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SUSAN MOFFITT: Today our trending globally conversation will focus on the Changing Geography of poverty in the United States and joining us for our conversation are Scott Allard, professor at the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Washington, and Margaret Weir, the Wilson professor of International and Public Affairs and Political Science here at Brown University. Both Scott and Margaret are experts on social welfare policy and urban policy. I'm Susan Moffitt, the director of the Taubman Center for American Politics and Policy.

[APPLAUSE]

Welcome, Scott and Margaret. Thanks for joining us today. It is such a treat to be sitting at a table with both of you.

SCOTT ALLARD: Indeed. It's really great to be back at Brown. I was a faculty member here in the early 2000s and it's great to be back. It's great to have you here too, Margaret. You're one of my favorite people to mentor for a good part of my career.

SUSAN MOFFITT: So Scott, I'd like us to start by asking you, what inspired you to write your new book, *Places in Need: the Changing Geography of Poverty.*

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. It ties back to my time here at Brown. I was finishing my first book, *Out of Reach,* which was about changes in the safety net that really led to a rising importance of human service provision to low income working poor families.

And I was finishing that book and thinking about the spatial distribution of human services in cities and how it changed over time. And I did a survey of organizations, and to check the quality of the data I went and visited some of the survey respondents where they were. And my study sites where LA, Chicago, and DC. So I happened on a trip out to LA and I was visiting several of the providers and I had the address of a food bank and it wasn't in LA it was actually in another municipality which isn't unusual out there. The city of Los Angeles is actually smaller in footprint than people kind of associate with the place Los Angeles.

And so I start driving and I was like wow, I'm really getting far outside the city and I kind of checked my map, and sure enough that's where I was supposed to be. And so I pull in and the

executive director is meeting me at the front door and she says, oh, I am so glad you're here. I've been wanting to talk to you. We have been trying to think about what's happening in our food bank, and we hope you can help us kind of process.

And so I walked in and immediately it was clear that this was a place that was doing a lot of work with families in need. They had tables set up in the lobby where there were computer monitors, and they were having food stamp eligibility workers come in and sign people up for food stamps. The shelves in the food pantry were literally bare. They couldn't keep food on the shelf. As soon as they got donations or USDA food commodities, they went right out the door.

And she told me that their number of clients had been increasing by 10% every month for the last two years. And this is before the great recession and I'm not in Los Angeles. I'm not in even a poor suburb like Compton, in South Central. I'm in a place where like you would think this is where they film the Brady Bunch.

[THEME MUSIC]

THEME SONG: That's the way we all became the Brady Bunch. The Brady Bunch, the Brady Bunch, that's the way we became the Brady Bunch.

And I was just shocked by this. It kind of ran counter to everything that I thought of as a scholar poverty, as an urban scholar. And so I came back to Brown, and around the time I got back the Brookings Institution where I'm a fellow started to release some studies that show that there were actually more poor people in suburbs than in cities. And suddenly the visit to LA started to make more sense to me.

And so I started the research and development on this book as I was leaving Brown. I went to the University of Chicago for several years and then now at the University of Washington. And I kind of crafted the book around ideas that I had here based on that visit to Los Angeles.

SUSAN MOFFITT: And what do you see as some of the main findings of your book? What was surprising?

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. So I think I already kind of gave away one of the key findings. Like my colleagues at Brookings, I found that there's evidence there are far more poor people in the suburbs of our cities than in the cities themselves. And that runs counter to this kind of spatial discourse we have about poverty in America, where we think of poverty as being an urban phenomenon.

I also found that this wasn't new. We kind of talk about it as if it's kind of a post recession kind

of reality, but if you go back to 1990 there are almost as many poor people in the suburbs of our cities than in the cities themselves. And that's at a point when we were having a national conversation about urban poverty and if you were in academia you were reading books called *The Urban Underclass* and you're reading Williams Julius Wilson thinking about concentrated poverty in cities. But yet, at that point, there was still quite a bit of suburban poverty. And so it'd been a blind spot for academics for a long time.

And so in the book I talk about these demographic changes, about how there are more poor people in suburbs, about how deep poverty, something that we think of as being an urban phenomenon, or a [INAUDIBLE] is actually much more prevalent in suburbs than in cities.

And I started in the book talk about why it matters. It matters for a variety of reasons. One, our perceptions of poverty because we tie them to place and we tie them to race, we think of poverty as being a problem for urban residents and for people of color in cities. I argue it leads to diminished support for the safety net because we associate racial stereotypes with the poor, and that leads to less support for the safety net that we would have otherwise.

And so not only is this idea that poverty is a city problem, the Trump administration ran around for the entire campaign talking about this, that's not true demographically. But it also then works to undermine support that we would provide for anybody, regardless of where they live or their race or ethnic background.

DONALD TRUMP: We need law and order and we need law and order in the inner cities because the people that are most affected by what's happening are African-American and Hispanic people. And it's very unfair to them what our politicians are allowing to happen.

MARGARET WEIR: The thing that I would add to that is that suburb covers a lot of different kinds of situations in which people live different governments. So for example, in the work on the suburbanization of poverty included as a suburb are very, very different places. So for example, a declining industrial city on the outskirts of Chicago, Waukegan, or Zion, Illinois. Central Falls here is included as a suburb. But at the same time, so are Sunbelt places that are kind of strips of apartment buildings outside of these areas.

So I think one of the things that is important when we think about suburban poverty is to have this very diverse setting in mind. It's not just the cul-de-sac single family house that we think of as suburbs, but that sufferers themselves are extremely diverse in the kind of governments that you find there and the kind of housing situations you find there. And that diversity I think is

one of the things that makes it tough to understand exactly what the problem suburban poverty poses and also how to address it.

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah, I totally agree with that. When I started, I had a lot of conversations with people about how would we define a suburb? And there's some agreement, but there's debate. And in individual metro areas, that question is different and you'd want to tackle it differently a little bit. What I try to do in the book is lay out a real clear kind of method of how I defined a suburb. And in the national data and trends, it doesn't matter that much how you define a suburb. So you could count Cambridge or you couldn't. You could count [? Lowell ?] or you couldn't. It doesn't change the national trajectories or figures that much because most places it's more cut or dry.

The point about the diversity of suburbs is a really important one though. And you know this from your work, and Susan, you know this from doing work in schools, there's a lot more diversity of what suburbs are whether you're thinking about government institutions or as places to live than in cities in many ways. And this is true for rurales too.

There's a much more rural diversity I think of context than we appreciate. And I think that challenges some of the stereotypes we have. We kind of think about suburbs as these kind of Brady Bunch homogeneous white places. Single family, ranch style homes, is kind of the ideal, but it's not really like that. And in different places how the community is composed and the nature of the housing stock, the nature of transportation and employment, really changes or affects how poverty presents itself, the kind of trends in poverty, but also the opportunities to provide support to families in need.

SUSAN MOFFITT: So given all of this diversity of suburbs, what do you see as some common themes of problems facing the suburbs?

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. Well, I know Margaret and I have talked about this over the last several years. We talk about the safety net often in its federal program form. So we talk about programs like Medicaid or food stamps or SNAP, or we talk about TANIF, welfare cash assistance for single moms. We talk about the Earned Income Tax Credit.

These are these large federal programs that many of them are very effective at reducing poverty or mediating the effects of poverty, but a large part of our safety net and a part that we often don't think about often enough are the human service programs, which are really the glue of the safety net, but they're highly localized. So these are the job training programs or

the emergency food assistance programs, or the free clinics that help people who may not be eligible for public programs, or help people when they have a short-term loss of work earnings, or a spell of unemployment.

And those programs are huge. We spend probably almost $200 billion a year on these programs and they're a huge part of how we help low income communities, but most of that capacity is concentrated in cities for a variety of reasons. Part of it that's where we made our public investments, part of it that's where charitable philanthropy has targeted their investments-- Margaret's work speaks to this. --and part of it's that we don't because we think of poverty as an urban problem, a lot of our private giving, a lot of our volunteerism, and a lot of the kind of political will we need to mobilize to develop local solutions for poverty just aren't present in many suburban communities. They're not nearly present enough.

MARGARET WEIR: And the other issue on suburban communities is transportation. Suburban communities for the most part did not develop large public sectors. They may have good parks and they may have good highways and they may have good schools, which is an important thing to think about, but transportation's a huge problem for low income people in these suburban areas.

SCOTT ALLARD: I think one of the differences between suburban areas, rural areas and urban areas is just the distances people have to cover often without adequate transportation.

MARGARET WEIR: Their poverty is often less visible because they're spread out in ways that are distinct from cities. And it becomes very difficult for them to access the services, especially if those services are back in the city.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And so when you start to look at different parts of the country, you can see also huge variation in the availability of a safety net. So it's the suburbs, but it's even worse in some kinds of suburbs. Distinctive histories make for very different kinds of access to these supportive social services. So we have some idea that local initiative is what it takes to address problems of poverty, and local initiative is part of what it takes to address issues of poverty. But I think you can see from the unevenness of our safety net that something more is needed.

SCOTT ALLARD: In the book and in my work I ask the question, is there a difference between being poor in an urban setting or an urban or suburban setting? And in many ways I think that the experience

of poverty is the same. When we're poor we experience the stress and anxiety of being poor. We experience the hardship of not having enough food to eat or not having a secure stable place to live, maybe not having reliable access to transportation or health care, worrying about how to provide for our kids, worrying that we might be a sick child or a sick parent away from falling into deeper hardship. I think those experiences are common across geography.

When we're poor in different contexts, there's things that come out. So one of the questions I don't think we know actually is-- if we know that the experience of poverty in cities is tied to the concentration of poverty and exposure to violence, exposure to poorly supported or poorly run community organizations and institutions often, one of the questions that I ask is, is that true in suburbs? And we don't know.

We know that there are some suburbs that are really advantaged. Some places have really strong nonprofit communities, really strong parks and schools, churches or congregations, good access to transportation, but then there are lots of communes that don't. And the challenges of economies of scale that human service providers face, it's much harder to figure out how to locate or provide programs when you don't have the population densities that you need to achieve economies of scale to supply services.

MARGARET WEIR: I think one of the big differences between urban, suburban, and rural is in suburban areas at least have the possibility that some of these urban nonprofits that have been in existence for a long time can locate satellites out in the suburban areas. And you have kind of regional organizations of the United Way and philanthropies that may be looking to see where our new pockets of need.

And then there, of course, there are some suburbs that have a lot of money. And if you're poor in a suburb that has a lot of money, you might be able to benefit from that because they have more charitable dollars at their disposal. And I think for rural poverty, it's that isolation, it's the lack of any sort of organizations that can easily move in to your place to assist you. I think there the federal role is critical, and federal dollars, like, for example, for community health clinics are critical in these rural areas.

But I wanted to pick up on one other thing that you mentioned, Scott, and that's the concentration of poverty. So one of the things that I found really interesting in your book was that you found that there are concentrations of poor people in suburban areas. And urban scholars always say the concentration of poverty is one of the things that really makes urban

poverty and to relate it to racial segregation makes urban poverty particularly hard to solve and particularly entrenched. And so you have really interesting findings about concentrated poverty in the suburbs.

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. It's a really important question, and you're right. When we think about poverty in cities, we think about the historical racial segregation of poverty in neighborhoods where the poverty rate's well over 20%, 30%, 40%. And what you find is actually there are nearly as many people in suburbs living in high poverty neighborhoods by that definition as in cities. And the trend has grown dramatically over time.

SUSAN MOFFITT: And yet, how do you understand the relative invisibility of suburban poverty?

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. I mean that's a great question because there's this kind of irony that poverty has become much more present and pervasive in suburbs. But yet when you go out and speak to communities, there's still this kind of perception gap and people still don't quite grasp that the problem is present in their community. Now, some of that is because we have this narrative about poverty being an urban phenomenon.

And so even in suburbs when you go and talk to people about neighborhoods or communities where there's been increases in poverty, they'll say, well, in those urban parts of our community. They're going to use the word urban to kind of I think in some ways say that, well, those aren't our people. Those aren't people from our community. We may not be responsible for them.

But I think Margaret raised earlier this kind of notion that poverty is an isolated experience of isolation. And that's true regardless of where you are geographically. I think it may be different in different types of places. But what you do find is in a lot of suburban communities poverty is isolated in apartment complexes, off of interstates or turnpikes and maybe trailer parks, or in cul-de-sacs with more affordable housing tucked away, hidden from view, hidden from kind of the common interactions of the day.

And so people are often surprised to learn that half the kids in their school are on free and reduced lunch because they don't see it in their daily life. And I think part of it's they don't see it and part of it's that we just don't talk about poverty, as if it exists outside of cities.

MARGARET WEIR: And I think some of that has to do with the weak political voice representing low income people or the interests of low income people in the suburbs. And in one of the things that your work

has shown over time is just that the numbers of nonprofit organizations in suburban areas is lower. And these organizations don't just provide services, they also act as advocates for low income people. So I think the political voice that would be needed to represent the problem and make it more public is not as strong in suburban areas.

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. When you take stock of the school board composition or the boards of nonprofits or who's elected to townships or county councils, it doesn't reflect the diversity of these communities at all. Earlier when we were talking about what's unique about suburban poverty, I think one of the things that's unique about suburban poverty is the resonance of race and ethnic identity for families and suburbs, where I think in cities, cities are kind of historically more melting pots. And it isn't that we don't have issues of racism or anti-immigrant sentiment in cities, but I think those issues are more present in suburbs and I think it affects how people connect to help, it connects how they get involved or are mobilized to be involved in schools or local government. And it really matters. There is an absence of voice to put it in those terms.

One of the things I talk about in the conclusion of the book then is the need to cultivate the next generation of leaders, whether they're nonprofit leaders or governmental leaders that are kind of indigenous leaders from underrepresented marginalized communities in suburbs.

The only way we're going to build better capacity, better response and better community commitments, is if we ensure that we're cultivating the next generation leaders, helping them, whether it's through involvement in boards or taking jobs as program managers, and executive directors are getting elected to offices in local and county government. If we aren't doing those things, we're not going to change the local dialogue and the local efforts dramatically. I think a lot of the problems will kind of continue to persist without a lot of local effort or thought.

MARGARET WEIR: I agree. I mean I think a lot of local leaders in the suburbs do not want to admit that their community has a problem and they do not want to devote resources to addressing the problem for fear that if they put money into addressing the problem that both they will become known as a place that has homelessness, or they will be known as a place that has access to food for people who don't have it, and that they will attract those people.

SUSAN MOFFITT: So the suburbanization of poverty is not just an American phenomenon, but it's a phenomenon elsewhere as well. I was curious if either of you see models from other countries, especially in Federalist systems, ones that have our fragmented approach of ways of navigating suburban poverty.

MARGARET WEIR: The United States is unique in the sense that we expect so much to bubble up from below in terms of organizations, in terms of ability to solve problems. And even in federal governments such as Germany, there are explicit federal policies devoted to police equalization. So one of the big dangers in the United States is that places become poor and then they enter these downward spirals of raising taxes and people leave, and then they raise taxes more and more people leave, and their services decline, and eventually you have a place that is pretty hollowed out. I mean there are rust belt places all over Europe, but these places have much more access to national level resources and there's much more effort on the part of national governments to organize a response even if there are expectations that there will be local engagement and locally specific ways of solving problems. Not quite as hands off as it is in the United States.

SCOTT ALLARD: Yeah. I think that's spot on. One of the other realities here is-- especially when we think about European cities, if we kind of look at that as a comparison to the US. Those cities developed at a very different time than American cities did, and actually poverty has been a suburban reality in European cities for a long time.

That's kind of the way the geography of poverty works in a lot of European cities. Lower income populations get pushed to the periphery margins. Public housing decisions reinforce that. Settlement patterns of immigrants and refugees reinforce that. And I think that what's happening in the US is we're kind of catching up at some level in that way, like our cities developed at a different point in the early 20th century, and this suburbanization of poverty is actually making the US cities look less exceptional, if you will, than maybe American exceptions would tell us.

MARGARET WEIR: One thing I would say too is that in Europe there is more willingness of the federal government to invest public dollars in infrastructure. And if you build an infrastructure, there are more opportunities to build an inclusive public infrastructure. And here I think of the Paris suburbs, and there was recently over the last 10 years an effort to build a whole rail loop all around those suburbs. La Grande Paris it was called. And initially they were going to connect high tech areas and bypass immigrant neighborhoods where the housing projects are. But the fact that it was a public investment allowed for a public debate, and eventually the system as plan now includes those neighborhoods and connects those neighborhoods to the whole rest of the large metro area.

SUSAN MOFFITT: So where do we go from here?

SCOTT ALLARD: I talk about the need for us to maintain our federal commitments, actually strengthen and expand our federal commitments to safety net programs, that we know work. We're at the end of a long economic recovery. And actually for many people at the lower end of the income distribution, there hasn't been nearly enough recovery and we're likely coming to the end of years of growth and expansion.

And the time for us is to step up to our commitments to provide access to the programs we know that reduce poverty. Whether that's the Earned Income Tax Credit or food stamps, those programs are really effective at poverty reduction. We know there's a number of employment programs and human service programs we could invest more in that would help low income households.

So not stepping away from our federal obligations and ensuring that we're providing funds and not cutting back or scaling back as many in Washington would like to now. As I mentioned, we have to cultivate leadership in our communities and do that intentionally. I think we need to step up with our own giving and volunteerism.

And there's a lot of room for us to dedicate more of our time and money to organizations that help the most in need. And then I think just our work as scholars, our work in communities as volunteers, our work to get involved in politics, demands that we challenge the stereotypes about poverty, pernicious stereotypes that cast poverty as a problem for others, for people of color in cities, when poverty is a problem that is present in all our communities that all our friends, families and relatives, encounter. And that shared fate I think is really important. It's ultimately what will help us solve poverty problems in cities, suburbs, or rural communities.

MARGARET WEIR: I totally agree with this image of putting more into realizing that we have a misallocation of resources. We spend so much on imprisoning people in this country, and it's a negative set of priorities that we have. If we can redirect some of that money towards actually promoting more opportunity through investing in these various social services, we would be able to grow in ways that was much more inclusive.

The two other things I would mention-- and one of them, of course, is the housing issue. And one of the problems where we end up having kind of concentrations of poverty is because affordable housing is not available in areas of opportunity, and addressing this housing issue through the use of vouchers that help people find and move to areas of opportunity with good

schools is an essential piece of being able to address this issue.

And one other factor that I would mention, although I don't think I totally believe it's good in the American context, but when I think about how difficult has been to knit together this social safety net, I know that some places have been experimenting with the idea of a universal basic income. The city of Stockton in California has kind of a trial example of putting this into place. And it does make me think, we have low wages in this country, we're not raising the minimum wage enough, families have all kinds of distress and insecurity, and in some ways trying to address all that through social services is such a big burden.

SCOTT ALLARD: One of the things that Margaret kind of points out here is the need for innovative solutions and testing new ideas and experimenting. Our American system for all that it isn't is it actually allows us to do some of that. And actually, I think this is where places like the Taubman Center and the Watts Institute are so critical.

We saw this today, Susan. You train the next generation of thought leaders, people with creative ideas, with really dynamic tool kits and with a concern for issues of inclusion and equity that are going to matter and are going to resonate in our communities in the next couple of decades. And I think our hopes for new solutions and new ideas come from the work we do to train students at places like Brown University or the University of Washington where I'm at. And our hope has to hang on that. It's really a critical piece to this puzzle.

SUSAN MOFFITT: Well, Scott and Margaret, thank you.

SCOTT ALLARD: Thank you. This was great. I can't wait to come back.

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