Introduction

Social Ties among the Poor in an Era of Unprecedented Inequality

The only solution is not a Rambo, Superman, or Bionic Woman solution. It’s not an individual solution. The only solution is a collective solution. We should unite together, and figure out creatively how we should survive, survive today, and how we can fight for tomorrow, where we’re not simply surviving, but we’re thriving. . . . Our strength is in our unity, is in our coming together, and not in some kind of exaggerated, individual effort to try to deal with it. I mean, you’ve got to do the best you can, but as an individual you should seek to unite with others.
—Walter, 55, Kensington Welfare Rights Union member

A married thirty-one-year-old Latina mother of one young child, struggling to get by, Betty is intensely alone. Long dark hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, large pink-tinted glasses frame her sad eyes during our interview; she lifts her glasses to wipe away tears as she tells me in a quiet voice how overwhelmed she is with managing household responsibilities and her perceptions of what she might be doing wrong as a wife and mother. Betty speaks freely and openly with me, although she is soft-spoken and at times seems self-conscious. She is friendly and outwardly positive even in the face of her palpable sadness.

A high school graduate and a current welfare recipient, Betty has extensive work experience in retail customer service. She is currently enrolled in a welfare-mandated customer service job training program. Her two-year-old daughter attends a day care paid for with a child care subsidy, but Betty finds it substandard and feels her daughter doesn’t like it there. She yearns for a job and wants to be a better wife and mother
than she feels she is. In our interview, she seems to blame herself for every problem in her life. She sees herself as inadequate.

Betty grew up with her mother, father, and four younger brothers in New York, just outside the city. Her father had other children from a prior relationship as well; all her siblings and half-siblings were boys. She’s been married for two and a half years. Betty’s family members do not form a private safety net for her—instead they are a source of stress. As a child, she was a victim of sexual abuse by an older male relative, and when she told her parents about it, they didn’t believe her. Her mother didn’t approve of Betty’s husband; for an entire year she and her daughter lived with Betty’s mother while her husband, not permitted in the house, slept in his van outside their home; they could not afford a home of their own at the time. Meanwhile, her relationship with her mother-in-law was no better, and they fled New York for Philadelphia in part to get away from these relatives. She and her husband argue frequently: He doesn’t understand her depression, and he spends his earnings as a construction worker on food and entertainment for himself without including his wife and daughter in his expenditures. She pays the rent out of her welfare check, which she gets by telling the welfare office she and her husband are separated, and in some ways they are: he sleeps downstairs and she upstairs. They are having problems and likely would be physically separated if their financial situation allowed, but she tells me, “Right now he’s staying in the house because I don't want him sleeping in the car.” She takes care of their daughter alone, and she doesn’t always have enough food to eat.

Betty rarely speaks to her neighbors. She tells me, “I don’t get into that.” She seems not to have friends in Philadelphia, and while she has some extended family in the city, she can’t count on family for help. “They stay to themselves,” she says. She feels they do not want to associate with her. In our interview, she focuses on what she as an individual can do to better her situation. She holds out hope that the job training she’s enrolled in will lead to stable employment with adequate pay, and she clings to the notion of an imagined future as an art gallery owner, but with no clear notion of how she might achieve that goal. She admits to suffering depression worsened by deep loneliness. But when I ask her, “What should people who are struggling do?” she tells me they should have a positive attitude.
Betty’s situation might be substantially improved had she the comfort of friends around her for emotional support as well as practical assistance; people sometimes pool resources to eat meals together or watch one another’s children. Without others to whom she can turn in moments of need and crisis, she’s left feeling bereft of the kindness and care that could prop her up from the depths of lonely despair. But she also lacks the sort of private safety net the poor require to survive in the context of the post-welfare reform era’s disappearing public safety net. As Robert Putnam has noted, social networks comprised of family have gotten smaller, but nonkin social networks even more so.\(^1\) He also notes that the general collapse of social networks disproportionately affects people in lower social classes; Betty’s case, his work suggests, may be typical.

* * *

Paloma is three years younger than Betty, and Latina as well. She also struggles to survive. I meet Paloma through KWRU, and through the organization she’s come to know and trust a network of people. Like Betty, Paloma graduated high school and had a series of jobs—as varied as cashier, restaurant hostess, file clerk, lifeguard—she credits to being “articulate” and knowing “how to dress for an interview,” but she describes the salaries as inadequate for survival. In our interview, she’s energetic, vivacious, and passionate about poverty alleviation. Paloma speaks rapidly to me. Her enthusiasm is infectious at KWRU rallies and meetings; other members smile and laugh at her quick wit and she freely gives hugs to all those she comes across.

Her father died when Paloma was only fifteen. That rite of passage was difficult for her and for her mother, who turned to alcohol. Mother and daughter grew apart. Paloma moved out of her mother’s home, and when she was nineteen she and her boyfriend became homeless when they were evicted from their apartment for not being able to pay their rent. They slept one night in a public park, and the next day she found members of KWRU distributing food from a van. The organization gave the couple a place to stay; she is still an active member today.

Paloma and her boyfriend had three children together and remained a couple for ten years. He was a drug user and ultimately they broke up because of it. Now she has a Section 8 housing voucher,\(^2\) secured with
KWRU’s help, which provides her and her eight-, five-, and two-year-old a measure of stability and security. Food stamps, but not cash assistance, help to sustain her and her family, and she has received donated clothing and furniture through KWRU, leaving her with few expenses compared to those without a housing subsidy or such donations. She has opened her home to new members of KWRU who need a place to stay. Paloma believes those struggling to get by should join others to work for survival together.

Paloma tells me that many people travel to social service agency after social service agency to get resources; just surviving can be a full-time job. So she has sympathy for those who are struggling and sell drugs in order to survive, but tells me they should join an organization to work for their survival. She describes staying to herself in her neighborhood out of a concern for safety, but longs for a neighborhood where everyone knows each other and helps one another. KWRU provides Paloma with the community she desires—a safe space where she doesn’t have to stay to herself. The group expects members to help one another and to attend rallies it organizes to protest conditions faced by the poor. Paloma tells me through KWRU she’s learned her poverty couldn’t possibly be all her fault because there were so many others facing the same situation. She sees people in KWRU as her family and plans to continue working with the organization to combat poverty.

* * *

As the public safety net has eroded, society places increasing pressure on individuals and private safety nets. This is turn encourages the language and perspective of individualism, in a vicious cycle. We need to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps because there really is no alternative, no understanding of the collectivity of society taking care of those in need. As risk is privatized, individualism as a philosophy is bolstered and social ties seem counter to prevailing ideology; people resist others’ aid, enacting an individualistic focus in everyday life.

Betty and Paloma illustrate a crucial distinction in the lives of the desperately poor, one at the center of the analysis in this book. Desperate poverty looks significantly different with social ties than without, and in spite of their many similarities and their shared experience of poverty,
these two women have very different lives. Betty’s life reflects the problems of living without an alternative to self-reliance; Paloma’s reflects an alternative to which few poor people have access.

Inequality and Poverty in the United States

As I write this in 2016, it seems that everyone is talking about inequality. As Jill Lepore argues, “What’s new about the chasm between the rich and the poor in the United States . . . isn’t that it’s growing or that scholars are studying it or that people are worried about it . . . [but that] American politicians of all spots and stripes are talking about it, if feebly: inequality this, inequality that.”3 Lepore is correct: while the richest of the rich have been amassing greater and greater amounts of wealth, deep poverty has been increasing and the American Dream is further out of reach for more people than it ever has been before. While the Great Recession and Occupy Wall Street helped shine new light on the issue, the gap was vast a decade ago.4

Nonetheless, many prominent figures, including Pope Francis, have drawn increasing attention to the injustice of the prevailing economic system and growing inequality,5 and many politicians have responded, at least in their rhetoric. This has included a number of candidates for both the Republican and Democratic nominations for the 2016 presidential race,6 suggesting growing concern about the issue. Hillary Clinton has called attention to policies that have exacerbated inequality by increasing the wealth of the rich through tax cuts and corporate loopholes.7 Bernie Sanders has noted, “income and wealth inequality has reached obscene and astronomical levels,” stating, “inequality is worse now than at any other time in American history since the 1920s.”8 While in Sanders’s case, this constitutes a continuation of the political rhetoric he’s voiced for decades, his prominence suggests the political resonance of this discourse. Many in America acknowledge that inequality robs people of good lives while privileging a few. Even politicians who believe America can sustain the present state of inequality recognize their constituents’ concern over the issue, particularly as the Great Recession has made downward mobility, and the deep poverty participants in this study have experienced, more apparent.
Inequality and poverty are of course different, but they are inextricably intertwined, and worsening inequality exacerbates poverty.\textsuperscript{9} Elise Gould and Alyssa Davis find that growing inequality is the primary reason the poverty rate has remained elevated over the last several decades. . . Since 1979, increasing inequality has been the largest poverty-boosting factor. . . Despite our growing economy and the fact that poor workers are now more educated than ever, rising inequality has worked to keep low-income people in poverty.\textsuperscript{10}

As inequality widens, deep poverty is more apparent: in a society where the wealthiest have so much, the fact that those at the bottom have \textit{nothing} is all the more striking, which may explain the growing attention to these issues. And deep poverty has been increasing since the mid-1970s, following an almost three-decade period of shared prosperity.\textsuperscript{11} President Richard Nixon advocated in 1969 that the government pay a guaranteed minimum income to families who could not provide for themselves.\textsuperscript{12} Instead, beginning in the 1970s the United States began to embrace neoliberalism, a theory that a free market can best solve social problems.

As Joseph Stiglitz argues, “Our skyrocketing inequality—so contrary to our meritocratic ideal of America as a place where anyone with hard work and talent can ‘make it’—means that those who are born to parents of limited means are likely never to live up to their potential.”\textsuperscript{13} Jennifer Silva identifies a counterintuitive effect of this change: the abandonment of systems that support upward mobility seems to support American faith in individualism. She argues that people “are left with a worldview that conceives of rights in terms of ‘I’s’ rather than ‘we’s,’ with economic justice dropped out of their collective vocabulary. Rooted in everyday instances of disappointment and betrayal within the family and institutions, the cultural logic of neoliberalism resonates at the deepest level of self.”\textsuperscript{14} She describes a “therapeutic discourse” made ubiquitous through self-help literature, Oprah Winfrey’s ideas, and Alcoholics Anonymous that strengthens a “culture of self-reliance fostered by neoliberalism in the economic sphere by teaching young people that they are responsible for their own emotional well-being in the private sphere.”\textsuperscript{15} She notes,
“Happiness comes to be understood as the by-product of individual will, rather than structural circumstances.”

Silva argues that the self-blame she documents in her participants has its roots in an economic shift, even as the therapeutic ethos feeds it: “As power shifted from labor to big business, industrial work grew less and less secure and valued. This decline in the economic sphere was accompanied by a shift in working-class consciousness, leaving its members to believe that they had no right to demand equal opportunities because their own shortcomings were blamed for their lack of success.” People explain inequality by focusing on their own failings rather than seeing wider structural explanations, attributing success to character or innate power rather than being born advantaged. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb identified a similar dynamic four decades earlier, writing that society requires people to “understand what happens to them in life in terms of what they make of themselves.” Individualism has long been a part of American society, but it began to drive U.S. policy in a new way in the mid-1970s.

Neoliberalism, the Privatization of Risk, and Social Ties

The rhetoric of reducing the size of government and the dependence of people upon government pushes society toward what social scientists call the privatization of risk. And in the context of the privatization of risk, Jacob Hacker argues that Americans have heard the message “loud and clear . . . that they alone are the ones responsible for their successes and their failures, that they alone are the ones who need to invest in education, take on a mortgage, ensure that they have health coverage, put away enough for their retirement—and bail themselves out . . . if things go bad.”

Neoliberalism supports deregulation, tax cuts, and the privatization of public services. The institutions created after the Great Depression to shelter the most vulnerable in society have worn away to almost nothing under its sway. For example, federal housing initiatives have dismantled public housing, privatizing housing options for the poor in programs such as market-based housing and voucher programs. The end result is a considerably shrunken pool of affordable housing options for the poor. Dependence on food banks has risen as funding for WIC (vouchers or checks through the Women, Infants, and Children pro-
gram to purchase specific foods)\textsuperscript{21} has shrunk.\textsuperscript{22} These policies privatize risk and contribute to inequality, insecurity, and poverty.\textsuperscript{23}

In the past, people had security through long-term employment at one place, a good pension, and health care benefits. As these conditions changed, the state declined to take a large role in funding higher education, health care, or retirement for everyone. A college degree became necessary but not sufficient to establish a stable career, health care costs skyrocketed, and employers abandoned pension programs. Individuals now assume nearly every risk involved in obtaining education, coping with illness and injury, and growing old. Congress insistently requires citizens to take on this risk.\textsuperscript{24} Government programs would effectively require all taxpayers to share these risks, and pension programs used to distribute them, at least, among a large group; privatization and individualization impose the risk on each individual.

The consequences of the privatization of risk are severe. Losing a job or having a health crisis can trigger insolvency. Personal debt has skyrocketed as people use debt to pay for necessities such as medical care and housing. Parents pay growing portions of their income for housing to get their children into high-performing public school districts, taking on risk to better prepare their children to take on their own risks when they become adults. Even areas of growth in federal funding signify the neoliberal shift: college loans, rather than grants, grow, in a further shift of financial burden to individuals. Crippling college debt has ripple effects in adulthood and for the next generation.

As Jacob Hacker outlines, “The notion that certain risks can be effectively dealt with only through institutions that spread their costs across rich and poor, healthy and sick, able-bodied and disabled, young and old”\textsuperscript{25} has been largely abandoned. Under the influence of what he calls the “Great Risk Shift,”\textsuperscript{26} “winner-take-all has become the defining feature of American economic life.”\textsuperscript{27} As to everyone else, a lack of knowledge, skills, credentials, and money makes it impossible to protect themselves from crises, be it unemployment, disability, family dissolution, rising health costs, housing instability, and in some cases food insecurity.

In a cruel twist, neoliberalism makes social ties far more important than they used to be and urges people to protect themselves from poverty alone. As Marianne Cooper writes, “If today’s families want a safety net to catch them when they fall, they need to weave their own.”\textsuperscript{28} As
responsibilities for and burdens of economic risk shift from government and business to families, private safety nets become crucial for survival. But at the same time, the privatization of risk is both cause and consequence of an individualistic perspective, which in turn breeds social isolation, hindering the ties between people that are the foundation of private safety nets.

The corollaries to neoliberalism privilege individualism and personal responsibility— theories that deny the structural causes of inequality even as they support policies that worsen them. This rhetoric nonetheless makes neoliberalism sound appealing—as if it’s not about abandonment, but freedom: it promises efficiency and escape from governmental control while stealing state aid and a reliable social insurance system. Neoliberalism teaches people they must solve their problems alone, because they, not a rigged system, caused their problems. Deep poverty signifies that you’ve done something wrong, and you alone can and should fix it. These moral lessons further bolster neoliberal policies to reduce the government’s role in addressing poverty and inequality. This may explain why Americans still have confidence in their own chances and continue to want equal opportunities rather than equal outcomes, in spite of evidence that policies that appear to privilege equal opportunities actually do not provide them.

Neoliberalism thus encourages people to avoid social ties—that is, people with the potential to offer them social support and social capital. The types of support are limitless, but in this study included information exchanged regarding social services; emotional support and validation; help with day-to-day needs like food, transportation, housing, clothing, and child care; help with finding a job; and help with money.

Social capital consists of resources gained through social ties with others, but it’s more than support. Social capital consists of “assets gained through membership in networks” or “the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between people.” These definitions highlight the importance of trust, cooperation, mutuality, and continuity of relationships. Social capital allows individuals to alternately draw on and invest in continued support. The more you use your social capital, the more of it you have, for it is predicated on investment. Social capital is multifaceted support arising from ties built on reciprocity, trust, and continuity.
Neoliberalism has to a great extent robbed participants in this study of the option to pursue social capital. The non-KWRU participants in this study exemplify Silva’s statement that “The rise of neoliberalism in the economic sphere has prompted a radical re-envisioning of social relationships at the deepest level of the self.” KWRU members, on the other hand, have built social ties, ones that sustain for years and even decades, creating a safety net of relatively strong fabric. In this, they challenge the individualism that neoliberal rhetoric has encouraged. This building of ties does not, by itself, challenge privatization. It also does not mean that KWRU members have ceased to blame the poor, including themselves, for their poverty. But they have rejected to some degree the implication of this blame, which is that they are better off alone. KWRU’s core values reject poverty stigma, and its broader mission—to demand public funding to address poverty’s consequences through protest—challenges neoliberalism’s policy prescriptions, even if not every member fully subscribes to these ideas. This study contrasts KWRU members with a group that eschews nonkin social ties—not because they are able to survive alone in neoliberal society, but because they rely on kin ties, which, as this book will explain, they find compatible with the logic of individualism. This book contrasts a group who take the neoliberal cue to focus on individualism with a group who—to degrees that vary among individuals—reject it, and this book interrogates the causes and consequences of these differences.

Study Design and Comparison

Betty and Paloma represent the two groups of participants I interviewed for this book. Betty avoids social ties and Paloma relishes them. Betty focuses on what she feels she has done wrong and how she might make better decisions in the future that would lead to a future out of poverty. Neoliberalism has set the stage for her life: exacerbating poverty and dissolving the public safety net, it makes a private safety net of social ties all the more important to survival. But by convincing people that they as individuals are alone responsible for their place in the socioeconomic system and seeking to obscure the structural causes of poverty, it encourages avoidance of social ties and hindrance of collective approaches to poverty reduction. Paloma rejects neoliberalism in
that she welcomes the social network that envelops her and uses it to survive. Many KWRU members do not share her wholesale rejection of neoliberalism in that they do not embrace the perspective that they are not to blame for their poverty, or believe that KWRU’s aim of building a collective response to poverty and demanding greater state aid for the poor broadly is achievable, but Paloma is not alone in her perspective.

In addition, most KWRU participants recognize the positive power of social ties in their lives, because even ties with people whose resources are as limited as those of KWRU members become productive in the context of its model.

This study relies mainly on qualitative, in-depth interviews with twenty-five members of KWRU, including Paloma, and twenty-five individuals, like Betty, who are not members of the organization. I also conducted participant observation with KWRU members. Both groups are poor. There are similarities but not equivalencies in their economic situations: for example, participants from both have histories of low-wage work and welfare receipt. Participants from both groups live in varied Philadelphia neighborhoods: Kensington, West Kensington, West Philadelphia, and the Northeast; there are also non-KWRU participants who live in South Philadelphia and Germantown. KWRU participants have more experience with homelessness and KWRU participants are less likely to have kin ties that meaningfully contribute to their ability to survive. They are also older and have more children on average. The appendix provides more details on the study design and provides both summary and specific information on the participants. Other research has found that poor people without kin to turn to make do with available social services and with help from others with whom they form sometimes fleeting ties. This book identifies an unusual circumstance between KWRU members: they formed sustainable ties with one another, without kin relationships, unlike anything nonmembers described and generally absent from recent research on poor people.

The KWRU members who participated in this study are generally more disadvantaged than the non-KWRU participants; their extreme disadvantage is what led them to KWRU for help. Thus, my findings likely understate the benefits of KWRU membership, because I am comparing them to people with more advantages than they had when they joined. Without KWRU membership, KWRU participants would be in
Introduction

depth poverty with virtually no aid from anywhere. While most study participants had been homeless at some point, all of them had some sort of shelter—however tenuous—when we spoke. My methods did not involve seeking participants at homeless shelters or who were panhandling on the streets of Philadelphia, but KWRU participants would have been reduced to such measures without the organization.

In this book, I take a sociological theoretical perspective. This means I recognize that human beings have agency, or the ability to make choices, but the choices they have are limited. As Robert Putnam notes, “Researchers have steadily piled up evidence of how important social context, social institutions, and social networks—in short, our communities—remain for our well-being.”

The communities that surround individuals matter. And the conditions that surround those communities matter as well. People are not masters of their own fates, although their decisions affect their lives in important ways. Like all Americans, poor people have choices, but poverty circumscribes those choices.

A Distinctive Organization in the Poorest U.S. City

Cheri Honkala was a welfare recipient in Minneapolis in the 1980s. When she decided to apply for public assistance and for a Pell Grant to further her education, the state charged her with welfare fraud due to rules prohibiting simultaneous grant and assistance receipt. She pled not guilty and the trial caught the attention of the National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU). Honkala became interested in NWRU’s work taking over abandoned properties for homeless families. She started a group called Up and Out of Poverty Now and another called Women, Work, and Welfare. As she tells me, “One concentrated on welfare recipients and the other on homelessness, and we were taking upwards of 75 houses at any given time. Then I began to win hundreds of houses for families in Minneapolis.” Honkala relocated to Philadelphia, and the city has been her home ever since. She founded KWRU in April 1991. The Kensington name has symbolic significance, and the organization’s office is based in the neighborhood, but its target membership and mission are not bound to the neighborhood. It is a statewide organization, and Kensington is a North Philadelphia neighborhood that was once a manufacturing center but is now among the poorest areas in Pennsylvania, in the poorest
big city in the United States. Whereas 15 percent of the U.S. population was poor in 2014, including 27 percent of children, nearly a third of Philadelphia’s population lives in poverty. It has the highest rate of deep poverty—defined as 50 percent of the official poverty line—among all big cities in the United States, at 13 percent.41

While gentrification has witnessed some recent increases in Philadelphia’s population, it’s apparent to anyone walking through Bella Vista one day and West Kensington the next, just a few miles directly to the north, to see how “renewal” is confined to particular spaces while others remain isolated, neglected, and devastated. Kensington is emblematic of late-twentieth-century deepening poverty and widening inequality in the United States. It was also the site, in 1903, of a historic strike by 100,000 textile workers—at least 10,000 of whom were children—to demand mill owners reduce their work week from sixty to fifty-five hours, and, later that same year, the origination point of a march by children organized by Mary Harris “Mother” Jones to demand better child labor laws.42 Many KWRU members do not live in Kensington itself, but they live with its legacy and its struggles.

Philadelphia is one of the largest cities in the United States, even as it lost population in the twentieth century as both cause and consequence of economic decline and crime. The city is ethnically diverse,43 owing in part to successive groups of immigrants that have moved into some neighborhoods as more affluent residents have moved out. Historians note that these patterns started a long time ago: “The great Industrial Revolution of the 19th and 20th centuries came to Philadelphia early . . . and left Philadelphia early.”44 Philadelphia lost 75 percent of its manufacturing jobs between 1955 and 1980, and the population declined from 2.1 million in 1950 to fewer than 1.5 million in 1999, only coming back up to a bit over 1.5 million as of 2014.45

Kensington reflects these trends. It was historically a white working-class area of the city, but over time it’s become poorer and more racially diverse.46 Many of the manufacturing jobs Philadelphia lost came from Kensington, which was a mill town from the 1860s to the 1930s.47 In the twentieth century, Kensington experienced industrial growth and working-class prosperity, but a decline occasioned by deindustrialization followed. Kensington is now home to the city’s poorest whites as well as the most desperately poor of the Puerto Rican migrants.48
Deindustrialization took a toll on much of Philadelphia, as did a lack of investment in the city’s public schools and services, but the disappearance of textile manufacturing ravaged communities like Kensington. In his ethnographic study of Philadelphia after deindustrialization, Robert Fairbanks II describes Kensington as “one of the most heavily blighted pockets of spatially concentrated poverty in the United States,” noting that over half the Kensington population lives in poverty and nearly half of the area’s properties are vacant.49

Patricia Stern Smallacombe describes the neighborhood’s industry in the twenty-first century as “a surviving though greatly diminished manufacturing, distribution, and retail sector; nonprofit institutions serving an increasingly impoverished and hard-living population, many of whom receive government assistance or other forms of disability insurance; and a thriving underground economy of drugs, prostitution, and other legal and illegal activities.”50 Weakened social institutions have made things worse, lowering trust and collective efficacy.51

KWRU defines itself as “a multi-racial organization of, by and for poor and homeless people. We believe that we have a right to thrive—not just barely survive. KWRU is dedicated to organizing of welfare recipients, the homeless, the working poor and all people concerned with economic justice.” KWRU has three main stated goals. The first is to “speak to the issues which directly affect our lives: poor people have been excluded from debates, such as welfare reform, which have huge impact on our families. We are committed to tell the stories of what is really happening in our lives and in poor communities across the country.” The second goal is to “help each other, and all poor people get what we need to survive: We are committed to seeing that all people have the basic necessities of life—food, clothing, utilities, medical care and housing. We have assisted over 500 families in obtaining housing and utilities.” This includes temporary shelter in Takeover Houses and Human Rights Houses—the former being an extralegal response to lack of housing, in abandoned buildings, and the latter being homes they rent with foundation funding. The final goal is to “organize a broad-based movement to end poverty: We know that there is enough to go around in this, the richest country in the world. We believe that the American people are a just and loving people and that we can build a movement, led by poor people, to end poverty once and for all.”52
KWRU is an organization founded by and run by the poor. There are no paid staff members. The organization relies on the commitment of a few key members, poor people themselves, who’ve been involved for years and run the group’s activities on a daily basis: plan protests, apply for grants, and put together educational materials. Those who go to colleges and universities to speak about poverty and the organization’s work put much of their stipends back into the organization and keep the rest, but leaders have no other source of income through the organization. KWRU relies a great deal on the free labor of student interns, idealistic college students who want to help the organization with their antipoverty efforts.

During my research, KWRU maintains an office in West Kensington where people in need can come by for help. They provide aid with navigating available social programs, like helping people fill out paperwork for the welfare office and calling caseworkers. They call utility companies to request payment plans or bill reductions for both members and people who walk in looking for help. They distribute donated food in poor neighborhoods. KWRU offers shelter for homeless families in three forms: Takeover Houses, Human Rights Houses, and the homes of members. Takeover Houses are squats in abandoned properties. KWRU legally rents or owns the Human Rights Houses, which foundation funding makes possible. It should be noted that Human Rights Houses have cost as little to purchase outright as a few thousand dollars in the poorest parts of Philadelphia. Members who get help from KWRU are expected to give help in return, a topic discussed in chapter 4. They volunteer in the office and on food distributions, and attend rallies. As they become more economically stable, usually through securing permanent housing with the group’s assistance, they frequently allow new homeless families to stay with them, continuing the cycle of support.

At the time I began my research with KWRU in late 2003, members and activists had a busy daily schedule and the office on North 5th Street was always abuzz with activity, typically focused on local protests as well as providing practical assistance to members and walk-ins, as I’ll describe below. In 2009, three years after the conclusion of my research, KWRU lost its major foundation funding, which reduced its ability to provide temporary housing for homeless families. Over the next few years KWRU effectively merged with the Poor People's Eco-
nomic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), an umbrella organization encompassing dozens of groups, spearheaded by KWRU leaders in 1998. In addition, in 2012 KWRU founder Cheri Honkala ran for vice president of the United States on the Green Party ticket with Jill Stein. As of 2016 PPEHRC continues to maintain a local office where members assist people who call or walk in needing assistance.

In June 2015 PPEHRC cosponsored a U.S. Social Forum in Philadelphia (USSF), during which members of various organizations came from throughout the country as well as several international locations to discuss issues such as mass incarceration and climate change. I heard one attendee refer to the four-day conference as “Occupy but organized,” referring to Occupy Wall Street. PPEHRC was one of two “anchor organizations” (along with Disabled in Action) for the USSF. The website and the conference program listed over twenty partner organizations.

As KWRU did in 2003–2006, PPEHRC in 2016 engages in what they call “projects of survival” to “reclaim vacant government owned homes to house homeless families and individuals that are often turned away from city shelters or are victims of fire, domestic violence, and/or foreclosure” through housing takeovers; they also distribute food to those experiencing hunger and food insecurity and recently, are engaging in urban gardening efforts as well. PPEHRC has an educational arm, similar to KWRU’s, to cultivate the skills and capacity among members to lead campaigns to effect change and the organization has run bus tours around the country. The group’s protests, like the 2003 event I described in the Preface, are focused on getting needed assistance. PPEHRC confronts the push toward neoliberalism directly and consciously, through the practice of working with others instead of as individuals, and by using what public resources there are and demanding more of them.

Perspectives on Social Ties

The contrast between study participants like Betty and study participants like Paloma is at the heart of Surviving Poverty. Betty is struggling to survive virtually alone, in job training as part of an effort to improve her lot through human capital investment, but with little hope of improving a life of subsistence. Paloma has found a measure of security
through KWRU. Poor people tend to avoid social ties, as Betty does, but my observations suggest that, in spite of the cost of building them, social ties offer the poor benefits, both emotionally and in terms of their ability to survive. The benefits are even stronger when the ties are sustainable—that is, when circumstances enable them to last. I define sustainable ties as ties between nonkin that provide deep, meaningful support and have the potential to last over time. The situations that brought study participants to join KWRU open up the possibility for people who might otherwise “stay to themselves” to build such ties. While they are still very poor, they value these ties and use them to make their lives better.

Falling Without a Net

Like the poor generally in America, study participants face a tattered public safety net and a structural context that provides only the most limited of opportunities. A number of scholars contend that policy makers presume the existence of a private safety net, comprised of kin, to justify the ongoing dismantling of the public safety net. As Judith Levine argues, welfare reform also included rhetoric about transferring responsibility for poor families from the government to the community. She states, “One of the underlying philosophies of reform was that it was not government’s job to permanently support those in need. Instead, reformers believed, it was the job of communities—of friends, of family, of neighbors—to support each other. By removing the entitlement to cash assistance benefits and creating time limits on those benefits, government was giving the message that it was time for social networks to step in to fill the void.”

Many, including many of the poor themselves, praise welfare reform and the ideas it represents, that families and community should help the poor in lieu of government programs. However, this study demonstrates a reason that welfare reform has failed: the private safety net cannot fully compensate for the lost support. Kin support may be weak even when it is available—the family members of poor people do not have many resources either. But it is often absent, and individuals like Betty who lose that support are at risk of homelessness—as are their children.

The assumption that all poor women leaving welfare have families willing and able to fill the void is faulty. Low-income people struggle in
the United States; they struggle to survive and to get ahead, to hold on to hope and hold on to self-worth, and to find voice and find community. As a large body of recent research demonstrates, those with the greatest need for support are the least likely to have it available to them. Private safety nets are simply not always available to people to fall back on in times of need.

Given their limited opportunities, the participants in this study consider the options they do have and they make choices about how to live their lives and how to survive; many dream of a future out of poverty. Factors beyond their control structure the ways in which they seek out assistance. For participants like Paloma who choose to join organizations, the actions of those organizations—which also reflect structural constraints—matter as well. As Mario Luis Small and Scott Allard note, “The fewer the resources to which people have access, the more their circumstances will depend on the organizations in which they participate, the systems in which these organizations operate, and the institutions governing the behavior of both.”

Even though I would assert that Betty might benefit from KWRU membership, this is not a story about how poor people's choices structure their circumstances; rather, it takes the structural reality of systemic disadvantage as a starting point. Betty would still be poor, and KWRU membership might not work for her, although it did benefit most members. Critics of studies of social ties, networks, and capital assert that such studies blame the poor for their plights; I have no intention of placing blame on the poor for their poverty. Larger structural forces cannot be ignored. This book asks, given the structure, what do people do? How does the structure shape and limit their agentic decisions?

The poor are not a monolithic group, so their choices and strategies vary within the confines of the possibilities available to them. The attitudes and actions of the poor do not only reflect structural determinants. Even faced with virtually identical material conditions, people respond to their situations differently, and this difference does not reflect deviant values but the use of different strategies to cope with their material situations, all typically combined with mainstream cultural norms and values. The structure shapes the context in which people make decisions, and insufficient resources shape poor people's lives in countless ways. My research reveals many details of the challenges study
participants face, and this book recounts those insights; I acknowledge agency without blaming people for their poverty, recognizing they are actors who make choices within a realm of constrained possibilities. Participants who isolate themselves seek a leg up and out of poverty by avoiding ties with others they perceive as potentially dangerous or resource-draining. Those who work together with others to survive seek a private safety net to help them avoid the worst consequences of the direst poverty. As I document in this book, all these people want to avoid welfare and to be self-sufficient and independent, rendering efforts at attitudinal change misplaced and misguided; blame for poverty does not rest on the shoulders of the poor. Unfortunately, this fact contradicts the prevailing opinion of the American people, as Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson write: “More than most societies, Americans believe that people rise or fall as a result of their own efforts, and therefore get what they deserve. . . . We distribute blame and praise to individuals because we believe that it is their individual actions, for better or worse, that matter. People get what they deserve.”

This book’s discussion of the varied strategies of the poor presupposes the fact that poverty is structurally created; responses to it are structured as well; those responses and their consequences are the focus of this book, joining other studies of how low-income people develop and maintain support networks. Margaret Nelson, in her 2005 study of single mothers in poverty, notes:

The more closely I looked at the choices single mothers made in every realm of their lives (and perhaps especially in their negotiations for material and emotional support), the more it seemed that those choices were shaped by ideological constraints that single women neither invented nor chose. . . . Public morality matters to single mothers, and it especially matters because of the sharp awareness that their family form is subject to denigration. The lives of the single mothers I studied thus provide evidence of both the effects of structure on decision making and of opportunities to exercise agency.

Ties are not a cure for what ails the poor. Only a massive revival of the public safety net, reversing the state’s neoliberal neglect, and systemic changes in the organization of the labor market can offer such a
panacea, but the reality of the experiences of those I interviewed and spent time with suggests the importance of social ties in their lives. This book describes the tension between social isolation and social ties among the poor and the consequences of each for a set of participants in a major urban area; its findings inform our understandings of what shapes the attitudes and decisions of the poor, how they survive, and the benefits they may gather by being tied to one another. My findings suggest that social service agencies might use social ties to alleviate, but not end, poverty.

In spite of the enormous gains poor people in America could gather from social ties, they are at great risk of social isolation. An individualistic ideology tends to pervade their views about survival, poverty, and mobility. Although America’s structural context prevents poor people, by and large, from ascending the class ranks, a tradition of individualism and striving for a better life reveals itself in the outlook of most poor people. Poor people typically expend a great deal of energy just surviving, and consequently only a subset of the poor actively engages in strategies to achieve mobility out of poverty; even these strivers can only accomplish so much in the context of formidable structural barriers. They imagine dreams fulfilled by personal effort and sound decision making, even though structural realities circumscribe the potential impact of their individual actions.

Like most Americans, most of the fifty people I interviewed in my research prioritize individualism and consequently wish to refrain from relying on others. Individualism leads them not only to hopes of more education and a better job but also to avoid social ties; development of and reliance on ties contradicts their perspective on the importance of going it alone. But great need sometimes overwhelms pride and an individualistic focus and people can begin to build, lean on, and develop social ties that can provide significant support and lasting relationships. By recruiting half of the participants through KWRU, I was able to identify poor people who did create social ties and build social capital.

Social ties between the poor formed in desperation are sometimes short-lived, such as the disposable ties Matthew Desmond documented. But KWRU creates the possibility for poor people, often on the brink of homelessness and with no one to rely on, to build lasting
social ties with one another—ties that last far longer than the ones Desmond identified.

Participants exhibited a range of beliefs about the strategies best for poor people to pursue, centering on varied levels of faith in human capital investment and a tension between avoidance of and reliance on social ties. While the stretched resources of the poor mean that investing in human capital can make it impossible to invest in social ties, I found that the strongest connection to avoidance of social ties lay in a strongly held belief in individualism. My data suggest that intense need, rather than a changing view, leads to investment in social ties, but that the investment itself tends to overwhelm individualism. In fact, KWRU members often espouse perspectives prioritizing individual agency, but their need for immediate aid leads them to invest in ties in spite of this.

Researchers have long documented that survival strategies among the poor typically include reliance on social support, frequently from people in their social networks, who may have scarce resources themselves. While scholars have found extensive kin ties in poor communities,80 others have documented a lack of kin ties for some.81 Those unable to rely on family use what exists of the threadbare public safety net and piece together help from social service and philanthropic organizations. When these sources fail, some develop disposable ties with virtual strangers in order to gather needed resources, but this response is unreliable and fraught with problems.82 KWRU, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for poor people to build sustainable ties with one another and with the organization in an ongoing support relationship, one in which they can invest and on which they can draw. While the relationship can be burdensome, most study participants from KWRU recognize its value.

The Aims of This Book

*Surviving Poverty* examines how people develop and avoid social ties, and the consequences of those actions. I conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews with twenty-five members of KWRU, mostly women, and twenty-five women who were using social services targeted to the poor, between late 2003 and mid-2006 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
I also conducted participant observation of KWRU participants and obtained follow-up information in the year and a half before this book went to press, between mid-2014 and early 2016. Approximately one-third of each group identify as white, a third as Latina, and a third as African American. All sixteen whites and eighteen African Americans are native-born. Of the sixteen Latinas, three were born in Puerto Rico; only two others were born outside Philadelphia, in other cities in the United States. Consequently, this book does not portray the immigrant experience or immigrant social networks.

I establish that participants, like most Americans, subscribe to individualism, which causes them to cling tightly to the belief that they should manage their struggles independently; that they avoid social ties, considering them dangerous, in part because they stigmatize other poor people; that great need can bring people to overcome these obstacles and seek help at an organization that promises help; that reciprocity requirements make the cost of social ties very high; and that ultimately the sustainable ties KWRU provides make members’ lives better. As I’ll explain, KWRU membership is demanding. Lacking paid employees, KWRU depends on members to staff their food vans and attend their rallies; it runs on reciprocal demands, the way another organization would run on dues. Yet many members maintain their membership for years.

KWRU’s model offers important insights for agencies that seek to improve the lot of poor people in the United States. Study participants and others like them would have a better chance of surviving—and thriving—if they could pursue human capital investment, build sustainable ties, and if the services available to them provided the broad and deep support necessary to address varied aspects of their struggles. While most programs they can access consist of singular attempts at change (welfare-mandated job training, GED test preparation, parenting classes), there are programs that provide a variety of services as a bundle, in one location and with useful coordination. Such programs could also create community; if such programs required reciprocity from the clients they serve, those clients would feel the power of their personal investment and overcome their shame at asking for help, instead viewing it as a draw on their own investment. As the KWRU model suggests, keeping such reciprocal demands manageable is key; if the burden is too great, it will hinder rather than foster sustainable ties.
Beyond what personal ties can offer lies the need for other macroeconomic policy changes. KWRU describes safe, affordable housing as a human right; it is also the foundation on which the poor build stable lives. The expansion of housing subsidies and child care subsidies would go a long way to giving the poor the possibility for socioeconomic mobility. Human capital investments should yield returns as well, especially given their emphasis in neoliberal rhetoric: education and training obtained by the poor should be linked to available jobs, and those jobs should pay a living wage. Surviving Poverty concludes with some proposals for how to begin to remake the reality of social ties, human capital, and the poor’s access to them both.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 focuses on a key obstacle to changing the poor’s access to social ties. It describes the widespread perspective among study participants that through individual effort and persistence they can achieve a better life. They believe in the achievement ideology—the belief that effort will always lead to success—and that personal failings rather than structural barriers ensure that poor people stay poor. They blame the poor, including themselves, for being poor, and believe that hard work, persistence, and additional education and training will be the ticket out of poverty. They seek to be independent; doing things on their own bolsters their notion of being in control and their faith in the power of their own agentic decisions. A key part of their recommended strategies rests on avoiding social ties, in part because such ties represent a failure of independence.

Chapter 2 describes many participants’ avoidance of social ties. In general participants avoid contact with neighbors, considering their neighborhoods places of fear, stress, crime, and violence. The chapter examines reasons for keeping to oneself, including the individualistic ideology I describe in chapter 1, and the fear that neighbors will gossip about one’s problems, which individualistic ideology makes unthinkable. I argue that individualistic ideology also supports pervasive stigma about poverty, which causes participants to avoid associating with others who are in many ways like them. It makes them comfortable avoiding social ties that might require reciprocity that they might not be able
to provide—or that will be a drain on their precious resources. The findings in chapter 2 relate most strongly to participants who are not members of KWRU. But most KWRU members exhibit these beliefs and avoidances as well, making it all the more remarkable that they overcome fear, judgment, and pride to enter a situation of reliance on others.

Chapter 3 describes the great need that leads people to join KWRU. Homeless, recently escaped from domestic violence, or at risk of losing welfare benefits, food stamps, or other crucial forms of support, they seek support from an organization that could assist them to secure benefits or temporary housing. Chapter 3 describes the public face of KWRU, the difficult circumstances people confront that lead them to KWRU, how the organization addresses their practical needs, and the decision to initiate social ties with strangers to aid survival in a society that exerts considerable pressure to pursue stability and success as individuals. While some KWRU members still have stigmatized views of poor people and at times espouse individualistic ideology, the group’s mission specifically seeks to dismantle that stigma; a number of members begin to recognize that personal failings alone cannot cause all poverty. However, this change generally seems to be the result of time as a KWRU member; people do not initiate contact with KWRU because of a change of opinions from those described in chapter 2, or as a consequence of a reasoned decision to build social ties for survival.

Chapter 4 explores KWRU’s reciprocity norms, which substitute for the membership dues that members could never pay. KWRU requires a great deal from people in exchange for the help provided, reflecting the fact that KWRU leaders do not see it as a social service organization. Rather, they aim to build a network on a foundation of support exchange. They provide assistance to those who seek help, but they require members to attend rallies and protests, to visit and help out at the office, and to provide help as possible to other members. This help may extend as far as opening one’s home to a fellow member. The chapter also discusses the fact that these reciprocity requirements can be onerous and members who take them lightly may be pushed out for failing to fulfill the obligations of reciprocity in the group.

Chapter 5 discusses the sustainable ties KWRU members build through the organization. These ties are not based on kinship, but, reflecting the supportive and lasting nature of these ties, members speak of
KWRU members as the family they never had or the one they wish they had. I discuss how KWRU supports these ties, including the fact that rifts between members—even between members and a leader—do not dissolve the member’s tie to the organization, unless the member refuses to obey reciprocity norms. The relationships fostered within KWRU provide emotional support and give members a community, and a sense that they are neither alone in their struggles nor alone in the world. The homelessness that brings so many to KWRU’s doors demonstrates a lack of family support; KWRU begins to serve as a substitute family.

Building sustainable ties exacts a high cost for KWRU members. However, this very cost brings benefits: unlike the one-way support offered by social service agencies, the reciprocal exchange of help within KWRU fosters trusting relationships among members and between members and activists. The social capital those relationships provide yields instrumental support that proves key for survival. While escaping poverty is not achievable with a simple recipe of either avoiding or developing social ties, the social ties such as those available to KWRU members bring more rewards than costs.

In the book’s conclusion I propose that social service agencies would benefit from taking KWRU as a model, that this would allow them to make it possible for the poor to simultaneously invest in human capital and social capital through sustainable ties. Such agencies could require a reasonable number of volunteer hours in ways that work with clients’ education, employment, and child care needs. If such volunteering could fulfill TANF work requirements, agencies could allow recipients to meet multiple needs simultaneously. Through requiring reciprocity, agencies could foster relationships and lessen their burden. Agencies could require clients to provide services that fit well with their skills, interests, and abilities. An exchange of services could offer the benefits of social capital that KWRU can only offer in isolation from and opposition to human capital. Social capital might enable agencies to serve a greater number of people, offsetting some of their costs by creating a social network that facilitates child care or housing assistance and lessens the need for subsidies.

I also suggest a number of more general policy changes based on my findings. A lack of affordable housing and affordable and accessible child care remain the most substantial daily hurdles most poor people
face. The private safety net of social ties has historically helped fill the gap left by an inadequate welfare system, a system made more inadequate by welfare reform. But the private safety net is often frayed, not up to the task. Even as neoliberalization outsources the safety net from the public to the private realm, it weakens the threads that weave the private safety net. Agencies that strengthen the private safety net could confer real benefits, and KWRU represents a distinctive model that would make such a task possible.