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What Does Obama Really Believe In?

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From the back seat of Steve Gates's white Pontiac, Monique Robbins spotted Jasmine Coleman walking home from school alone. It was an icy December afternoon on Chicago's South Side, and Jasmine's only protection against the wind was a thin purple jacket. She looked cold. Gates pulled the car over to the curb, and Robbins hollered at Jasmine to get in.

Jasmine was 16, and Robbins and Gates, who were both in their 30s, were her neighbors. All three of them lived in or around Roseland, a patch of distinctly subprime Chicago real estate that stretches from 89th Street to 115th Street, way down past the last stop on the El. Fifty years ago, Roseland was a prosperous part of Chicago, home to thousands of blue-collar workers, most of them white, employed by the South Side's many steel and manufacturing plants. But the plants closed long ago, the white residents all moved away and Roseland has become one of the worst-off parts of the city by just about every measure you can think of: unemployment rate, dropout rate, murder rate or just the barren, empty feel of the streets.

Looking out for Jasmine and young people like her in Roseland and other blighted sections of Chicago was Gates's full-time job. He worked for an organization called Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), acting as a mentor to the students in public high schools who were deemed most "at risk." I met Gates, who is a laid-back, burly guy with tight dreadlocks and penetrating pale gray eyes, in the fall of 2010, and for several months he let me watch him at work, becoming, in the process, my unofficial guide to Roseland.

Gates pulled the car up in front of Jasmine's house on Lafayette Avenue, and Jasmine ran in to fetch her brother, Damien, who was also enrolled in YAP. Their house looked small and battered. The metal gate guarding the front door was torn off its hinges, and there was a fist-size hole in the front window. Damien, a handsome 17-year-old, sauntered out to the car behind Jasmine, and the two of them piled in the back while Gates kept the car running for warmth.

"Man, it's critical in our house," Damien said with a little laugh.

"It's cold!" Jasmine said. "You go in there, you think you still outside."

Damien and Jasmine's mother had been fighting a long, losing battle with the gas company. The previous summer, after she failed to pay the heating bill, the company shut off the gas line. Now there was no heat at all, winter had arrived in force and that hole in the living-room window let in a steady stream of frigid air all night long.

Gates still lives in the house he grew up in, just a few blocks away from Damien and Jasmine's home. Things in Roseland were pretty bad when he was growing up, Gates told me, but they are much worse today, and the web of poverty that he saw kids like Damien and Jasmine caught up in, a paralyzing mix of unforgiving economic conditions, destructive social influences and shortsighted personal decisions, seemed almost impossible for them to escape. Some days, it seemed to Gates that he was making progress with the kids in YAP, but often the job felt hopeless and depressing, an unbroken cycle of hospital visits, school-expulsion hearings, court dates and funerals. It was taking a toll on his mood and his health, he told me. He and his girlfriend of 15 years had just broken up. He was smoking way too many Newports. He couldn't sleep.

One reason Gates's job was so daunting was the simple fact of the multitude of problems the students were facing. One had just been sent to boot camp for stealing a car. Jasmine's ex-boyfriend was shot and killed one night while sitting in a car in a snowstorm. A girl in YAP told me she was so angry at her mother for not protecting her from the sexual predations of a relative that she used to come to school just to find somebody to fight. "Just when you think it can't get worse, it gets worse," Gates said.

But the job was also daunting because it often seemed like such a lonely enterprise. When you're down in Roseland, it's easy to feel very far from the center of the nation's attention. The big question that Gates wrestled with every day — how do you help young people growing up in poverty to succeed? — was not too long ago a major focus of public debate in the United States. During the Johnson administration, the place to be for smart, ambitious young people in Washington was the Office of Economic Opportunity, the command center for the War on Poverty. In the 1990s, Washington once again saw a robust public discussion of poverty, much of it centered on the issue of welfare reform. But not today. It is not that poverty itself has disappeared. In 1966, at the height of the War on Poverty, the poverty rate was just under 15 percent of the population; in 2010, the most recent year for which data is available, it was 15.1 percent. And the child-poverty rate is 22 percent — substantially higher today than it was then. And yet as a political issue, especially during this presidential campaign season, poverty has receded almost to silence.

If any American president might have been expected to focus his attention on Roseland and its problems, it would be Barack Obama. The neighborhood, as it happens, played a critical

role in Obama's personal and political history. As a young community organizer, he worked in Roseland and at a nearby low-rise housing project called Altgeld Gardens for three years in the late 1980s; it was in these communities, Obama said in the speech announcing his presidential run, that he "received the best education I ever had." And when he finally left Roseland, for Harvard Law School and a political career, he did so, he said, to gain the knowledge and the resources that would allow him to eventually return and tackle the neighborhood's problems anew.

When Obama ran for president the first time, urban poverty was a major policy focus for his campaign. Senator Obama gave speeches on the issue, his campaign Web site had a dedicated poverty section with a variety of policy proposals, and in his platform, he committed his administration to "eradicating poverty," pledging that "working together, we can cut poverty in half within 10 years." But the official poverty rate has continued to rise under Obama. In May, Bob Herbert, the former New York Times Op-Ed columnist, castigated the president in the online magazine The Grio for his failure to address publicly the "catastrophe" of children growing up in urban poverty. "Barack Obama can barely bring himself to say the word 'poor,' " Herbert wrote.

The idea that Obama hasn't done much for poor Americans is simply not true; by some measures, he has done more than any other recent president. But Herbert is right that Obama has stopped talking publicly about the subject. Obama hasn't made a single speech devoted to poverty as president, and if you visit barackobama.com these days, you would be hard-pressed to find any reference to the subject whatsoever. As a result, he is missing — so far, at least — an important opportunity to change and elevate the national conversation on poverty. What we know about poverty, and specifically about its effect on children, has shifted markedly in the last few decades. New ideas are emerging from the fields of economics, neuroscience and developmental psychology. Four years ago, Barack Obama was the one politician in Washington who seemed attuned to those ideas and most concerned about addressing them. And the intellectual journey that led him to these new ways of thinking about poverty started in Roseland.

Obama arrived in Roseland in the summer of 1985 as a 23-year-old Columbia University graduate on a quest for a sense of purpose and belonging. It was a confusing, conflicted time to be black in Chicago. The election two years earlier of Harold Washington, the city's first African-American mayor, energized black residents, but many of them were still living in poverty, and whole sections of black Chicago seemed to be turning into war zones. The dispatches that journalists like Alex Kotlowitz and Nicholas Lemann filed from the city's gigantic high-rise housing projects during Obama's time in the city are shocking even today: children crawling on the ground to avoid bullets, apartments firebombed, a prolonged gun

battle between gangs in two neighboring high-rise buildings that drew not a single police car in response.

Life in Roseland in those days was not as bad as it was in the high-rise projects like Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes, but the neighborhood was changing, and as Obama conducted fact-finding interviews with local residents, he heard again and again the anxiety and fear that those changes were producing. In his memoir, "Dreams From My Father," Obama wrote that the middle-aged, working-class African-Americans he met in Roseland expressed satisfaction at what they had achieved in life: "On the strength of two incomes, they had paid off house notes and car notes, maybe college educations for the sons or daughters whose graduation pictures filled every mantelpiece." But when they talked about the neighborhood's future, Obama wrote, "our conversations were marked by another, more ominous strain." They worried about the neighborhood's trajectory of decline, "the decaying storefronts, the aging church rolls, kids from unknown families who swaggered down the streets — loud congregations of teenage boys, teenage girls feeding potato chips to crying toddlers, the discarded wrappers tumbling down the block — all of it whispered painful truths, told them the progress they'd found was ephemeral, rooted in thin soil; that it might not even last their lifetimes," Obama wrote.

As Obama's time on the South Side progressed, he grew preoccupied by the fate of Roseland's young people, especially the teenage boys, who seemed increasingly directionless and hopeless. It was not just money they were lacking, he realized, but something deeper. As a boy, Obama spent several years in Indonesia, with a close-up view of third-world poverty, and in his memoir, Obama compared the lives of the children he saw in Altgeld Gardens with the lives of the children he saw as a boy growing up in the slums of Jakarta. In many ways, Obama wrote, the Indonesian slum-dwellers had it better. "For all that poverty, there remained in their lives a discernible order," he explained. "The habits of a generation played out every day beneath the bargaining and the noise and the swirling dust. It was the absence of such coherence that made a place like Altgeld so desperate."

In the spring of 1987, Obama wrote, he began to feel that "something different was going on," on the South Side. It was a subtle shift — "a change of atmosphere, like the electricity of an approaching storm" — but to Obama, that spring brought to Roseland the "sense, shared by adults and youth alike, that some, if not most, of our boys were slipping beyond rescue."

Steve Gates turned 14 in 1987; he and his peers in Roseland were precisely the rootless and wayward young men that Obama was so concerned about. When I asked Gates about that year, he said he, too, remembered it as a dark time. "That was when crack really hit," Gates said. "And that changed things. Before crack came into our neighborhood, I never heard

gunshots." Before long, Gates was carrying a gun himself. And as the violence increased, he said, families with any kind of prospects left Roseland for the suburbs south of the Chicago city limits. The families that stayed behind more often than not were the ones that were falling apart. The only reason Gates survived to adulthood, he told me, was that his mother worked extra shifts as a bus driver to put him in Catholic school and then send him off to college.

In the fall of 1987, Obama traveled to Cambridge, Mass., for a conference at Harvard Divinity School, and as David Maraniss recounts in his recent biography, one of the talks Obama attended was by the University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson, who had just published his landmark book "The Truly Disadvantaged." There is probably no book that did more to explain the changes that were taking place in neighborhoods like Roseland. Wilson identified a major shift in American poverty at that time. Sociologists define a neighborhood as being in "extreme poverty" if 40 percent or more residents are poor, and Wilson showed that from 1970 to 1980 in the five largest American cities, the number of poor people living in extreme poverty almost tripled. That degree of concentrated poverty, Wilson wrote, was extraordinarily toxic, especially to children, and it led, in neighborhoods like Roseland, to "an exponential increase in related forms of social dislocation."

The organizing techniques in which Obama was trained increasingly seemed to him inadequate to the social ills that Roseland faced. So Obama proposed something new: a "youth-counseling network" to provide mentoring and tutoring to teenagers while working directly with their parents — a program that sounds quite a bit like YAP, in fact. But by that time, Obama had decided to apply to Harvard Law School.

He left Roseland with profoundly mixed feelings. He felt at times as if he were abandoning the South Side. But as he later described it in "Dreams From My Father," he was able to convince himself that going to Harvard would be a natural extension of his work on behalf of Roseland's poor. An essential tenet of community organizing is that change comes from political power; going to Harvard, Obama reasoned, was a way of getting more of it. "I would learn power's currency," Obama wrote, and then bring that knowledge "back to where it was needed, back to Roseland, back to Altgeld, bring it back like Promethean fire."

And indeed, Obama's approach to poverty as a politician was activist and innovative. Early in his presidential campaign, in July 2007, he gave an entire speech about poverty at a community center in Anacostia, a high-poverty neighborhood in southeast Washington. While Obama expressed support in the speech for some of the traditional, broad-brush Democratic antipoverty policies — raising the minimum wage, strengthening unions, expanding access to health care, improving educational opportunity — his focus was on the

need for new solutions to concentrated urban poverty, which he described as “the cause that led me to a life of public service almost 25 years ago.”

With a nod to the ideas of William Julius Wilson, Obama made the case that inner-city poverty is qualitatively different from other strains of poverty. “What’s most overwhelming about urban poverty is that it’s so difficult to escape,” he said. “It’s isolating, and it’s everywhere.” Addressing this kind of poverty was neither simple nor straightforward, Obama said. “If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools and broken homes, then we can’t just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community.”

Obama laid out an ambitious agenda to do just that. At its center was a proposal to expand the work of Geoffrey Canada and his organization, the Harlem Children’s Zone, which takes an intensive and comprehensive approach to child development in a 97-block high-poverty neighborhood in central Harlem, providing poor children with not just high-quality charter schools but also parenting programs, preschools, a medical clinic, a farmers’ market, family counseling and help with college applications. (My 2008 book, “Whatever It Takes,” is a profile of Canada and a history of the Children’s Zone.)

“When I’m president,” Obama said, “the first part of my plan to combat urban poverty will be to replicate the Harlem Children’s Zone in 20 cities across the country.” With a candor unusual for a presidential candidate, Obama acknowledged the high price of his program: “Now, how much will this cost?” he asked. “I’ll be honest — it can’t be done on the cheap. It will cost a few billion dollars a year. . . . But we will find the money to do this because we can’t afford not to.”

Looking back at the Anacostia speech today, what is striking about Obama’s proposal, beyond its size and scope, was that he didn’t conceive of it as just one more federal spending program. It was, instead, something more potentially disruptive: a thorough overhaul of existing federal aid to inner cities, a blueprint for a more coordinated, more effective, more responsive way to direct the often haphazard flow of government money into urban neighborhoods devastated by the multiple effects of concentrated poverty. It represented a break from the past: a new way of doing things in neighborhoods like Roseland.

As president, Obama has followed a very different path from the one he described in Anacostia. The Promise Neighborhoods program exists, but it is a small item tucked away in the discretionary budget of the Department of Education. Rather than devoting “a few billion dollars a year,” his administration has spent a total of $40 million on the program in the last three years, with another $60 million in grants going out to community groups later this

year. A few other initiatives have focused on concentrated urban poverty, but they are mostly small and scattered. Instead, the antipoverty path that Obama has pursued looks more like a traditional Great Society Democratic approach: his administration has spent billions of dollars on direct aid to poor people, mostly working-poor families.

The reason for this shift in priorities, according to people in the Obama administration, was the economic crisis they inherited. As David Axelrod, Obama's former senior adviser and current chief campaign strategist, described it to me, "We were essentially an economic triage unit, trying to prevent the country from sliding into a second Great Depression." The president's economic team during the transition was staffed mostly with centrist economists — Lawrence Summers, Tim Geithner, Jason Furman — but one of their top priorities, early on, was to send aid to poor people. A central tenet of Keynesian stimulus spending is that in an economic crisis, you try to get as much money as quickly as possible into the hands of people who will spend it right away, and the less money people have, the more likely they are to spend every dollar they receive from the government. The previous summer, Mark Zandi, the chief economist for Moody's Analytics, who was serving, at the time, as an adviser to the McCain campaign, testified before Congress on the need for an aggressive stimulus program. In his testimony, he included a handy chart, based on his own algorithm, that listed the "Bang for the Buck" that various stimulus measures would provide. According to Zandi's calculations, aid that went to wealthier Americans would not be very effective as stimulus: for every dollar that Congress cut from corporate taxes, the G.D.P. would gain 30 cents; making the Bush tax cuts permanent would boost it by 29 cents for every dollar added to the deficit.

Stimulus measures that gave money to poor and distressed families, on the other hand, would be much more productive: extending unemployment-insurance benefits would boost G.D.P. by $1.64 for every dollar spent. And at the top of Zandi's list was a temporary boost in the food-stamp program, which he calculated would produce $1.73 in G.D.P. gains for every dollar spent.

Jared Bernstein, who was Joe Biden's main economic adviser during the financial crisis, told me that Zandi's chart was taken very seriously by the economic team. "Everyone was carrying around this list of multipliers," Bernstein said. "And food stamps was always at the top. That had the largest multiplier." (Almost four years later, Bernstein still had the food-stamp multiplier committed to memory.)

Jason Furman, who is now the deputy director of the National Economic Council, was the subject of an outpouring of liberal outrage when he became the economic-policy director for the Obama campaign in the summer of 2008. (His critics mainly objected to positive

statements he made about Wal-Mart and other multinational corporations.) But it was Furman who, in the early days of the transition, called Robert Greenstein, the head of the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, to ask for a wish list of possible stimulus-spending initiatives for the poor. Greenstein told me that he and his colleagues drew up a long memo detailing different antipoverty programs that the White House might want to finance, and he sent it to Furman. A few days later, Furman called Greenstein with a complaint: his list wasn't long enough. "He said, 'You need to think bigger,' " Greenstein said. " 'Give us more options.' " As the economy continued to decline that fall, the numbers continued to increase; the total amount in the stimulus package that was targeted specifically at low-income Americans in 2009 topped $80 billion.

And so in 2009 and 2010, the Obama administration put a tremendous amount of money, very quickly, into the hands of low-income Americans. As part of the Recovery Act, the administration extended the eligibility rules for existing programs like food stamps and unemployment insurance, and the combination of the collapsing economy and the more generous rules meant the programs grew quickly. The number of individuals receiving food stamps rose to 45.1 million in 2011 from 27.4 million in 2007. From 2008 to 2010, an additional 6.8 million people, mostly children, began receiving Medicaid. Temporary changes in the eligibility criteria for various tax credits, including the earned-income tax credit and the child tax credit, produced tax refunds for millions of low-income workers, often totaling thousands of dollars a year.

And while it is true that the Census Bureau's official poverty figures have grown steadily worse under Obama, rising to 15.1 percent of Americans under the poverty line in 2010 from 13.2 percent in 2008, those dismal numbers come with a significant caveat. When government statisticians calculate the poverty rate, they include only cash income. And over the last two decades, and especially during the Obama administration, the way the federal government gives aid to poor people has shifted away from cash transfers toward noncash transfers — food stamps, Medicaid subsidies, housing vouchers — none of which are included in a family's income for the purposes of poverty statistics. If you do count food stamps and other noncash aid, the poverty rate has, according to some calculations, not gone up much at all during the Obama administration, during the worst economic crisis in 70 years. That is a remarkable accomplishment. When I asked William Julius Wilson last month for his thoughts on the current administration's antipoverty efforts, he said that Obama had "done more for lower-income Americans than any president since Lyndon Baines Johnson."

In Roseland, the stimulus may not have made things much better, but it stopped them from getting much worse. Food stamps helped some families get enough to eat, teenagers got

summer jobs, some tenants received help with their rent. A stimulus grant to the Chicago public schools helped pay for the YAP program, which let Steve Gates start working with children like Jasmine and Damien. But it was, by definition, a temporary fix.

When administration officials talk about longer-term solutions to poverty these days, they often talk about education. And the cabinet member who expresses the most personal concern about the plight of disadvantaged children is Arne Duncan, the education secretary. Before arriving in Washington, Duncan was the chief executive of the Chicago Public Schools. There, he put a high priority on overhauling the city's failing high schools, many of which were on the South Side, and as education secretary, he expanded that effort by adding more than $3 billion to a federal program to turn around 1,300 of the lowest-performing schools in the country. "What I fundamentally believe — and what the president believes," Duncan told me, "is that the only way to end poverty is through education."

There is a growing body of evidence that for many low-income children, a great school can provide a route out of poverty. And Duncan is a firm believer in the idea that transforming the schools in neighborhoods like Roseland will in turn transform the lives of the children who live there. But the record of school reform in Roseland is not encouraging. Jasmine and Damien attended Christian Fenger High School, a three-story redbrick hulk on 112th Street that, under both Duncan and his predecessor, was the target of multiple reforms — from its brief incarnation as a math-and-science academy, complete with a $525,000 NASA-sponsored science lab, to the introduction of a "transformation" program partly financed by a large grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. But despite all the efforts, Fenger's academic results never really budged during Duncan's tenure. About half of each freshman class dropped out before graduation, and each year, only 2 or 3 percent of Fenger's juniors scored 20 or higher on the A.C.T., which is the college-readiness target of the Chicago Public Schools.

School reforms over the last decade have produced some notable successes for poor children. But there is a growing concern in education-policy circles that those reforms — like charter schools that require a significant level of parental involvement — tend to have a much higher success rate with better-off low-income students, the ones who come from more stable and capable homes. Chicago's public-school population is almost entirely low-income — just one in eight students does *not* qualify for a federal lunch subsidy — but within that population, some students are much more disadvantaged than others. Researchers from the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research were able, recently, to identify a subset of students who were particularly disadvantaged, living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and unemployment, with high levels of crime and an elevated incidence of child abuse. The researchers found that these students were clustered at 46 public schools, which

the researchers, borrowing a phrase from William Julius Wilson, labeled “truly disadvantaged” schools. These 46 schools were the targets of frequent reform efforts. But they were much less likely to respond positively to those reforms than schools with a less disadvantaged (but still poor) student body.

The divisions that the consortium’s researchers found among Chicago’s schoolchildren have an echo in national poverty trends. The Census Bureau tracks a category that the government calls “deep poverty”; families are said to be in deep poverty if they earn less than 50 percent of the poverty line — which means around $11,000 a year for a family of four, not including food stamps or other noncash support. The number of families in deep poverty grew sharply during the recent recession and its aftermath, and in 2010, the share of Americans whose families made less than half of the poverty line hit a record: 6.7 percent of the population, or 1 in 15 Americans. The numbers are even higher for children, disturbingly so. In 2010, 1 in every 10 American children lived in deep poverty.

This increase in deep poverty certainly has something to do with changes in the economy. But it has more to do with a shift, over the last two decades, in government aid to the poor. A working paper published last year by a team of economists led by Yonatan Ben-Shalom of Mathematica Policy Research tells the story of a growing divide. In 1984, federal aid to poor families was progressive, in the literal sense of the term — the poorest families got the most help. Single-parent families below 50 percent of the poverty line received, on average, $1,231 (in current dollars) per month from the federal government. Those in what could be considered shallow poverty, between 50 and 100 percent of the poverty line, received $448. But over the following 20 years, that situation was reversed. Government aid to families in deep poverty fell by 38 percent on average, while aid to families in shallow poverty increased by 86 percent. By 2004, the government was actually giving *more*, each month, to families in shallow poverty than to families in deep poverty.

This shift is mostly the result of a series of legislative changes in the 1990s meant to encourage work among the poor — among them the expansion of the earned-income tax credit and a law permitting children of single mothers working low-wage jobs to be covered by Medicaid. At the same time, government support for nonworking poor families began to drop sharply. The welfare-reform law passed by Congress in 1996 continued to provide cash aid to some poor families but did so with stringent requirements that adults who received that aid — mostly single mothers — either be working or actively looking for work. Over the last two decades, cash aid shrank steadily, and in many states, it has now all but disappeared. In Wyoming, just 314 families currently receive cash welfare. Illinois’s caseload fell by 86 percent from 1997 to 2011. In Georgia, in 1996, more than 90 percent of poor families received cash aid. Now 8 percent of them do.

In theory, at least, this tough new approach makes economic sense; if you want to make low-wage work more appealing for poor adults, you need to make nonwork less appealing. A little carrot, a little stick. Where the theory breaks down is in the fact that these adults are raising children, and many of the adults — like Jasmine and Damien's mother — are having great difficulty doing so. Cutting their income, as the government has done over the last decade or two, seems unlikely to make them more effective parents, and it inevitably hurts their children.

There are now seven million American children whose families earn below 50 percent of the poverty line. And in the last decade, we learned quite a lot about what it does to children to grow up surrounded by the kind of everyday chaos that often accompanies life in a family that is earning less than $11,000 a year. Neuroscientists and developmental psychologists can now explain how early stress and trauma disrupt the healthy growth of the prefrontal cortex; how the absence of strong and supportive relationships with stable adults inhibits a child's development of a crucial set of cognitive skills called executive functions.

In fact, though, you don't need a neuroscientist to explain the effects of a childhood spent in deep poverty. Your average kindergarten teacher in a high-poverty neighborhood can tell you: children who grow up in especially difficult circumstances are much more likely to have trouble controlling their impulses in school, getting along with classmates and following instructions. Intensive early interventions can make a big difference, but without that extra help, students from the poorest homes usually fall behind in school early on, and they rarely catch up. When you cluster lots of children with impulse-control issues together in a single classroom, it becomes harder for teachers to teach and for students to learn. And when these same children reach adolescence — unless someone like Steve Gates has managed to intervene — they are more likely to become a danger to themselves, to each other and to their community.

Jack Shonkoff, a pediatrician who directs the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, is leading a campaign to translate the science of adversity and brain development into new policies to better serve American children living in deep poverty. He says that current government policies actually provide a pretty good way to identify the children who are going to need additional intensive help to succeed in school. If your parents can't handle the work requirements to get federal cash aid, then you're more likely to need extra help to perform well in kindergarten. But these children are often among the least likely to get additional specialized services. In other words, the way we direct services to poor children would work better if we did more or less the opposite of what we're doing today.

One afternoon in April of last year, I visited Fenger High with a YAP counselor named Sean Lett, and we ran into Damien and his mother. It was report-card pickup day, and Lett was acting, quite literally, *in loco parentis*, checking in with the teachers of all of his clients, sitting down with one and going over his report card with him line by line. When he saw Damien, he asked to see his report card, and it was awful — lots of Ds and Fs. Lett lit into Damien right there in the hallway. "This isn't good enough, man," he said, leaning in. "You got to start handling your business, for real. No one else can do the work for you." His voice rose. "Quit playing. This life is real, boy. How old are you?"

"Eighteen," Damien said.

"Eighteen? You gonna blink and be 21. Seriously." He put his hand on Damien's shoulder. "I know you can do this, Damien. You just got to put your mind to it."

Lett, when I first met him, told me that he saw his role as not just a mentor, but something more. "A lot of our children are without fathers," he said. "If you don't have a father figure in your life, you don't have discipline and structure, and without structure, you don't have anything. You have chaos."

Lett's analysis has support from many of the academics who study how poverty has changed over time. Looking back on the lives and prospects of the American poor during President Johnson's War on Poverty, you can see two broad changes. In material terms, the trends have been mostly positive. Americans who live below the poverty line are much less likely to be hungry or malnourished today than they were then. A majority of families below the poverty line now have material possessions that would have been unthinkable luxuries in the 1960s: air-conditioning, cable TV, a mobile phone.

But while the material gap has diminished, a different kind of gap has opened between poor and middle-class Americans: a social gap. In the 1960s, most Americans, rich, middle-class and poor, were raising children in two-parent homes; they lived in relatively stable, mixed-income communities; they went to church in roughly similar numbers; their children often attended the same public schools. Today, those social factors all diverge sharply by class, and the class for which things have changed most starkly is the poor. Damien may have a cellphone, but he has never met his father.

The two social scientists who are most prominently chronicling these social changes today are Charles Murray, the conservative scholar, who wrote about them in his recent book, "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010," and Robert Putnam, the progressive Harvard political scientist best known for his book "Bowling Alone." What Murray and Putnam have each reported is that college-educated and well-off Americans

today tend to raise their children in stable, two-parent families. Among this cohort, divorce rates have fallen over the last few decades. Rates of unmarried births are rising slowly, but they are still quite low. According to Putnam's data, churchgoing rates have held steady since 1990, measures of social connectedness have gone up and the amount of time parents spend interacting with their children, especially their infants, has risen sharply.

But among Americans at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, things are quite different. Churchgoing has dropped since 1990 for less-educated and low-income Americans, and divorce rates have risen. Two-parent families are on the decline: in 2010, 88 percent of the children in the top third of the income distribution were being raised by married parents, and just 41 percent of the children in the bottom third were. While it's certainly true that many single parents are raising happy and successful children, these trends as a whole are taking a significant toll on low-income children.

"From a child-development point of view," Shonkoff told me, "we know that being a child in a family at the bottom end of the disadvantage scale means that you're going to be less likely to get the kind of parenting or other care-giving that will lead to good outcomes and more likely to face the kind of adversity that leads to bad outcomes." For children, these social factors make a big difference — not just in their current well-being, but also in their future economic prospects. This is a relatively new idea in the study of poverty, but it is one that is gaining acceptance among scholars: a critical factor perpetuating poverty from one generation to the next is family dynamics and their effects on child development. This means that if we want to improve social mobility, we need to find a better way to help disadvantaged parents and their children.

While this theory of poverty is still being debated by social scientists, it is not particularly controversial in poor neighborhoods. Obama saw it himself in Roseland. In "The Audacity of Hope," Obama wrote that poor African-Americans were well aware of the role that family breakdown played in the perpetuation of urban poverty. As he put it, "black folks can often be heard bemoaning the eroding work ethic, inadequate parenting and declining sexual mores with a fervor that would make the Heritage Foundation proud."

I experienced something similar during my time in Roseland. Steve Gates is by no means a conservative, but when he talked about the root cause of the problems his YAP clients were facing in school and in life, he always came back to their home environments. "Take a close look at our kids' family structures, and you get a perfectly clear picture of why they are the way they are," Gates told me. "There is a very direct correlation between family issues and what the kids present in school. The lapses in parenting, the dysfunction — it all spills over to the kids, and then they take that to school and the streets and everywhere else."

Unfortunately, these social changes pose an enormous challenge to policy makers. Americans know how to use their government to remediate a certain kind of poverty. If a family does not have enough food to eat or money to survive, we know how to issue food stamps or cut a check. But when children are growing up in a home without the kind of stability and support and order that they need to succeed in life, Americans don't always know — and certainly don't always agree — on what we want the government to do. We generally agree that we want the government to help increase opportunity and social mobility. But we don't like the idea of the government meddling in the home lives of private families. And so we're in a dilemma: the biggest factor holding back social mobility for poor children may be one we don't have a good strategy to solve — and it may be one we don't feel comfortable even addressing at all.

Given that political bind, what could President Obama do differently for young people like Damien and Jasmine? What Roseland needs is not necessarily a big new infusion of federal dollars. What it needs more than anything else is an antipoverty strategy that is much more comprehensive and ambitious than what exists there today, an approach that focuses on improving outcomes for children from birth through adolescence. Food stamps and other assistance are crucial, but parents like Damien's mother need help that goes far beyond that. Schools need to be better, yes. But better teachers and higher expectations can't on their own alter the pervasive influence of an entire neighborhood. And so the president could do what he pledged to do in Anacostia in 2007: create more programs that take on, in a direct way, the family dislocations that are holding many poor children back, like home-visiting programs for parents, intensive early-childhood education targeted at the most disadvantaged families and mentoring programs for teenagers, like YAP.

The Obama administration has, in fact, financed programs in all those fields, but in relatively small and uncoordinated ways, and often only temporarily. The stimulus grant that helped pay for YAP in Chicago ran out after two years. YAP's administrators lobbied school officials and Mayor Rahm Emanuel to continue the program with city money, but a year ago, YAP's funds were cut by nearly half, and next month, the program will end entirely. Steve Gates will lose his job.

And while it's almost a cliché among liberals that what Obama needs to do is give a few more good speeches, it really would make a difference for a president to talk publicly about the challenges of poverty policy in the candid and thoughtful ways that Obama did as a senator and in his first presidential campaign. When I asked Valerie Jarrett, Obama's longtime friend and mentor who is now a senior adviser to the president, about his relative silence on urban poverty, she said that the way the president spoke about poverty as a candidate in Anacostia — as a unique problem specific to one group of Americans — simply wasn't the

right way for him to speak about it as president. A better approach, Jarrett said, was for the president to propose and support a set of broad programs that raised all Americans economically, an approach that she described as inclusive. She added: “I think our chances for successfully helping people move from poverty to the middle class is greater if everyone understands why it is in their best interest that these paths of opportunity are available for everyone. We try to talk about this in a way where everyone understands why it is in their self-interest.”

It’s a challenge for any politician in troubled economic times: how do you persuade voters to devote tax dollars to help the truly disadvantaged when the middle class is feeling disadvantaged itself? The problem is that universal economic progress will not help those in deep poverty — or at least not enough. Places like Roseland need specific, targeted, effective help if they are ever going to change.

When I visited Roseland in June, almost two years after I first met Steve Gates, what struck me most was how much hadn’t changed in the neighborhood. The storefronts were still mostly boarded up. The graduation rates were as low as ever. I went with Gates to yet another funeral of yet another young man who had been shot and killed. But Gates was trying to be positive. On a Friday night, he invited me to a YAP graduation celebration held in the basement of a Baptist church. Damien received a plaque, and he gave a little speech to his peers and mentors. He has two babies now, he said, and it’s hard, but he also has a high-school degree and a job at a shoe store. The front window of his house is broken again, but it’s summer, so it’s not such a big deal.

It may well be that the kind of small, personal and incremental changes that have to take place in families like Damien’s in order for him and his children to have any real hope of success are simply beyond the power of any government or any president. But for a couple of years, Steve Gates was, in a roundabout way, a representative of the federal government in Roseland, and the work he did, to me at least, pointed the way to a different and more productive kind of engagement with young people like Damien.

Finding a new approach won’t be easy, of course. Back in Anacostia in 2007, Obama acknowledged that “changing the odds in our cities will require humility in what we can accomplish and patience with our progress.” But real change would take more than that, he said: “Most importantly, it will require the sustained commitment of the president of the United States.”

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