: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- 29 Kurzer, Paulette. "The Politics of Ideas in Reforming the Dutch Disability Fund." *Wiley Online Library*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, November 21, 2012. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/gove.12005>.

- 30 Turner, Margery Austin. “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Housing Voucher Program,” June 17, 2003.
- 31 Turner, Margery Austin. “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Housing Voucher Program,” June 17, 2003.
- 32 “Voucher Holders Need Not Apply: An Audit Report on the Refusal of Housing Choice Vouchers by Landlords in the Austin MSA,” November 2012.
- 33 Thomas, Jacqueline Rabe. “How Wealthy Towns Keep People With Housing Vouchers Out.” ProPublica. *The Connecticut Mirror*, January 9, 2020. <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-wealthy-towns-keep-people-with-housing-vouchers-out>.
- 34 Thrush, Glenn. “As Affordable Housing Crisis Grows, HUD Sits on the Sidelines.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, July 27, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/27/us/politics/hud-affordable-housing-crisis.html>.
- 35 “Editorial: End Section 8 Housing Discrimination.” *Los Angeles Times*. *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-section-8-discrimination-law-homeless-20190419-story.html>.
- Stewart, Nikita. “New York City Sues Landlords Who Refuse Government Vouchers.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, June 20, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/20/nyregion/nyc-government-vouchers-lawsuit.html>.
- Board, The Inquirer Editorial. “Too Many Philly Landlords Shutting the Door on Fair Housing: Editorial.” <https://www.inquirer.com>. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 28, 2018. <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/editorials/housing-discrimination-vouchers-urban-institute-fair-landlords-20180828.html>.
- Moore, Natalie. “Civil Rights Group Finds Housing Discrimination In Chicago.” WBEZ Chicago, January 10, 2019. <https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/civil-rights-group-finds-housing-discrimination-in-several-chicago-communities/45b03806-dafe-42dc-96e5-74aa3039fb9b>.
- 36 “Expanding Choice: Practical Strategies for Building a Successful Housing Mobility Program,” March 2020.
- “Crafting a Strong and Effective Source of Income Discrimination Law (PRRAC, March 2020).” Poverty and Race Research Action Council, March 19, 2020. <https://prrac.org/crafting-a-strong-and-effective-source-of-income-discrimination-law-prrac-march-2020/>.
- 37 Turner, Margery Austin. “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Housing Voucher Program,” June 17, 2003.
- “Expanding Choice: Practical Strategies for Building a Successful Housing Mobility Program,” March 2020.
- 38 Leung, Charles Ka Yui, Sinan Sarpça, and Kuzey Yilmaz. “Public Housing Units vs. Housing Vouchers: Accessibility, Local Public Goods, and Welfare.” *Journal of Housing Economics* 21, no. 4 (December 2012): 310–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhe.2012.08.002>.
- Ellen, Ingrid Gould. “What Do We Know about Housing Choice Vouchers?” *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 80 (January 2020): 103380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2018.07.003>.



- 39 Haveman, Robert. "Do Housing Vouchers Work?" *Pathways* Spring, no. 2020 (n.d.): 15–17.  
[https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/media/\\_media/pdf/pathways/spring\\_2013/Pathways\\_Spring\\_2013\\_Haveman.pdf](https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/media/_media/pdf/pathways/spring_2013/Pathways_Spring_2013_Haveman.pdf).
- Ellen, Ingrid Gould. "What Do We Know about Housing Choice Vouchers?" *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 80 (January 2020): 103380.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2018.07.003>.
- 40 Miles, D. R. Bailey, Barbara Samuels, and Craig E. Pollack. "Leveraging Housing Vouchers to Address Health Disparities." *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 2 (January 2017): 238–40. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2016.303565>.
- 41 Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- 42 Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: the 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. London: Atlantic Books, 2017.
- 43 "Unnatural Causes: Explore Health Equity: California Newsreel." Explore Health Equity. California Newsreel, 2008. <https://unnaturalcauses.org/resources.php>.
- 44 Maxwell, Rahsaan. (2016). Cultural Diversity and Its Limits in Western Europe. *Current history* (New York, N.Y.: 1941). 115. 95-101.
- 45 Mezey, Naomi. "Law As Culture Law As Cultu." *The Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 13 (n.d.): 35–67.
- Berman, Paul Schiff. "The Enduring Connections Between Law and Culture: Reviewing Lawrence Rosen, Law as Culture, and Oscar Chase, Law, Culture, Lawrence Rosen, Law as Culture, and Oscar Chase, Law, Culture, and Ritual and Ritu." *GW Law Faculty Publications & Other Works*, 2009.
- Bodnar, John W. "How Long Does It Take to Change a Culture? Integration at the U.S. Naval Academy." *Armed Forces and Society* 25, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): 289–306.