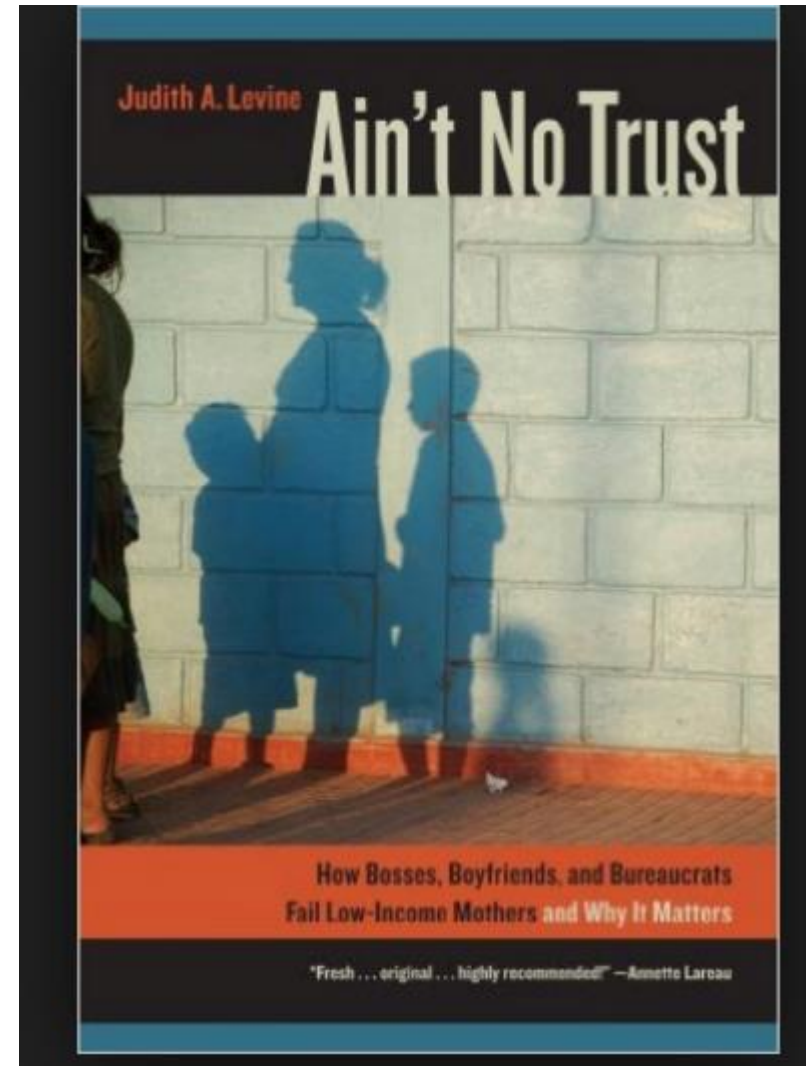
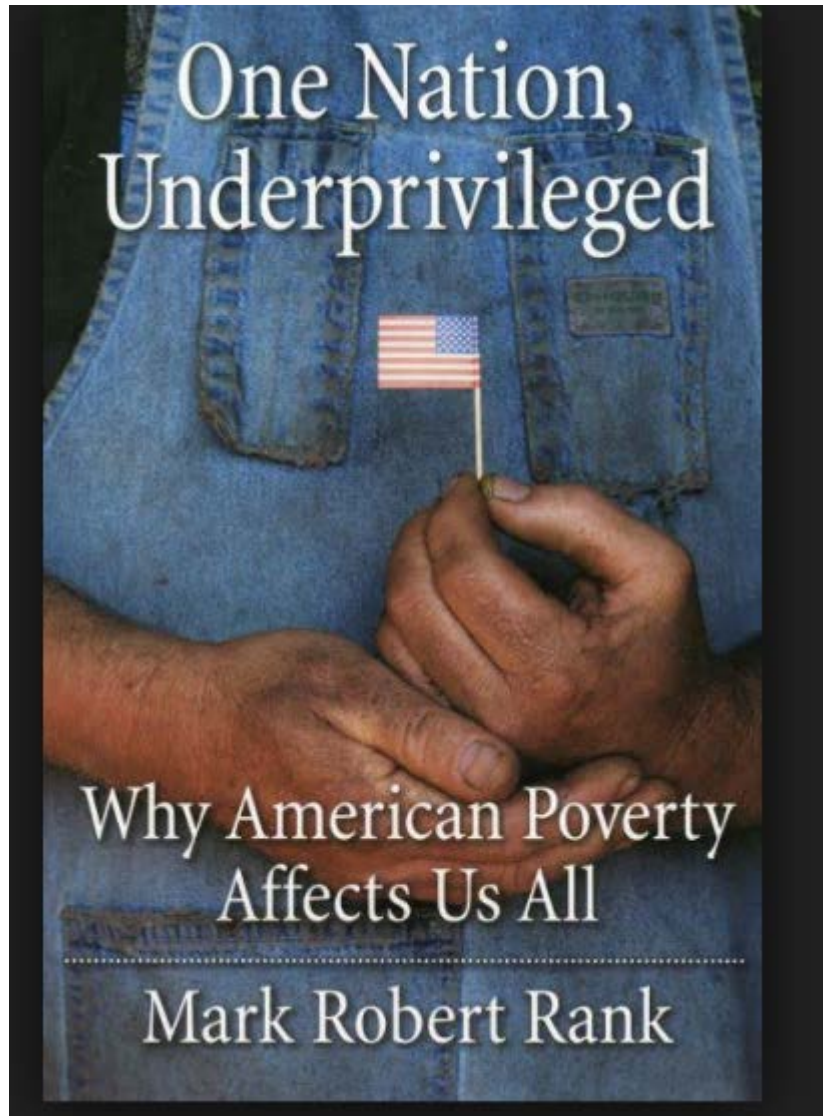


TANF Summit Opening Plenary: Reflections, Resilience, and Recommendations to Improve Family Well-Being

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Suggested Readings in Sociology of Poverty



Sociological Research on TANF and Family Well-Being

- Qualitative research: what it adds to the discussion
- Great Recession: early lessons and next steps
- Higher Education: ongoing need amid increasing costs
- Domestic Violence: still a major issue
- Social Psychology: free-floating anger and understanding the neuroscience of poverty and its implication for policy

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- Why qualitative research?
- What does it add to the discussion?

THE GREAT RECESSION

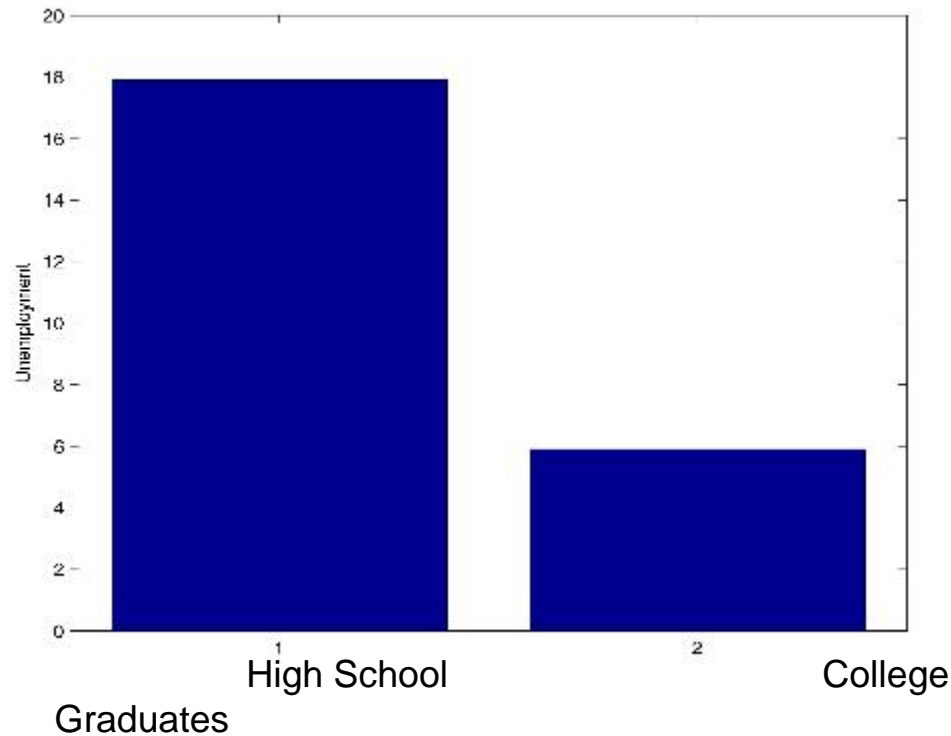
- Longest post-war recession, with “its origins in a unusually dramatic financial crisis.” (Grusky, Western, & Widmer 2010: 4)
- Included an “increase in joblessness has been greater, the long-term unemployed are a larger fraction of total employment, and the recovery of the labor market, in terms of job growth and falling unemployment, has been very slow” (2010: 4).
- GR had a deep impact on American families, especially those who were low-income. Research shows that low-income families are usually the first to feel the effects of the recession or an economic downturn, and as a group they are some of the last to recover from a recession.
- U.S. poverty rate increased each year during the GR, peaking at 15.3% in 2011 (Census 2012).
- Poverty rate is now 14.5%, the first time it has started to fall since 2006 (Census 2014).

U.S. Poverty During GR

- More people experienced economic struggles during the Great Recession than in any other time in the last 40 years.
- Low-income and near low-income adults are working more but are falling behind economically.
- Extreme poverty has grown from 1/4 of the poor to almost 1/2 of the poor. These are families who are living on less than half of the federal poverty line.
- Child poverty rates are also high and not falling as the economy recovers.
- The number of adults in the U.S. who are working but still poor has increased by almost **double** since 2000 (US Dept. Labor 2002/2011).
- TANF has been called the “least responsive” social program during the Great Recession (MDRC 2010 and California Budget Project 2011).

GREAT RECESSION, EDUCATION AND WAGES

- During Great Recession, workers with a Bachelor's degree had lower unemployment rates and higher income during the recession than those without a college degree (US Census Bureau 2012).



MY RESEARCH: REFORMED AMERICAN DREAMS

- ✧ In 2006, I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 45 mothers on CalWORKs (California's TANF program) pursuing higher education in San Francisco and Alameda Counties (Oakland).
- ✧ Participants were recruited through community colleges and universities in San Francisco and Alameda (Oakland) Counties, through the centers on campus that serve low-income student parents, and through Low-Income Families' Empowerment through Education (LIFETIME), a grassroots advocacy organization for mothers on welfare pursuing higher education.
- ✧ Follow-up interviews conducted in 2008 with 25 participants.
- ✧ Third interviews conducted in 2011 with 35 of original 45 participants (78% retention rate).

LOCATION OF RESEARCH: SAN FRANCISCO AND ALAMEDA COUNTIES



LOW-INCOME MOTHERS' PERSPECTIVES

- ❖ Research shows that low-income families are usually the first to feel the effects of the recession or an economic downturn, and as a group they are some of the last to recover from a recession.
- ❖ However, what happens when low-income women graduate amidst the biggest recession the nation has experienced since the Great Depression?
- ❖ The experiences of participants in my research provides longitudinal “on the ground” perspectives about higher education, employment/unemployment, poverty, access to social safety net programs, and the recession, and we can gain important insights into intersection of these trends.
- ❖ The purpose of this research was to uncover how mothers who pursued higher education while on welfare fared after graduating amidst the Great Recession. Further—to understand which characteristics strengthened or devastated their experiences in the recession.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ✧ What factors lead mothers to pursue higher education while on welfare?
- ✧ What challenges do they encounter?
- ✧ What resources help them to pursue education?
- ✧ What role do advocacy social service organizations play?
- ✧ How did they fare during and after the Great Recession?
- ✧ What implications do their experiences and perspectives have for TANF reauthorization and state implementation?

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Percent (n)</u>
White	24% (11)
Black	42% (19)
Latina	20% (9)
Asian-Pacific Islander	7% (3)
Other/Mixed	7% (3)
Total	100% (45)

<u>Advocacy</u>	<u>Percent (n)</u>
LIFETIME member/client/leader	53% (24)
Not Involved	47% (21)
Total	100% (45)

<u>Number of Children</u>	<u>Percent (n)</u>
1	54% (24)
2	20% (9)
3	15% (7)
4	9% (4)
5	2% (1)
Total	45

PARTICIPANTS' DEGREES COMPLETED DURING RESEARCH STUDY

Degrees	Pursuing in 2006	2011 Highest Completed Degree
Associate's	60% (27)	29% (10)
Bachelor's	33% (15)	54% (19)
Master's	7% (3)	11% (4)
Dropped Out	----	6% (2)
Total	100% (45)	100% (35)

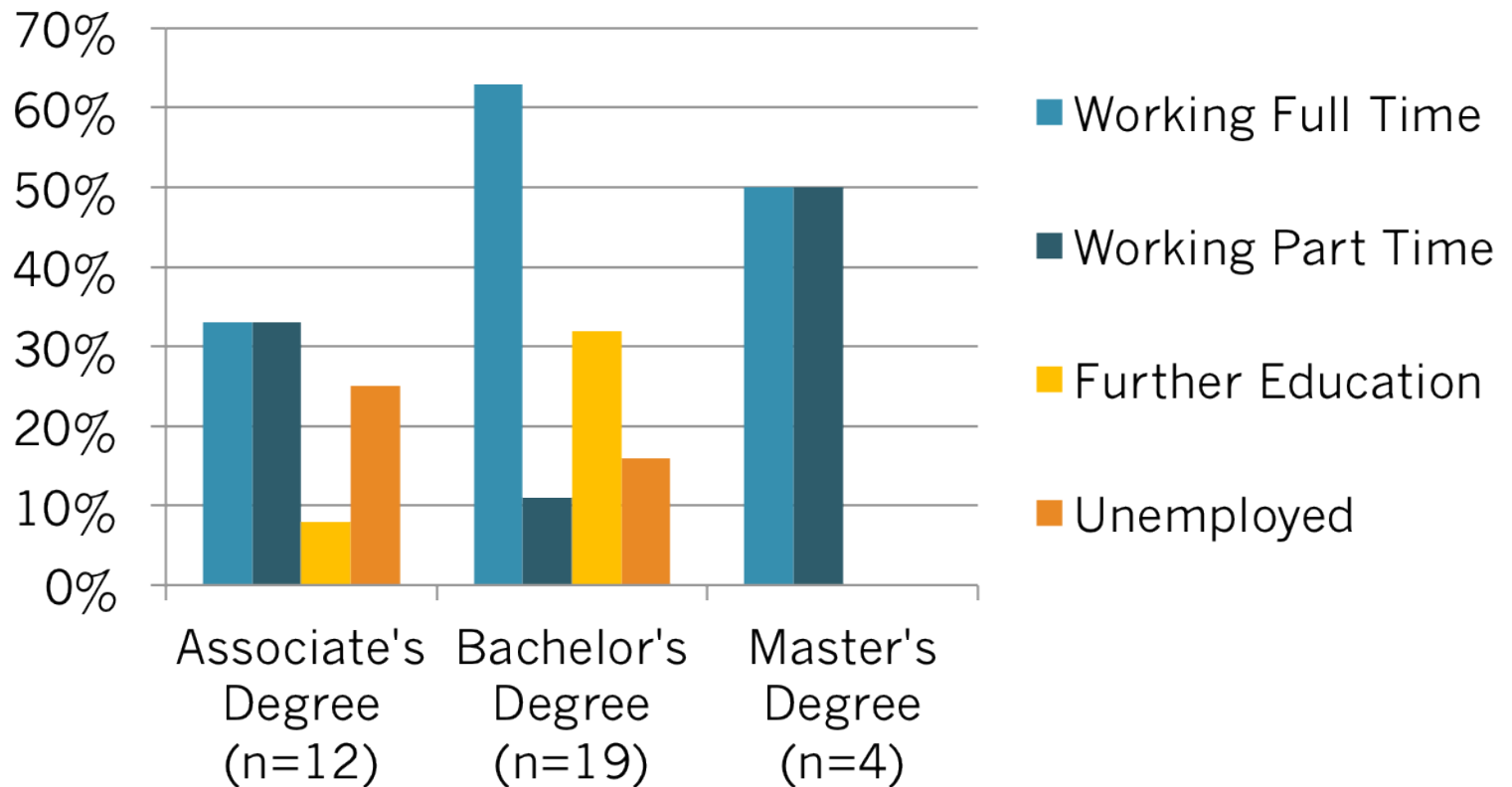
EFFECTS OF THE 'GREAT RECESSION'

- ✧ In 2011, economists had claimed the recession ended; yet, **participants have not yet felt the recovery.** Many still struggled with issues due to **un/underemployment, rising food and transportation costs, housing foreclosures, and increasing tuition.**
- ✧ Mothers **judiciously watch budgets, live on less, and carefully plan for an uncertain economic future.**
- ✧ **'Great Recession' hit hardest for those without Bachelor's degrees.** A few lost jobs or were unable to find jobs after graduating. Even though these participants might income-qualify for CalWORKs, they had already exhausted their 60-month lifetime limit and **were left with no support.**
- ✧ **Employed participants, especially those with Bachelor's degrees, felt their education or degree was instrumental in keeping their jobs during the recession.**

GREAT RECESSION EXPERIENCES

- ✧ Participants' responses about how they fared during the recession could be categorized in 4 ways:
 1. some report that they are ***doing okay, but worry***
 2. others have ***made significant cuts, are stressed about finances, but surviving*** a week at a time while trying to keep a positive attitude;
 3. a couple mention that ***poverty is poverty***, and that they are still poor in a recession
 4. a few experiencing ***deep struggle, not really getting by, and not sure how to provide food/rent/necessities.***

2011 EDUCATION ACHIEVED AND CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS



CHARACTERISTICS THAT STRENGTHEN

What characteristics made a positive difference for where they landed?

- **Finishing a bachelor's degree**, especially being allowed to finish one while still receiving welfare support.
- **Supportive transitional services**: knowing about them, having advocacy support to utilize them, and using them fully.
- **Sharing a household** with another wage earner.
- **Attending a school with supportive services** or resources to aid student completion.
- **Finding career-track employment with benefits** for the worker and dependents.

CHARACTERISTICS THAT DEVASTATE

What characteristics made a negative difference for where they landed?

- Not finishing a degree program.
- Being sanctioned off welfare.
- Experiencing domestic violence while in school and not getting supportive services.
- Not receiving child support.
- Not being eligible for or utilizing supportive transitional services.
- Not being able to find a job that pays a livable wage with benefits.
- Running out of unemployment before being able to find a job.
- Health conditions or lack of health care to cover health problems.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- ❖ **Increasing access to higher education for welfare parents helps families become economically self-sufficient when time-limited aid ends.**
- ❖ Through their experiences we can reflect on how expanding **access to higher education**, creating job market **supports for the working poor**, extending **unemployment assistance**, expanding **welfare**, ensuring affordable health care, and strengthening **supportive transitional services** (such as child care, mental health services, and food stamps) **increase mothers' chances of economic self-sufficiency**, helps low-income families move up economically, but can also buffer the middle-class from moving down.
- ❖ Overall, this research finds that major social policies like **universal health care, affordable housing, expanded public transportation networks, and implementing a living wage** would further support participants, and other low-income families' chances of economic self-sufficiency.
- ❖ The Great Recession exposed that the **American safety net for low-income families was shredded in the last 15 years**, and that mothers who are able to climb out of poverty, can still suffer greatly during economic downturns. **Their experiences illustrate that we need to rebuild the safety net, so that it is available to everyone during recessions.**

QUESTIONS?

Thank you!

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