



How to Help America's Poor People Build Community and Assist Each Other

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Paloma was homeless and 19 years old when she joined the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. A decade later, the energetic, vivacious, 28-year-old mother of three young children had secured housing with the organization's help and become passionate about poverty alleviation. Her enthusiasm is infectious at rallies and meetings, where other members smile and laugh at Paloma's quick wit and find comfort in her ever-available hugs. She helps others in the organization as much as she can, sharing child care and food and sometimes allowing homeless members to stay with her.

The Kensington Welfare Rights Union – and the larger Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, which has become the focus of local efforts since the Union lost private foundation funding in 2009 – is a unique group of and for poor people in Philadelphia. The need never goes away. Although the national poverty rate has declined, Philadelphia remains the poorest big city in the United States. People living in poverty in the city come to the organization when their situations are dire, when they must find a place to live and have nowhere else to turn. Most are homeless, recently escaped from domestic violence, or at risk of losing welfare benefits, food stamps, or other crucial forms of support.

Based on in-depth interviews with 25 Kensington Welfare Rights Union members, mostly women, and 25 women using services for the poor, my research examines how poor people develop social ties. I find that members help others in need, build supportive relationships with other people in the organization, and generally have more supportive ties than non-members.

The American Dream and Social Isolation

Like most Americans, the people profiled in my research subscribe to individualism, clinging tightly to the belief that they should manage their struggles independently. They avoid social ties, considering them dangerous, and at times stigmatize other poor people. Typically, poor people believe that through hard work, additional education, and persistence, they can achieve a better life – their version of the American Dream. They blame the poor, including themselves, for their situations. They seek to be independent, because doing things on their own strengthens their sense of control and their faith in the power of their own decisions.

Poor people shun ties for fear of signaling that they are not independent. Many participants in my research avoid neighbors and regard their surroundings as places of fear, stress, crime, and violence. Not only do poor people, like other Americans, often look down on others who are poor; they also avoid social ties that might make demands on them and drain precious resources.

People join the Kensington Welfare Rights Union or the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign when dire need comes into conflict with the desire to avoid ties. At first, new members do not fully accept the organization's message that poverty should not be stigmatized. But membership leads most to recognize that personal failings alone do not cause poverty. The Union accomplishes this in part through bold rhetoric at public rallies, but also by bringing people together in shared endeavors.

Reciprocity and Social Ties

Mindful that the Kensington Welfare Rights Union helped her get a housing voucher, Paloma has opened her home to new members who need a place to stay. She regularly cooks for other members and trades child care. Although she is particularly big-hearted, all members must give back to the group and its members. Lacking paid employees, the organization depends on members to attend their rallies, staff their office, and distribute food in poor neighborhoods.

I spoke to some former members who found these practices too burdensome, yet reciprocity can also be a powerful force for good in members' lives. It makes scarce resources stretch further and forges ties of mutual support that last for years, even decades. Such support is often lacking for poor people, who stand to benefit from emotional support and a sense that they are not alone in the world with their struggles. Homeless people without family support are often the ones who turn to the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, and the organization ends up serving as a substitute family. Unlike the one-way support social service agencies offer, reciprocal exchanges of help within the organization foster trusting relationships among members, even if people have to work to participate.

A Useful Model Worthy of Expansion

The model developed by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union could be of great value to programs for poor people that bundle and coordinate a variety of services in one location. By requiring reciprocity, such programs can also create community, enabling clients to feel the power of personal investment and overcome their shame at asking for help because they are giving as well as taking assistance. Keeping reciprocal demands manageable is important; if the burden is too great, it will hinder rather than foster ties. Some members I interviewed did find the organization's requirements excessive. To avoid this, demands can be moderated; and better funding for such organizations could allow them to offer more supports to members.

Agencies dedicated to improving poor people's lives could require a reasonable number of volunteer hours in ways that work with client needs for education, employment, and child care. If such volunteering could legally fulfill the work requirements of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, today's U.S. cash assistance program for the poor, agencies could help recipients meet multiple needs. They could require clients to make contributions that fit their skills and interests, offsetting some of their costs by creating a reciprocal network for child care or housing that reduces the need for tax subsidies. Of course, spreading the model described here cannot alone abolish poverty. There is an enormous need to strengthen and better fund America's increasingly threadbare safety net. But embracing the model can help more people survive poverty with greater dignity and less loneliness. As Paloma explains, "when I'm down... [and] really need people to back me up, I have an organization full of them." Anyone might envy this level of community and connectedness. But for poor people, it is especially essential and powerful.

Read more in Joan Maya Mazelis, *Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties among the Poor* (NYU Press, 2017).