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The Moral Construction of Poverty and the Child Welfare System

Plan for the next hour or so:

- 1) discuss the overrepresentation of poor families within the child welfare system and explore how this overrepresentation relates to the “moral construction of poverty”;
- 2) discuss four theories about why poor families are overrepresented in the child welfare system; and
- 3) discuss solutions.

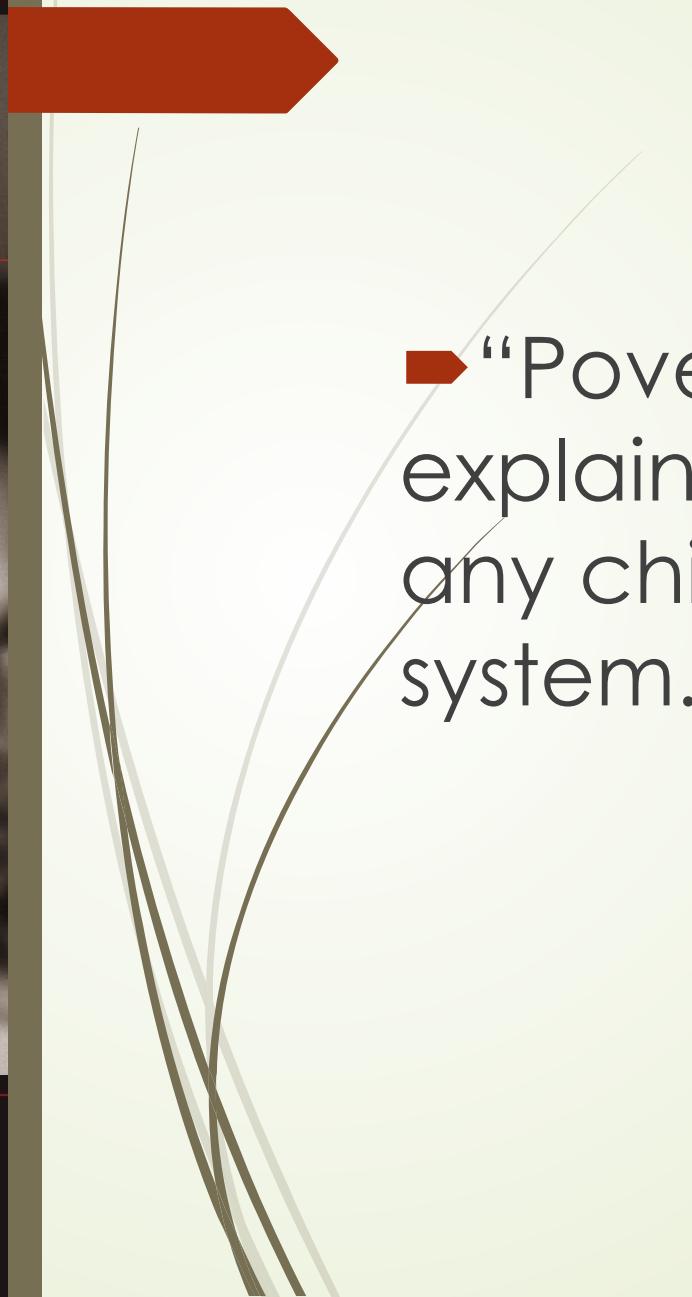
**“Passionate, meticulously researched...
not afraid to spark controversy.” –MS.**

SHATTERED BONDS

**The
Color
of
Child
Welfare**

DOROTHY ROBERTS

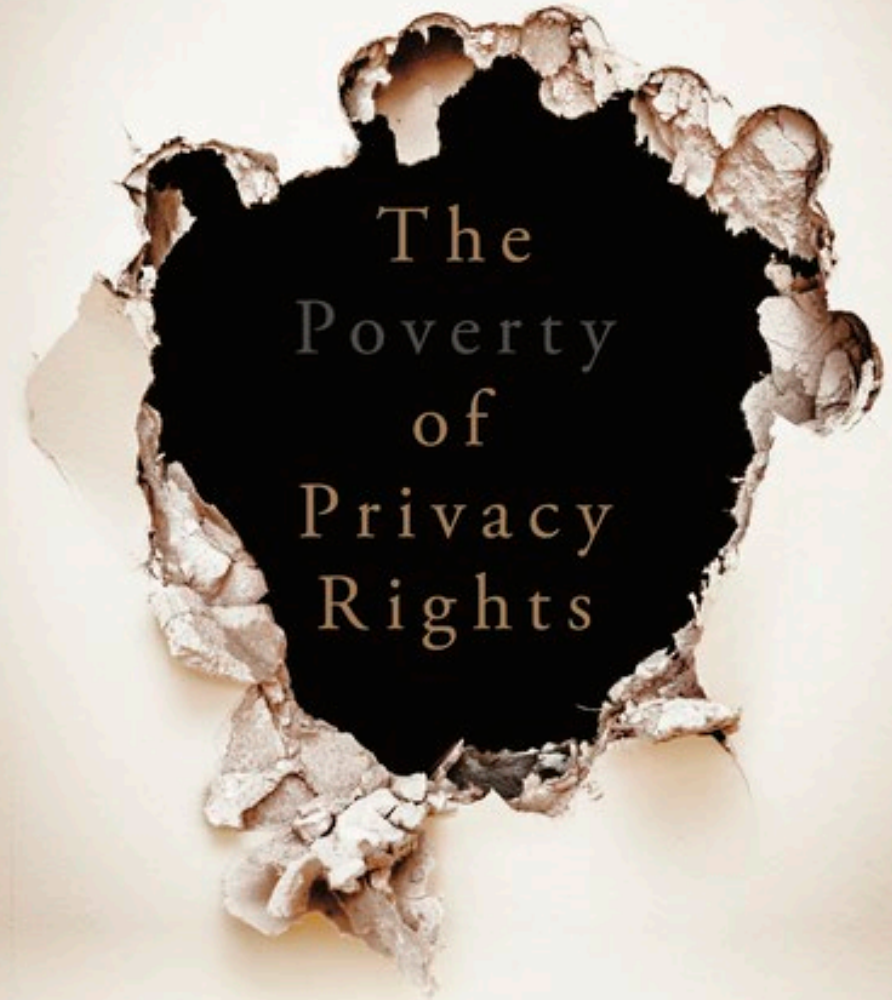
Author of KILLING THE BLACK BODY



➤ **“Poverty is key to explaining why almost any child gets in the system.”**

Moral Construction of Poverty

- People are poor because they:
 - are lazy,
 - are irresponsible,
 - don't have a good work ethic,
 - are promiscuous,
 - feel entitled to government handouts,
 - etc.



KHIARA M. BRIDGES



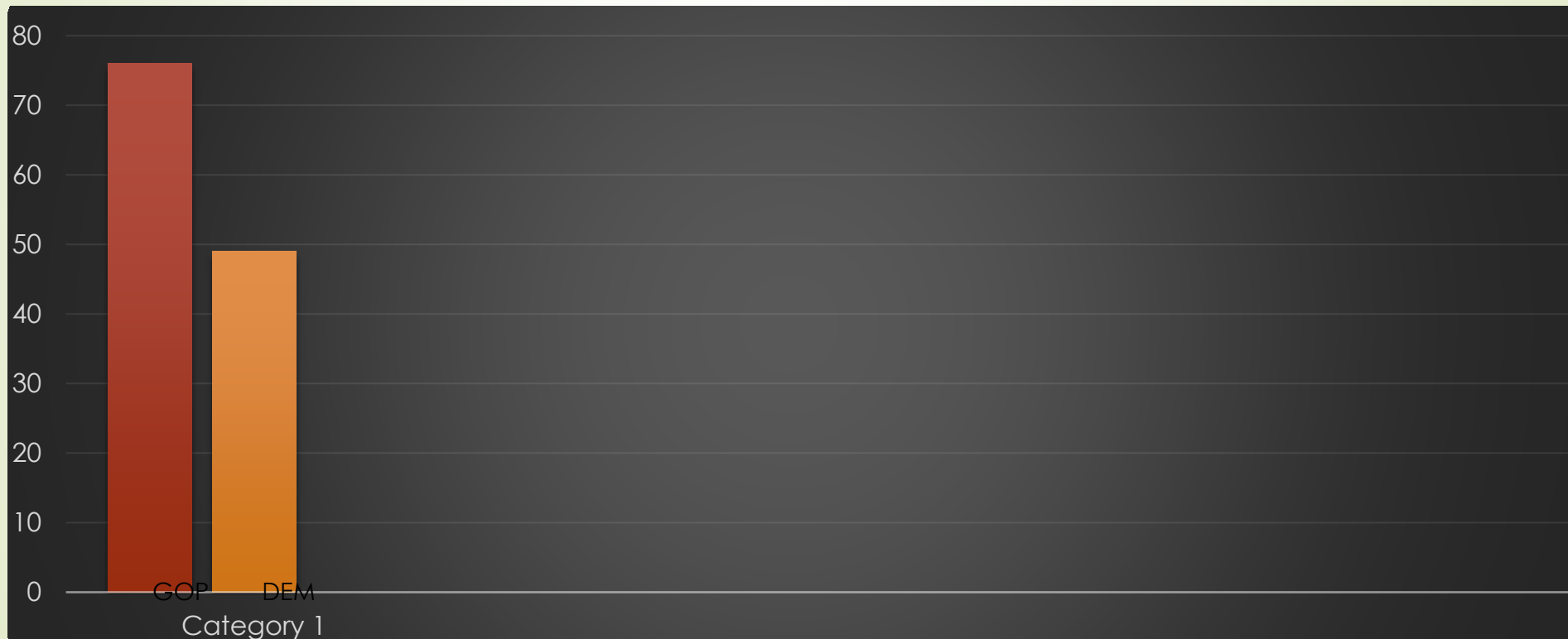
Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act

“You take somebody that has the right mind-set, you can take everything from them and put them on the street, and I guarantee in a little while they’ll be right back up there.... You take somebody from the wrong mind-set, you can give them everything in the world—they’ll work their way right back down to the bottom.”

-- Ben Carson, retired neurosurgeon and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development



“Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard”




Theories about the overrepresentation of poor families in the child welfare system

- poverty makes it difficult to avoid the harmful consequences of imprudent behavior;
- actual higher rates of abuse;
- confusion of poverty and neglect;

Child Neglect: A Guide for Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention

Diane DePanfilis

- Physical neglect [includes:]
 - Nutritional neglect: when a child is undernourished or is repeatedly hungry for long periods of time
 - Clothing neglect: when a child lacks appropriate clothing, such as not having appropriately warm clothes or shoes in the winter.
 - Other physical neglect: includes inadequate hygiene.
- Medical neglect[, which] encompasses a parent or guardian's denial of or delay in seeking health care for a child, [includes:]
 - Denial of health care: the failure to provide or to allow needed care as recommended by a competent health care professional for a physical injury, illness, medical condition, or impairment.
 - Delay in health care: the failure to seek timely and appropriate medical care for a serious health problem that any reasonable person would have recognized as needing professional medical attention. Examples of a delay in health care include not getting appropriate preventative medical or dental care for a child, not obtaining care for a sick child, or not following medical recommendations.
- Inadequate supervision[, which] encompasses a number of behaviors, includ[ing:]
 - Exposure to hazards. Examples of exposure to in- and out- of home hazards include:
 - Smoking: second-hand smoke, especially for children with asthma or other lung problems.
- Environmental neglect[,] which is characterized by a lack of environmental or neighborhood safety, opportunities, or resources.
- Educational neglect [includes:]
 - Failure to address truancy;
 - Failure to enroll a child in school.



Theories about the overrepresentation of poor families in the child welfare system

- ▶ poverty makes it difficult to avoid the harmful consequences of imprudent behavior;
- ▶ actual higher rates of abuse;
- ▶ confusion of poverty and neglect; and
- ▶ the visibility of the poor

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PUBLIC VOWS



A History
of
Marriage
and
the Nation

“The formality and conformity of marriage-like arrangements matter far less in the law now than in the past, because support can be traced through cohabitation and biological parenthood. And no state needs to work through household heads to locate or govern family members: *the interweaving or intrusion of government presence in the lives of individuals through their employment, schooling, immigration, taxation, and social welfare, travel, and so on, has advanced so far that all are already in the state’s grasp.*”

Studies of hospitals' reporting practices:

- ▶ “families who were Medicaid-eligible ... were more likely to have their children removed.... Severity of condition was not significantly associated with outcome.”
- ▶ reports to child welfare services “were less likely when families were white or were middle- or upper-income, either because doctors do not suspect abuse or feel that they can be more effective in working directly with the parents. Families with annual incomes of \$25,000 or more had better than a two-to-one chance of having their recognized child maltreatment go unreported.”
- ▶ study “found child maltreatment to be reported more often for low-income than middle- and upper-income families with similar presenting circumstances. For example, research has revealed that doctors are more likely to diagnose physical injuries among poor families as ‘abuse’ and to diagnose them as ‘accidents’ among affluent families.”



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➤ “The issue is no longer whether the child may be safely returned home, but whether the mother has attended every parenting class, made every urine drop, participated in every therapy session, shown up for every scheduled visitation, arrived at every appointment on time, and always maintained a contrite and cooperative disposition.”

Riverside County Department of Public Social Services

v.
T.S.

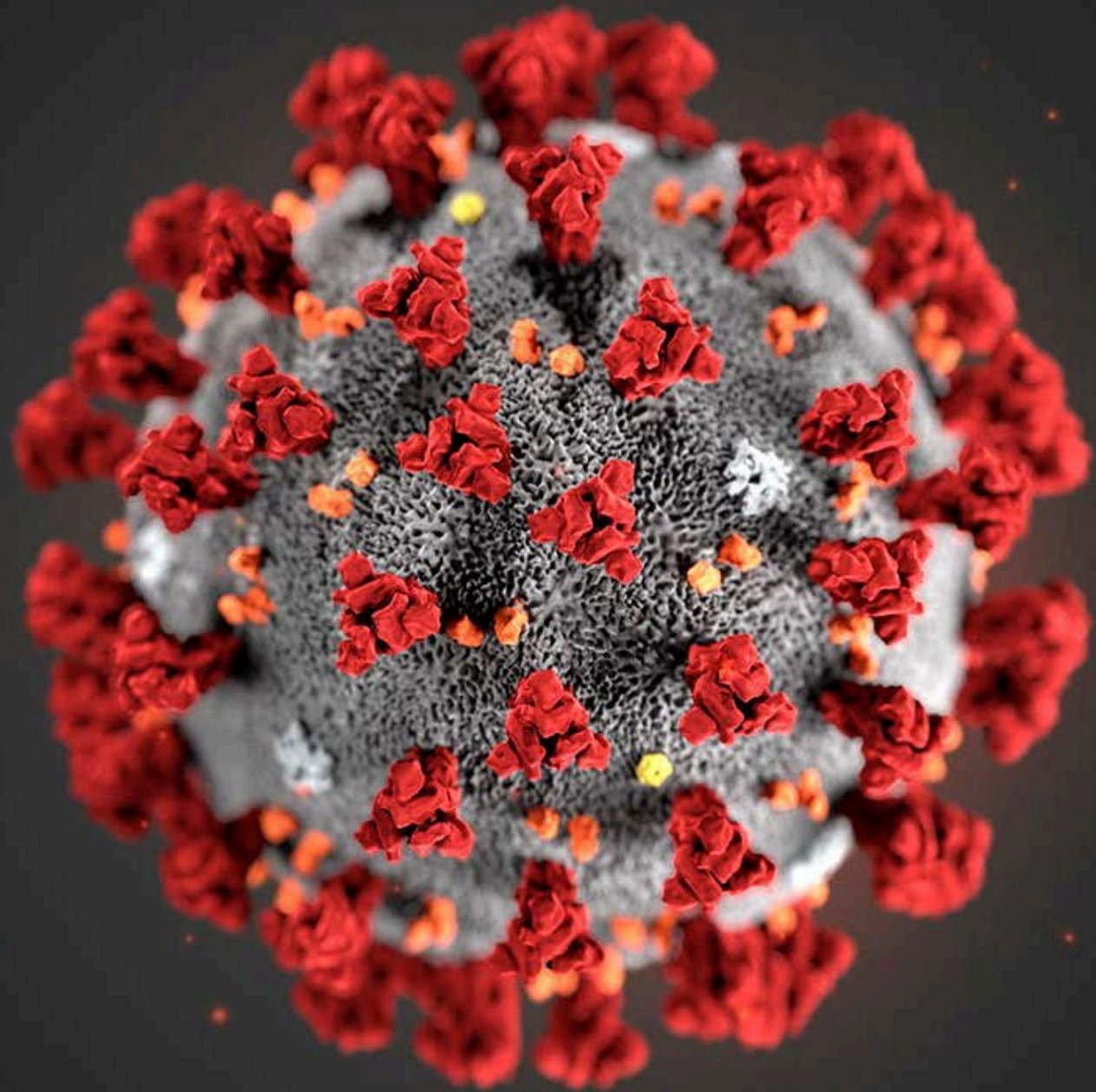
- ▶ Father himself identified housing as a barrier to his taking custody of Serenity and repeatedly requested help from the social worker. The case plan itself rightly identifies obtaining a stable residence and adequate resources to take care of Serenity as objectives he should pursue to regain custody. Yet the department did nothing to help him achieve those goals. Their negligence compounded father's problems, as did their insistence that he expend time and resources attending individual counseling sessions and parent classes, which the department recommended and the court imposed even before father had contacted the department.
- ▶ [lower court]: "Father throughout the duration of this case since it began in May of 2018 has not demonstrated that he's capable of providing a safe and stable home, along with the financial means to have Serenity in his care.... I understand from what counsel is representing today, he's not asking for placement. He's really asking for services so it could potentially lead to placement. But this Court has to look at the entire case and the actions of father and where he's progressed from the beginning to now, and the Court doesn't believe that giving six more months of services is going to get father to a point of being able to have his daughter in his care and weighing that with keeping Serenity where she is with her caregiver."



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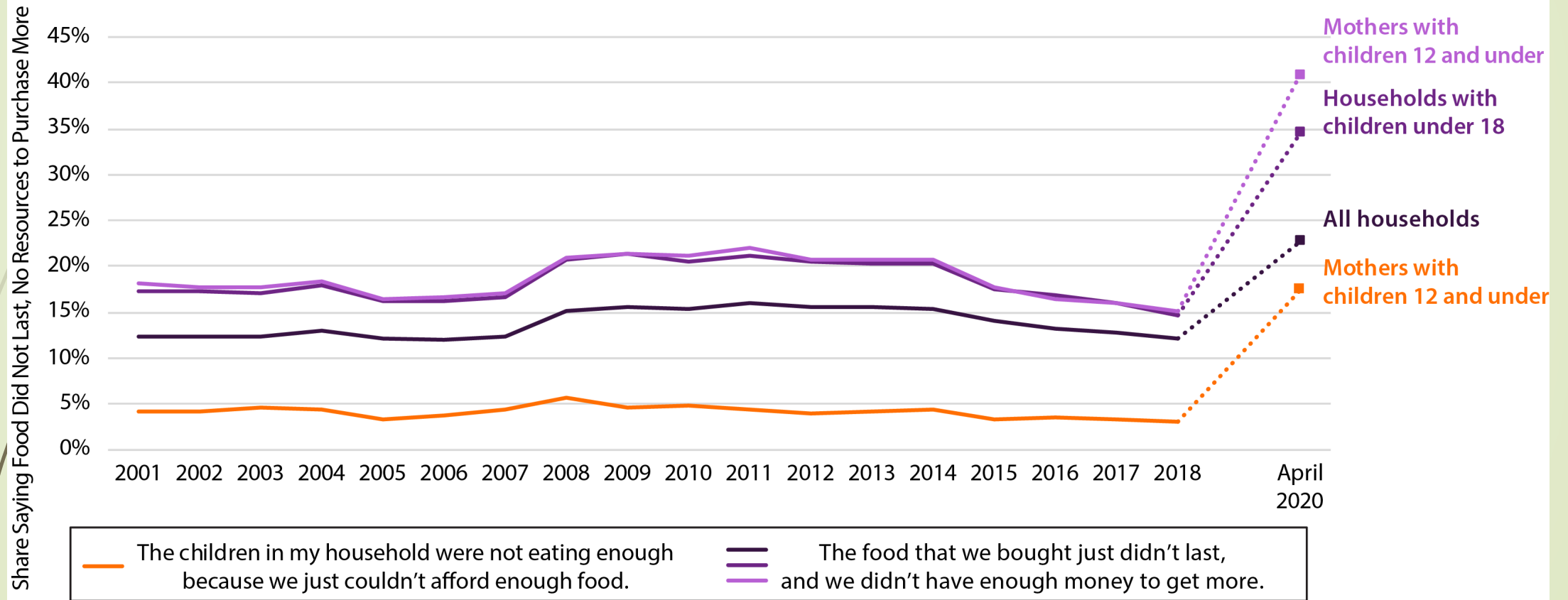




Study of Food Insecurity by Brookings Institute (2020)

FIGURE 2.

Food Insecurity in the United States, 2001 to April 2020



Source: COVID Impact Survey April 2020; Brookings Institution Hamilton Project and Future of the Middle Class Initiative Survey of Mothers with Young Children April 2020; Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement 2001-18; author's calculations.
 Note: Data for all households and households with children under 18 are from the COVID Impact Survey. Data for mothers with children under 12 are from the Brookings Institution Hamilton Project and Future of the Middle Class Initiative Survey of Mothers with Young Children. Both surveys have been weighted to be nationally representative for the populations that they describe. In the Survey of Mothers with Young Children, respondents were asked: "Below are two statements that people have made about their food situation. How often have these statements been true for your household since the coronavirus pandemic? The food we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more. The children in my household were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food." In the COVID Impact Survey, respondents were asked: "Please indicate whether the following statements were often true, sometimes true, or never true for you or your household over the past 30 days. We worried our food would run out before we got money to buy more. The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more." Neither survey administered the complete food insecurity battery as administered in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement. The statistics for each of these individual questions were replicated in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement for 2018.

Shelter

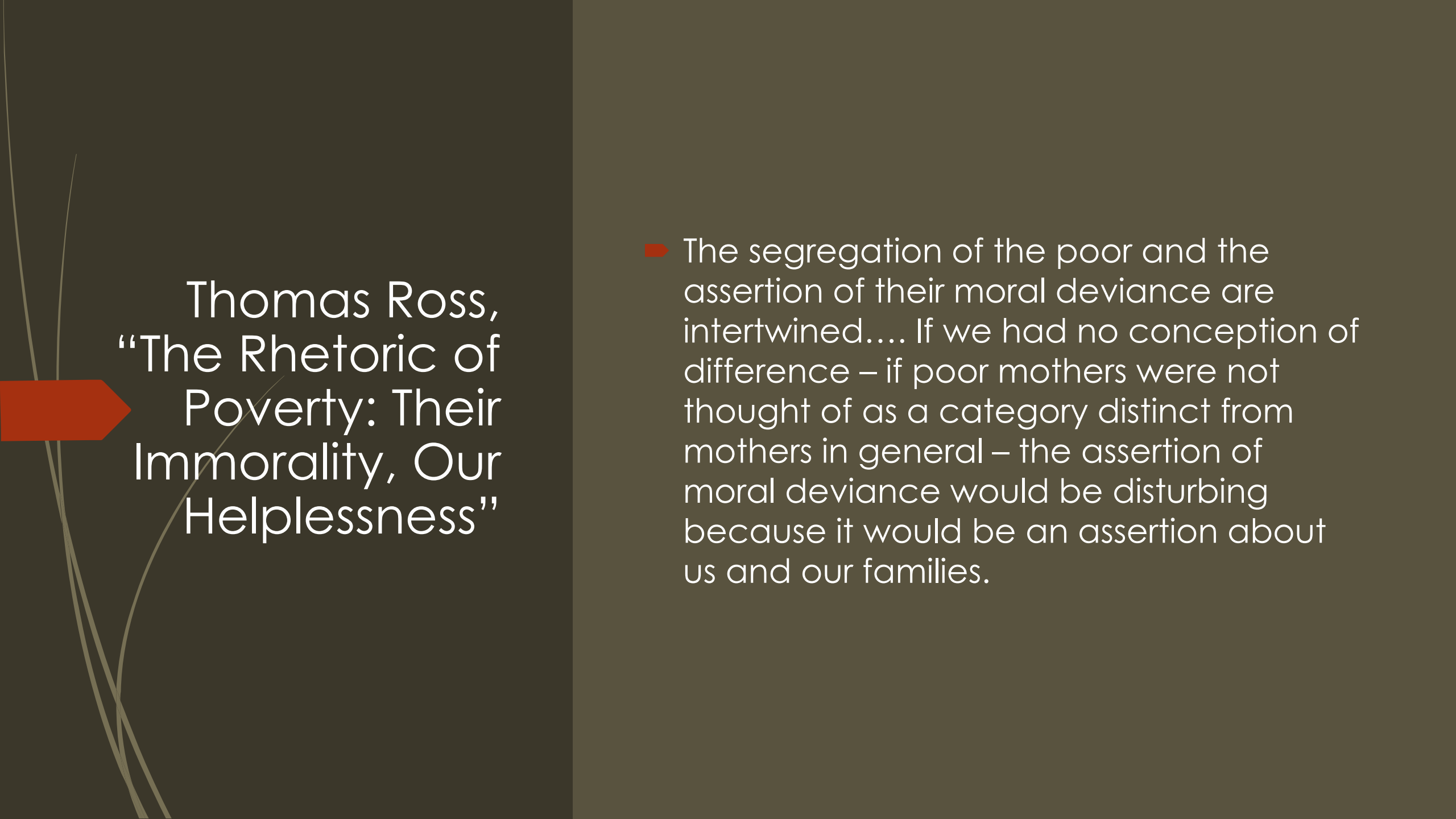
➤ More than 6 million households failed to make their rent or mortgage payments in September 2020.



Healthcare







Thomas Ross,
“The Rhetoric of
Poverty: Their
Immorality, Our
Helplessness”

- ▶ The segregation of the poor and the assertion of their moral deviance are intertwined.... If we had no conception of difference – if poor mothers were not thought of as a category distinct from mothers in general – the assertion of moral deviance would be disturbing because it would be an assertion about us and our families.



Thank you!