

Episode_127__Surviving_Poverty

[00:00:00] **Avi Green:** Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That's a classic American saying and it's a lesson many Americans take to heart. But most of the time is not personal decision that determine whether you make it or whether you don't. There's a whole host of factors that lead to an astounding 40 million people who living in poverty in the US. The world's wealthiest nations. So, what are these beliefs and messages about success actually end up meaning for the nation's poor people and how do organizations navigate this culture and even fight against it to help poor Americans to succeed. Hi Avi Green and this is the Scholars Strategy Network No Jargon. Each week we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. This week I spoke to Joan Maya Maselis, she is an associate professor at Rutgers University in Camden and author of the book *Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties Among the Poor*. Here's our conversation.

[00:01:20]: **Avi Green:** Joan Maya Mazelis. Thank you so much for coming on No Jargon

[00:01: 23]: **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here

[00:01:27]: **Avi Green:** You start your book off a story of a woman who you call Betty. Tell me about Betty.

[00: 02: 23]: **Joan May Mazelis:** Alright, so, Betty is 31. She is mother of one child, a 2 year old, she's Latina. She lives in Philly but is originally from the NY area and she moved to Philly in part to accept some pretty negative ties with her family. She had bad experience with her own family and her husband's family. She grew up in the NY area with her parents and 4 younger brother and she had a number of older male relatives in her life. She didn't tell me who but there was an older male relative that sexually abused her when she was a child. She told her parents and they didn't believe her. And it was also a source of strain between her and her parents. Her mother then, when Betty was an adult, her mother never liked Betty's husband, she wouldn't let them stay in the house. So Betty and her daughter stayed in her mother's house but her husband slept in a van outside of their home. His mother wasn't really more welcoming to Betty either. Leaving NY to go to Philly was for them to start over. And to try to have a more positive next chapter of their lives.

[00:02: 42]: **Avi:** So they get to Philly and they live there in poverty. You write that the belief in individualism, the belief that Betty is responsible for whether she succeeds or not, or she is completely responsible for that play a crucial role in her life. Tell me about that.

[00:03:01]: **Joan:** Yeah, so, Betty is receiving welfare, she feels really guilty about it. Even though she has an extensive work experience she's in a job training program sponsored by welfare, trying to get her off welfare and back to work. And she just blames herself for everything that is wrong with her life. She thinks she's not a good enough mother, she thinks she's not a good enough wife, she thinks she's not good enough worker, provider for her family, and every step of the way she doesn't talk about how other people or how the government, or how the job market, might be holding her back, she talks about her own failures, and her own inadequacies

[00:03:43]: **Avi:** So for you as a researcher, how do you judge, whether Betty is sort of right about her own assessment that she is to blame for all of this.

[00:03:54] **Joan:** So you know as a researcher you want to validate what people tell you. Their own experiences through their own eyes and it matters a lot how they see their lives. And in some ways she can be the author of her own story, but at the same time there are things that are in the wider picture that I can see that she can't not just because I'm outside of her so I'm more object but because I've interviewed dozens of other people in Philly about it. And also, I knew about what was going on in the wider labor market and in Philly and the nation as a whole. So, at every step of the way, absolutely, there's some degree of individual responsibility. I think it would be naive to say there's not. People can make good choices, they can make less good choices, right, but at the same time there's so much working against her that she can't see. There opportunities that she never had because of the life she was born into. And because of where she lives and because of other things about her circumstances that are out of her control.

[00:04:55] **Avi**: One of the things that you do in your research is you look at how most of us are taught to believe that are choices really matter and therefore if we don't succeed, it's on us. How does this land on poor people that you study. Especially the poor people who are on their own.

[00:05:19] **Joan**: yeah. So they believe it completely for the most part. And I think part of that is that we all sort of believe that right. Every one of us. It's hard to get up and face everyday do the things you need to do if you didn't think your hard work will pay off. You know, why study for a test, if it's not going to effect how you do on that test. My students talk about that all the time. Why work hard if you think you're not going to be promoted at work. We all tend to believe that. Poor people live in the same society as the rest of us and are subject to the same stereotypes and ideas in the media and really at the public safety net eroded as we cut welfare in the past 20 years. There is even more focus on what individuals should do, that they should make better choices. That they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. And so I argue that the erosion of this public safety net has really increased individualism as, as a focus, as the solution

[00:06:17] **Avi Green**: It's been a little more than 50 years since president Lyndon, B Johnson, declared war on poverty and built many of the major social programs that we still have, uh, in more or less shape, um, that try to lift people out of poverty and together, these programs are, are usually called right? The social safety net. So 50 years in, can you just give a little read on how, how strong the net is doing.

[00:06:44] **Joan Maya Mazelis**: There's some holes in it. Um, it's, it's not the strongest fabric of a net anymore. Uh, there's a lot of things. The war on poverty we're very successful in, in fighting. So for example, poverty among the elderly really decreased as part of the effort of the war on poverty, through the expansion of social security and Medicare, that a much smaller percentage of poor people are elderly than they used to be. Child poverty has not, uh, had the same reduction. So people who are under 18, who are living in poverty really are still suffering at the same, um, terrible rates as they used to be. We have not, we have not successfully tackled that. But another piece of the war on poverty was welfare cash assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, which is health assistance to the poor. Those didn't start during the war on poverty, but they expanded during that time. And what we've seen in. I would say in the past 20 years or so, it was 1996, that welfare reform, which is how we talk about welfare reform has passed. And that changed completely how welfare works. So what people, even today, 20 years later, 22 years later, people still think of welfare as. Cash assistance that poor people just get. But in fact, it's time limited. You can only get it for five years total in your lifetime, and you can only get it for two years at a time before you have to fulfill work requirements. And so part of what that meant is that today, most people who are living in poverty don't receive any assistance from welfare. And so they're really trying to find a way to survive poverty without that government assistance.

[00:08:28] **Avi Green**: That's where I think the Kensington welfare rights union comes in. So you studied the neighborhood of Kensington in Philadelphia and this organization there, the Kensington welfare rights union. Tell me about that.

[00:08:43] **Joan Maya Mazelis**: So the Kensington welfare rights union, um, known as KWRU, uh, which doesn't really roll off the tongue that easily, uh, was founded in 1991 by a charismatic leader named Sherry Hunkeler. She's a well-known antipoverty activist. She ran for vice-president on the green party ticket with Jill Stein in 2012. The KWRU is a multi-racial organization of poor people for poor people. So it's not a social service agency. There are no paid staff members. Instead it's an organization that considers itself. And of and for the poor,

[00:09:22] **Avi Green**: it's basically a community association of people.

[00:09:25] **Joan Maya Mazelis**: It is! Although, you don't have to live in the neighborhoods bounds. So people live all over Philadelphia. Um, even though it has Kensington in the title, uh, it's not really just in that neighborhood, it's really all over. Um, and they work to end poverty and they want to change for peoples and the wider public's ideas about poverty. So they do things like. Stage rallies and protests to try to get housing vouchers from the city. Um,

they do things, uh, in those protests to say, you know, we're poor, we're here. It's not our fault. We're not going anywhere. Uh, we're not going to hide. We're not going to be ashamed and doing that. They really help, uh, other poor people to see that it's not all their fault. There's so many of them, how can it be? And they're trying to work against that stigma that so many poor people feel.

[00:10:13] **Avi Green:** What's it like to be a member of KWRU

[00:10:17] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Its a little demanding. I think that it can be very rewarding and fulfilling, but it is time-consuming. So, because it's not a social service organization and because it depends on members' efforts, the way another organization might depend on paid dues, that means that people have to go to these rallies and protests. They have to go to the office and put in some time, um, answering phones or helping people who walk in who have questions. Uh, they also do things to help each other. So there's a lot of shared housing with new homeless members coming for help are often housed by other people who have more stable housing. Who've been in the organization for longer because most people who come to KWRU for help. Are people who are really in dire circumstances, they're, uh, they either living on the street or they're living with, with people, they can only stay for a day or two, or they're living in their cars and they need more permanent housing. And they've heard that this organization will help them get it. And so it requires a lot of time and energy from people to give them help, but it also puts them in the same spaces with each other.

[00:11:27] **Avi Green:** How does the organization provide resources to poor people as an organization? That's, that's made up entirely of poor people. It doesn't seem like it actually has that many resources to just give around..

[00:11:41] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Exactly . So I will say that it's not generally financial resources. It's not a place where you go because you need. Have your electric bill paid and they'll just hand you money. Uh, it definitely doesn't do that, but for people who are hungry, usually someone can spare some food, people frequently cook for each other. So you might come over to someone's house and they're making a big stew and you can grab a bowl and join in. There's also a lot of, um, doubling up. Where people stay with other people. So people sleeping on someone's couch, or, you know, maybe their kids can sleep on the floor of the other person's kids room, but there's a lot of that kind of sharing housing, but it's also a kind of emotional support and a sense of community that they're able to offer. So they're very rich in resources, even though they're poor and financial resources.

[00:12:27] **Avi Green:** Can you tell me about Poloma? One of the other people that you studied?

[00:12:31] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Sure. Poloma is an activist in the Kensington welfare rights union. She came to them when she was 19, she was homeless. She had just been evicted. Uh, she and her boyfriend weren't able to pay their rent and they were put out on the street and they spent the night sleeping in a public park. And she said, I could never do that again. And that very next day, she happened upon someone from the Kensington welfare rights union who was giving out [00:13:00] free food in the neighborhood. And she said, well, what's this about? And she joined the group and she never looked back.

00:13:07: Avi: what is she like now

00:13:09 So by the time I met her, she was 28 and I'm a mother of three. The father of her kids, uh, is, is the boyfriend that she had when she was 19, when they were homeless together. And after, uh, her nine years, so far with the kids tumble of her rights union, she had secured a housing voucher with their assistance. She frequently cooked for other KWRU members. She frequently had new members stay with her people who were strangers and she let them sleep in her house so they could get back on their feet until they could find more permanent housing. Um, she also has. A really different attitude about life than I think a lot of other poor people do. She's very, um, aware that it's not all of her fault and she's very, uh, positive. She's very optimistic. She's very outgoing and friendly and gregarious. And I think, um, a lot of that helps serve her well in both pulling people to her, meaning that she'll have a lot of people to rely on, but also that she helps a lot of people. It

[00:14:11] **Avi Green:** It sounds like for Poloma and other members, they get some goods that you can count up economically, like help with housing, but they also get this stuff that, uh, is very valuable, but has no is, is priceless or it has no monetary value.

[00:14:29] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Yeah, I think that's true. You know, I think that, uh, even for a lot of sociologists who study this, I think we tend to focus on the economic aspects of material hardship. What do people get? They can, they can afford housing or pay their bills, but we forget about these sort of other, maybe less measurable, less tangible things that I think matter a lot as well. The sense of. Community the sense of feeling supported, um, having emotional support, feeling less alone, feeling like you have people to talk to who know what it's like to have gone through what you've gone through is really invaluable. And I was thinking about the difference between Poloma and Betty, because they really do, um, exemplify the difference between people who are in the Kensington welfare rights union and people who aren't. So Poloma is social and outgoing and. A helps alot of people and has a lot of people to rely on. So she feels her life is really rich and she has this level of security because she has the strong, private safety net, but Betty is lonely and isolated with no one to talk to. She cried during our interview and she blames herself. And even if she makes more money or if she gets a job after completing her training program, it might not be consistent or stable or reliable without a strong public safety net. And no private safety net to catch her if she falls. So when I think about how we, we think about moving forward, what we can do is really about how to strengthen communities and how to foster social ties among poor people, so that they have more, that more of them can have the emotional support and the sense of connectedness that would help them and that they, they deserve

[00:16:10] **Avi Green:** those organizations create a, uh, kind of, uh, resilience.

[00:16:14] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** I think they do. I think they do. And I also think that it allows us to see that, you know, the other piece of this puzzle is when we focus on what individuals can do on their own, we tend to kind of lose the forest for the trees we miss, what else is going on? Right. It's not all about those individuals. It's also about what's going on around them. Um, and it's also not just about what they can do as individuals, but it's what we, as a society can do.

[00:16:38] **Avi Green:** So Philadelphia has a mayor and a city council and to some degree rules itself, but of course, a ton of the policies that affect what happens in Philadelphia are actually made in Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania, uh, and some are of course made in Washington, DC. If, if any of those policymakers wanted to learn from your research, what, what would you say? Some of the bottom lines are.

[00:17:02] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Well, so I think we need to think about how agencies and public policies and we, as members of society, can support people who are living in poverty in a wider variety of ways than we do now, because we have a lot of focus on individual supports, removal of barriers, getting people more education or training, for example. And those things are really great. But even if everyone had the right education and training, we'd still have poverty. Right. So if individuals need job training and education and mental health counseling, but they also need community and comfort, and emotional support. So we can support families and communities and neighborhoods instead of just focusing on individual-level support. And I think that would really be ideal. I think it would help people succeed more, but I also think it would get us to slightly less than the intense focus on what individuals should do to better their situations and that would help reduce the stigma about poverty. Um, it would also help allow us to help more people at once I think, and, and changing really how we think about poverty and its causes and at a very practical level. I think that one of the things that the Kennestone welfare rights union did very well, that other organizations could do as well as requiring a little bit from members. Because that helps people feel invested and feel connected and it helps them really build social ties with each other. And then they have people to rely on. So rather than the model of say a typical food bank where you can go once a month and get a bag of food, but there's nothing you can do to invest in more help. And there's no way that you can kind of. Repay that favor. I think an organization that would allow people to, you know, give a few hours of their time to help out with childcare or help in some other way, depending what the organization offers before they get help. And as they're getting help, I think would really help those people feel that it wasn't so much charity as more something that they were part

[00:18:58] **Avi Green:** Do you think there's a, there's a push, uh, and has been a push for years, but there's a new push to require work in order to get TANIF. That is to say cash assistance or in order to get Medicaid, um, in, in many states, Would you suggest, um, allowing this volunteer work of actively participating in these organizations to strengthen communities, would you want to see something like those work requirements be satisfied by, by doing that kind of volunteer contribution?

[00:19:33] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** Well, absolutely. But I also think that work requirements are problematic anyway. I mean, I think most people want to work. They don't really need the requirement to do it. And so before welfare form, before work requirements, people were not on welfare for very long. They typically left quickly and would get a job as soon as they could. And sometimes if that job fell through, they end up back on cash assistance. But also, I think that before these particular requirements, people were also able to invest in education. They were able to invest in, in other ways that might make them more self-sufficient in the long run, rather than just having to get a job, to get any job. And I think it's a mistake to not allow us to interpret. Um, requirements maybe a little bit more creatively, so we can think about, uh, volunteer work. We can think about education, meaningful education that would really allow people to become more self-sufficient as ways to fulfill those requirements absolutely.

[00:20:29] **Avi Green:** I find myself thinking in your work about research by K Schlozman and Henry Brady and Sid Verba who write about how that that's actually one of the places where money in politics hits. You know, we think about money in politics in terms of campaign contributions and that sort of stuff, but, but money in politics is about not having the time, the energy, the lack of stress in your life to be part of the types of organizations, everything all the way up to a political party and all the way down to a neighborhood community group that are the sort of glue that, that give people meaning and also clout. Um, but if you're, if you're poor, uh, it's just so much tougher to get access to those kinds of, of organizations.

[00:21:15] **Joan Maya Mazelis:** I think that's true. I mean, I think there's a few reasons why part of it is lack of time or lack of resources. Um, but I think part of it is that even though the ideal seems to be an organization that would bring together people in a community at all, from all different walks of life, that reality is. What happens most of the time in those organizations is that it's the people with more money and more experience and more comfort level with those sorts of organizations that take on the leadership roles and are most active in the group. And often it's the people who have less money and less education who feel like maybe this isn't for me, I'm not sure I fit in. I'm not sure I have something to contribute. One of the things that I think is so valuable about the KWRU is that, um, everybody is at that lower income level and they're all made to know that they all have something that they can contribute. And so I feel like that's really valuable, even though in some ways they would have more clout. If they had lots of wealthy people who were politically connected as part of the organization, I think they would also lose some of the sense of community that they're able to provide for poor people.

[00:22:21] **Avi Green:** Joan, thank you so much for coming in to no jargon.

[00:22:24] **Joan:** Thanks so much for having me

[00:22:26] **Avi:** Thanks everybody for listening to today's episode, to read more of Joan Maya Mozella's work, check out scholars.org/nojargon. Of course, there's lots of other podcast episodes there as well as you may know if you've been listening for a while. No jargon is the. Podcast of the scholar strategy network. We're a nationwide association of over 900 researchers in 46 states. Join and put us over the top to 1000. If you are a researcher, the producers of our show are shear Roscoe and Dominic Duma. And the sound engineer is JM bys. If I sound good, it's because of them. And if you liked this show, please subscribe and rate us on apple podcasts or wherever you get your shows.