



Transcript for “Low-Income Mothers and Distrust”

Featuring Judith Levine

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

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[Chancellor] You’re listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty. I’m Dave Chancellor and for this, our January 2014 podcast, we’re going to be talking about low-income mothers and the concept of trust. This past November, Judith Levine of Temple University visited IRP and gave a talk based on her book “Ain’t No Trust: How Bosses, Boyfriends, and Bureaucrats Fail Low Income Mothers and Why it Matters.” Let’s turn to Levine to learn more about this work:

[Levine] The premise of the book is that low-income mothers express a palpable level of distrust and not just in the people or institutions you might expect, like caseworkers and the welfare office, but really in most of the contexts in which they find themselves. So, they also express a lot of distrust in employers, in child care providers, in boyfriends and husbands, and even sometimes in family and friends. And, I argue that this distrust blocks action of various sorts, undermines policies that are trying to create incentives, and really is a form of inequality in and of itself. And we haven’t paid a lot of attention to distrust and I argue we really should.

[Chancellor] So, if we’re to think of distrust as a form of inequality—where low-income women experience more than their share of distrust—where is it that this distrust is coming from?

[Levine] A lot of women talk about very concrete experiences they’ve had where they feel like the people they’ve interacted with have not been trustworthy and so they don’t trust because they learned through experience not to trust. And so we could debate about whether the people they were interacting with had different perceptions of what went on than the women did, but there does seem to be a fair amount of concrete evidence that the women are often right in their assessments. That they do get cut off from benefits that they should have been eligible for, they do face a fair degree of unpleasant and sometimes unfair treatment at work, they do have childcare providers that don’t pay attention to their kids the way we all might want childcare providers to pay attention to our kids. And so, a major source of distrust is untrustworthiness.

[Chancellor] In the trust literature, there's a strong connection between trust and *risk* and some scholars argue that where there isn't much risk, there's not much need of trust. But for a lot of these low-income mothers, the risks involved with most aspects of their day-to-day lives are really high—there's rarely a financial cushion and the costs of missing a check or missing the bus even can be huge—especially when you factor in the needs of their children. As Levine was saying, given these women's experiences, distrust is a sensible reaction to their everyday experiences and interactions with people that have shown themselves to be untrustworthy.

[Levine] And, there's really a structural setup that promotes that because low-income mothers are at the bottom of every hierarchy in which they find themselves and so they don't have a lot of power. And they often feel and rightly so, that the people they're interacting with don't share their interests, and that's recipe for distrust, and they also don't have the power to demand accountability when people don't share their interests.

[Chancellor] Levine based *Ain't No Trust* on two sets of interviews with low-income women: one pre welfare reform and one post welfare reform—I asked Levine what her aim was in looking at this through the lens of welfare reform.

[Levine] I did the pre welfare reform interviews not looking for distrust, I was really just interested in why and how women were able to move into the labor market and why sometimes those exits from welfare to work are not particularly stable. And I was just struck by how much of the discussion had to do with trust and distrust and so once there was this major policy change, I became interested in whether the picture would still look that way.

[Chancellor] The welfare reform we're talking about here is the 1996 legislation that made a number of changes—but the one we think about most was the end of AFDC—aid for families with dependent children—and the introduction of TANF—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Welfare reform ended the entitlement to welfare benefits, introduced time limits, and tied receipt to a handful of conditions that were designed to promote personal responsibility.

[Levine] Welfare reform tried to create incentives for a lot of changes, for leaving the welfare rolls quickly, for entering and staying in the labor market, for using childcare so that you could enter the labor market, getting married, and relying on friends and family rather than government. And I was interested in the role that distrust was playing now that there were all of these policy incentives to essentially ignore distrust. And what I found was that the distrust is very much still there. And so of course welfare reform made big changes but I think some of the changes it hoped to make didn't happen because distrust got in the way.

[Chancellor] If it was indeed distrust that limited the success of some of the changes under welfare reform, what's the alternative? I asked Professor Levine if there were things that really

could have been implemented differently during reform—or that might be policy options now—that could change the dynamics of some of these relationships?

[Levine] To really eradicate distrust, we would need major structural change. We would need a labor market that offers much better opportunities to people and in which low-income workers have much more power to have better treatment. We would need a welfare system that was less punitive, we would need a different income distribution, we would need a labor market for low-income men that was more hospitable to them. These are very big changes, many of which are very unlikely to happen. Or, are completely unlikely to happen in the current economic and political environment.

[Chancellor] But, even without big policy changes—or a broader economic recovery, Levine says that there are smaller changes that might not eradicate this kind of distrust, but would reduce it.

[Levine] So, for instance, if welfare caseworkers, if the welfare office was organized in such a way that caseworkers had a different set of incentives, if caseworkers were sanctioned for cutting people off of benefits for which they were actually entitled. If – and I use the word entitled hesitantly because welfare reform ended the entitlement to welfare benefits but to which they should be getting. If caseworkers were held accountable for not clearly explaining welfare rules, not being transparent to people, that would shift their interest to be more in line with low-income women.

And, I think it's incredibly difficult to be a caseworker post-welfare reform. An enormous amount was asked of them, there caseloads are way too big, it's an almost unmanageable job. So, making that more manageable would go a long way to reduce mistrust.

[Chancellor] Levine says that we should also perhaps change the way we think about childcare subsidies.

[Levine] The vast majority of childcare funding that came along with welfare reform went into childcare subsidies that allow low income mothers to buy childcare but only to buy the childcare that exists in their neighborhoods. And, if their experience with that childcare is that it's—their kids come home with bruises on their heads—which some women talked about—they're not going to trust it. So, if more were put into increasing available high-quality childcare, that would reduce distrust.

[Chancellor] Of course, a lot of the mistrust in these women's lives comes from untrustworthiness in their own neighborhoods and networks. Lack of employment opportunity, incarceration, and other factors have created a situation where many low-income men lack the resources to keep up with family and relationship commitments. And, Levine

explains that even though women's social networks can be a source of support, they can also impose heavy responsibilities on time and other resources in a way taxes trust too.

Yet, in all of this, we might just think of distrust as sort of a side effect of other relational or resource issues and maybe not something we should be concerned with as its own category. Levine says this would be a mistake.

[Levine] Some might say that this is a pretty abstract concept and paying any attention to it is pure luxury when we have a recession, when we have a budget crisis, when a safety net that isn't work based is so far in our rearview mirror. But, I think ignoring distrust really is shortsighted because even given that policy environment and that economic environment, distrust matters because it undermines policy. And it also matters for anyone who cares about inequality because trust is very valuable and a lot of people in the middle class really benefit. It makes things efficient, it makes things easy, it brings all sorts of rewards. And the fact that low income people don't feel—and maybe rightly so—don't feel that they're in a circumstance that allows for trusting to be safe, is a mark of inequality.

[Chancellor] Levine emphasizes that the creation of distrust in these cases is so often the result of how interactions between these mothers and other people or institutions are structured. And so, even as policy might aim to offer opportunities or the chance to pursue opportunities, it's reasonable to conclude that a lack of trust itself could serve as a very real barrier for low-income mothers who might otherwise pursue better options.

Thanks to Judith Levine for taking the time to talk about this work. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.