

**Michigan Sociological Association Annual Meeting 2018  
Keynote Address**

**PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITIES TO FIND  
NEW WAYS TO PREVENT AND ALLEVIATE POVERTY:  
WHAT ROLE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE?**

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In my view the social sciences were originally founded for the purpose of using theory, observation, data and scientific analysis to improve the human condition. We social scientists believe that the tools we employ can help us better understand the world, yielding insights that when acted upon can indeed enhance people's lives.

If I am right about the purpose—in fact the very foundational motivation for the existence of the social sciences—then our work should be judged largely on those of our discoveries that positively impact human beings. I think this requires us to assess on a regular basis how well we are doing: How much of what we do can be said to have direct or even indirect impact on the lives of people? What is our collective impact on society?

I would argue our impact is far too limited, that we need to do much better at connecting our work to the world we live in. It's not that there isn't a record of impact, but I would argue that most members of society could not name even a handful of insights generated by the social sciences that they perceive to have enriched the world.

For at least a few generations, the social sciences have largely been driven by the goal to develop theory, in the case of the social sciences, theory about human behavior. Theory at its best allows us to understand the patterning of the world in such ways that we can predict the future. The natural sciences have used theory to establish scientific laws that can in turn be used to accurately predict the travel of planets in our solar system and even stars and other celestial bodies light years away. We have gained many insights about the way that life evolves on earth as to have established general rules about the course of these events.

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The goal of theory generation is noble, and certainly there are instances where social science theories have helped us understand the world, predict behavior, and act in ways that improve outcomes. If we can find ways to build deeper understandings of how the social world works in such ways that can help us improve the social condition, we should. But I argue that the social sciences should put more effort into and more emphasis on the pursuit of translating the use of observation, data, and scientific analysis into meaningful insights that better society. That means not putting all our eggs into the basket of theory, taking leave of our simplified models, and getting down and dirty in the real world.

Every year, I hazard to guess that decision makers at every level make millions of decisions that impact the health and well-being of people in ways large and small. I further bet that social scientists are largely absent from most of these decision-making processes. In what ways can the use of data, observation, the wealth of empirical knowledge accumulated, and timely analysis offer insights that can or would benefit these decision makers?

In my own field, research on poverty in the United States, decisions impacting vulnerable Americans are made by government officials, both elected and not, by school teachers, social workers, by businesses, and by clergy. In many cases the research accumulated in my field can offer some insights that might guide action, yet in few cases do people who make these decisions have access to this knowledge. A school wishing to reduce chronic absenteeism might not know the various ways other schools have sought to do the same, and how those efforts have fared, for better or for worse. A developer seeking to build a mixed-income neighborhood could benefit from the insights of research on such developments.

I think we as social scientists are conditioned to make our work inaccessible to the broader public. We write up our results in technical and arcane language that is difficult for a lay person to understand and seek to publish in journals that are often hard to access for anyone outside of a university. I think we should do more to make our work accessible to a broader audience. Translation and dissemination should not just be an afterthought, but a forethought. How can we reach people, make sure they have access and that they can grapple with the findings, without diluting the quality of our work? How do

we transform our work into something that is actionable for people outside of the academy?

I think we also must seek to make what we do far more relevant to people. A key question is whether someone who *could* access our work and *could* understand something we've written *would* choose to do so. Some of the obligation here is on the public. We should expect that people, or at least practitioners, or policy makers, should care, and we can probably rightly criticize them in many instances for not doing so. But perhaps some of the responsibility remains with us. What is our responsibility to research, analyze, and write about issues that matter to people? Should we expect that if it seems important to us, it should seem important to others? Certainly, there are cases where we should raise issues that impact those who are vulnerable. Should we also be open to listening in ways that help us better understand what issues matter to people?

At the University of Michigan, I lead a university-wide initiative called Poverty Solutions.<sup>1</sup> Our mission is to partner with communities and policy makers to find new ways to prevent and alleviate poverty. We recognize that in confronting the challenges of poverty, scholars certainly don't have all the answers. Still, we have an important role to play. We can use data, evidence and analysis to identify critical issues, to seek out evidence-based solutions to those issues, and to inform action. As an initiative, Poverty Solutions sponsors research across U-M conducted by sociologists, in the schools of social work, engineering, law, and policy, and the other social sciences in collaboration with community partners on projects that seek to build knowledge on innovations and strategies that improve the lives of vulnerable people at any level in concrete and actionable ways.

We conceptualize poverty as the result of a set of interlinked systems—housing, education, criminal justice, labor markets—that fail to function as they should for people at the bottom and inhibit their ability to live healthy and productive lives (hmm, is this a theory?). Such a systems approach can be overwhelming, but on the other hand it gives many entry points at which to intervene. We can be entrepreneurial, seeking out opportunities to make positive change. We can seek out strong partner and opportunities to improve the functioning

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<sup>1</sup> <https://poverty.umich.edu/>

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of many different systems to enhance opportunity at many different levels. The two keys are that this is done in partnership—the agenda is set collaboratively with our community partners—and that the goal is concrete change based on data, evidence, and analysis.

While we support work throughout the university, the signature project of Poverty Solutions has been a partnership on economic mobility with the City of Detroit. We have four team members embedded at Detroit City Hall, and we partner on a range of efforts, from new strategies to keep families in homes that would otherwise go into tax foreclosure, to helping the City develop a systemic method to evaluate workforce development providers, to informing them on ways to conduct outreach about new criminal record expungement opportunities.

These efforts are new—we are coming up on three years since President Schlissel announced Poverty Solutions—and we have made our share of mistakes, and we seek to learn from them. Yet I think we've begun to develop a track record of successes that have positively impacted the lives of people in meaningful ways, a record that I'm proud of and believe that while our work has not generated much in the way of theory, it has lived into the call of the social sciences.

In my own work, I have been struck by how important it is to look at problems from multiple vantage points, and particularly—most importantly—to have my work guided by the experiences of those whose lives I seek to understand and impact. In the early years of my career, I spent most of my time studying poverty from the comfort of my office in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan. I worked with largescale data to understand how government anti-poverty policies do and do not help families as they should, studying programs like unemployment insurance, which hasn't changed much in 75 years even as the labor market has. I think I did good work during this time, work that held the possibility of helping. But I'm struck by the ways that my positionalities and isolation from my topic shaped my view. Put shortly, sometimes from the comfort of my office in Ann Arbor, I didn't even know the right questions to ask.

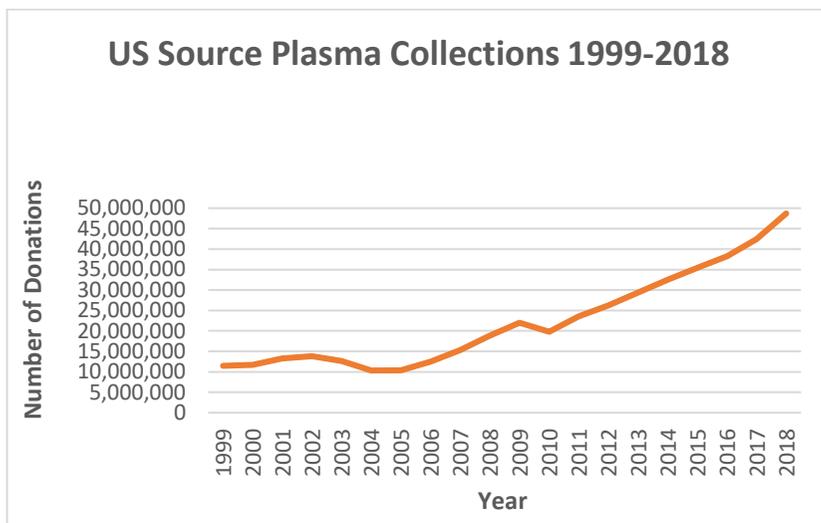
A few years ago I embarked on a project with Kathryn Edin to explore what was going on at the very bottom, what life was like for really, really, really poor families with children. We found that what typified these families were periods with no *cash* income coming into

the household—they might have SNAP (food stamps), and sometimes other in-kind benefits—but what does it mean to be without money in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America? We followed families in Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH, Appalachia, and the Mississippi Delta, and chronicled the experiences of their lives. This project resulted in our book, *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*.

I remember when we were in Chicago for my very first field visit, getting to know Jennifer Hernandez and her two children Kaitlin and Cole, Modonna Harris, and Susan Brown and their families, it was summer and on the inside crease of one mom’s elbow, I saw a little divot, what looked like a tiny scar. I immediately thought to myself, “oh, that might be a drug tract line. Perhaps there is a history of substance abuse in her past that might to some degree explain her present.”

Yet as we got to know families and particularly asked how they survived with so little money coming into the household, we saw these divots time and time again, and learned that they were scars from selling blood plasma so frequently. Unlike those in any other country, Americans can sell their blood plasma twice a week, every week, making roughly \$30-50 each time. It is a common survival strategy for those without cash who live near one of the nation’s 600 plasma center—which my student Analidis Ochoa has documented tend to locate in or near some of our poorest communities. It has the benefit of being legal, unlike many of the other survival strategies employed by the families we got to know, such as trafficking (selling) their SNAP benefits for cash as a steep discount.

Getting to know these families and learning that “plassing” was a frequent economic coping tool, I returned to the data to see if there had been any major change in plasma donation in recent years. And what I found shocked me. Plasma sales in the United States haven’t just grown, they’ve more than quadrupled since 2006, going from about 12 million to over 48 million in 2018. What’s more plasma is a growing and very profitable industry, with global sales jumping from 2000 to \$20 billion 2015. It turns out the United States accounts for 70 percent of the world’s plasma supply and only 40 percent of the demand. Thus we export the blood plasma of mostly low-income Americans, fueling a multi-billion dollar industry.



**Figure 1: US Source Plasma Collections 1999-2016**

Some argue that the plasma industry is exploitative because of these dynamics. Others might respond that the chance to sell plasma is an opportunity to eke out some cash while also contributing to an industry that saves lives, that what’s wrong here is that the cash safety net is a shell of its former self. Some contend that paid blood plasma donation should not be allowed, even as others might respond that it would be unethical not to allow plasma sales, which offer the opportunity for cash while saving the lives of those who need medical treatment. Some can argue that donors are not paid nearly enough, and others could argue that we should let the market set the price because messing with it could backfire.

For me the primary lesson in learning about the plasma industry and writing about it is that it’s something that I knew nothing about before I started my work on *\$2.00 a Day*, work that got me out of the comfort of my office and actually talking to people. Here is a major social phenomenon that impacts the lives of millions of Americans—embedded in an immensely profitable market—which I, a “national poverty expert,” knew nothing about before I went out and asked. Because sometimes, in the comfort of our offices, we don’t even know the right questions to ask.

Going out and asking—adding this to our toolkit for “observation” is a practice we seek to embed in our work at Poverty Solutions. It’s all too easy not to do it. We forget, we get comfortable, we get too busy. But I continue to be surprised about what we learn when we do.

Beginning the work of partnering with Mayor Duggan’s team on new strategies to reduce poverty and enhance mobility, I can list off all of the hot issues that I was thinking of as barriers to escaping poverty. But one thing that I was absolutely not thinking about when I started the work was auto insurance. Yet time and time again, as we talked with Detroiters, government officials, and community leaders, it came up. And so we did some research and analysis.

We found that the same policy that cost \$1,400 nationally cost \$2,600 across Michigan, the highest in the nation. In Detroit, that same policy would cost a stunning \$5,400 annually! That’s 18 percent of the median household income in Detroit. Our colleagues queried Detroiters through the city-representative Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Survey (DMAACS), and found that lowering the cost of auto insurance was far and above the highest priority of Detroiters in making transportation more affordable—55% of them marked it as the top priority: not improving public transportation or improving the roads, and certainly not creating more bike lanes (only 4 percent selected bike lanes as their top priority). What Detroiters wanted was to pay less in auto insurance.

Because of this feedback we did what we would never have expected: we wrote a paper on auto insurance and economic mobility in Michigan. We made the linkage between poverty, economic mobility, and car insurance, and examined the how and the why of Michigan’s extreme car insurance prices. Finally, we set out some goals for reform: “to reduce the cost of auto insurance across the state,” and “to narrow the gap between what Michigan’s wealthiest and poorest residents pay” (p.1). We found that the reasons for Michigan’s high rates were the result of well-intentioned policies adopted decades ago. But as is often the case, many interest groups had grown to have a financial stake in the system, so change was hard. As is so often the case, many different interest groups had a financial stake in the system and so change—even if they agreed it was the right change—was going to be hard. The people who were most hurt by this system that wasn’t

working like it should was the most vulnerable. They were by and large subject to the highest rates.

**Average Annual Premiums  
as a Percent of Median Household Income**

| <b>Place</b> | <b>Average Car In-<br/>surance</b> | <b>Car Insurance as<br/>Percent of Pre-<br/>Tax Income</b> |
|--------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Detroit      | \$5,414                            | 18%  |
| Cleveland    | \$1,277                            | 4%   |
| Chicago      | \$1,472                            | 3%   |
| National     | \$1,427                            | 2%   |

Source: The Zebra, the State of Auto Insurance 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates.

Cooney, Phillips and Rivera 2019. Auto Insurance and Economic Mobility: A Cycle of Poverty. Poverty Solutions Policy Brief, <https://poverty.umich.edu/research-publications/policy-briefs/auto-insurance-and-economic-mobility-in-michigan-a-cycle-of-poverty/>

Our brief report was cited in 30 news articles on the debate in Lansing, and it was cited by the Governor in her first action on the issue during the spring flurry of debate. We were a part of numerous forums and discussed our findings on local radio. At the end of this past May, the State Legislature passed, and the Governor signed an auto insurance reform package, with many of the elements of our proposed goals for reform. Now the work begins to see if the new law leads to meaningful rate reductions for Michiganders and especially Detroiters. Because that’s all that matters.

I joined the academy as a new doctoral student about 16 years ago, and I can say that if you had asked me when I started what some of my main topics of interest would be at this stage of my career, I wouldn’t have known to list blood plasma and auto insurance. I think if we’re doing the work right, it should take us in directions that we never expected to go.

But wherever that path takes us, I think we, as social scientists; we as scholars, and as teachers, have an obligation to do more to connect the work we do to the lives of people. We need to better live into social sciences foundational purpose. When we try to use data, observation, and analysis to help make systems work better, especially for the most vulnerable, we may not always get it right. But if we listen, if we partner with communities, if we help to guide while also be guided, and then we evaluate, then I think that the promise for impact can be great. We can do things that matter, and I think that society will mark our contributions.