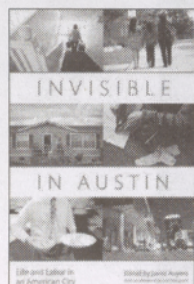


# The Unseen Invisible: A study in how the game is rigged

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At my company's holiday party in December, a coworker from the East Coast told me of her shock at Seattle's visible poverty. "You can't miss it unless you don't ever go downtown, and even then, in



**Invisible in Austin**  
Edited by Javier Auyero

many neighborhoods, you can't escape it," she said, marveling at how different that was from her home city.

At the same time, she had no idea of the laws banning or restricting the distribution of food to the homeless sweeping the country.

This perfectly illustrates the necessity of the book "Invisible in Austin." America's poor are less and less invisible. The reasons

why remain largely unseen, which could contribute to the general blame-the-victim stance so common in our politics and attitudes about poverty. But, according to the book's introduction, "from the 1970s till today, income stagnation, growing inequality, increasing economic instability, soaring debt and rising costs (in health care, housing, education, etc.) have steadily ended the well-being of American families. ... All are living in times when assistance to the poor has

shrunk dramatically, and all are experiencing the consequences of lack of living wages, stable employment, educational access, health insurance, welfare aid, housing and unemployment assistance, etc."

This book is about Austin, Texas, but it could just as well be about Portland or Seattle. And the 11 compelling narratives could be about Santos, Clarissa, Ines, Chip, Raven, Kumar, Ethan, Keith, Xiomara, Ella and Manuel, but they are also about the tangled web of structural inequality, institutional racism, sexism, ableism and more that keep poor people poor.

Their stories tell us to keep in mind that financial struggle, poverty and homelessness are a result of forces far beyond bad luck.

Javier Auyero's collection of accounts written by his sociology students about 11 poor people in a vibrant, rapidly growing city demands that we not blame the victim even as it humanizes the subjects as imperfect players in their own unfolding stories. As they drill down into individual experiences of low-income people in Austin, these 11 stories put our culture more sharply in focus, particularly how we exploit, punish, shut out, ridicule and devalue those whom our instant-gratification, consumer-crazy culture depends on most.

Santos started working when he was 5 and has labored his whole life at whatever job was available. He works harder than many successful professionals. "In Mexico, you can grow whatever you want on your land ... in the United States, you work for others," he said.

Clarissa, who worked 20 years in the

restaurant business until a car accident disabled her, said, "When I got the insurance from the lady that hit me, the hospital took it. So basically, they made me homeless. A hospital made me homeless ... I don't want to be taking disability. I probably should (given my ankle injury) but I don't want to. I want to support myself. I want to work."

Inés, "as a low-income, undocumented, single mother with limited resources, is forced to rely on the punitive functions of the state to achieve a sense of safety for (her daughter) Araceli and control over the family's circumstances" because they do not have access to other resources.

Chip's story is a perfect example of the kind of economic stagnation common in the U.S. "In the case of low-income earners, like Chip - is maintaining the same lifestyle what a person wants when he or she retires? Most advice about retirement is reserved for those who are financially secure, not for people like Chip.

About Raven: "Despite her best efforts, Raven is routinely drawn back to stripping and escorting, because of the financial stability it provides. A night of dancing can mean the difference between keeping her apartment in south Austin and being evicted or can enable her to afford gas to get to her administrative assistant job in west Austin."

Xiomara started an eventually successful housecleaning business to support her family when her husband, as is all too common, got injured on the construction job. "Unlike most jobs in the US, domestic work is almost universally excluded from the protection of

most federal labor laws ... at the same time, domestic work is also intimate and, by nature, intensely personal. Workers labor in close contact with the most private aspects of families' personal lives - they have keys to their homes and often know their relatives and children, if not in person then by photograph."

"Manuel is very much afraid of waking up one morning to a call informing him that a raid has taken his parents away. This event would not only destroy the family unity forged during his first years in the U.S., something that he has come to cherish, but it would also leave him unable to do anything about it ... Manuel's fear makes sense: ... In the last five years approximately two million people were removed from the country."

It's not just outsiders who view the poor with fear and disdain. Clarissa, for example, did not want to be associated with "the homeless" and did not want to be seen as "disadvantaged." Worse, "when the minimal social stability needed to foster mutuality and to buttress solidarity among and across wage-earning households evaporates, the poor cannot but prey on the poor."

Getting to know these people and their histories, hardships and hopes serves to heighten the tragedy of such internalized oppression and aggression. I share Auyero's hopes that it can galvanize folks into action as well.

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