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Coverage of Poverty in Persistently Poor Areas by Using Sense of Place

“Sense of place” is the way a person relates to his or her environment. This paper aims to help journalists learn to convey information using local identities to explain poverty in persistently poor locations. Sense of place, historical characteristics, narratives, and tradition should be used to cover poverty in a way that will draw in readers. Community members should be able to form accurate ideas about their locale and know how poverty affects it through crime, health, business, and education. National statistics, surveys, and legislation can be used at a local level to explain poverty trends, and this paper provides specific ideas to incorporate poverty coverage in beats across the newsroom. However, journalists can include several beats in the coverage and shouldn’t hesitate to follow other journalists’ examples of coverage. The 14 newspapers observed in this study are divided between how they acknowledge and cover poverty, and each must find its own way to correctly cover the issue in its market.

SENSE OF PLACE

Sense of place is “one of many characteristics displayed by people congruent with local identity ... Sense of place is defining oneself in terms of a given piece of land” (Xu). The term’s meaning is common across different fields of study – loci, place attachment or a place’s identity. Yan Xu develops an overarching concept of sense of place for the many different uses in academic fields and studies. He suggests perceptions and bonds are formed by four components: “toponymic, related to naming places; narrative, involving personal or group stories or legends; experiential, associated particularly with dependence and survival; and numinous, or spiritual.” This concept suggests that journalists must use stories about experiences and legends that

occurred in specific places to create the sacred sense of belonging. Other studies and our research suggest the same.

Jennifer Cross, professor in the Department of Sociology at Colorado State University, published a paper on sense of place in November 2001 in which she classified “sense of place” across the disciplines – anthropology, environmental psychology, geography, landscape architecture, history, and sociology – to mean various ways people engage with their surroundings. She surveyed ninety people in Nevada about their identity and sense of belonging, and classified the type of bond in six ways: biographical, being born in and living in a place; spiritual, something felt rather than created; ideological, living according to moral guidelines for human responsibility to place; narrative, learning about a place through stories; commodified, choosing a place based on desirability; and dependent, constrained by lack of choice through economic opportunity or dependency on another person. Through the knowledge of Cross’ six types, journalists can better understand how to incorporate historical, familial, and material aspects of sense of place into articles about poverty (Cross).

Extending the definition and application across another discipline, Oklahoma high school teacher Pauline Hodges explained in July 2004 how she uses sense of place to teach at-risk rural students. She creates interest in the literature by engaging them in their community through investigating and reporting. The students read books that portray a similar lifestyle to their own and then interview and tell the stories of community members. Likewise, journalists must return to the basics of talking to the readers and consumers on the streets (Hodges).

Psychologists like Nancy Freehafer say the loss of community in America may be becoming more prevalent. Newspapers must address this declining feeling and establish interest once more. Nancy Freehafer evaluated the degree to which sense of place has declined in

neighborhoods as more houses are burglarized and fewer children play in the streets. She looked at social groups and said all – even increasingly popular Internet groups – have a core sense of community through three factors: “common values, discussion and decision-making about tasks and a common history” (Freehafer). David Salvesen of the Urban Land Institute concurs, “In essence, people create places ... In one way or another, people put their stamp on a place. Try to imagine Lancaster, Pennsylvania, without the Amish.” To correctly evaluate and explain poverty in small communities, reporters must first understand the community and be able to explain social and economic issues through the common values and a common history (Salvesen).

Informing citizens about poverty is part of what will maintain the sense of place. Journalism can establish this sense of place as it informs about poverty. As Jay Rosen, a New York University journalism teacher and author of “What Are Journalists For?,” is quoted in a 1992 Columbia Journalism Review article, “So these are problems that we need to see as relating: the loss of readers, the loss of voters; the loss of a sense of place, the declining sense of civic membership; the rising disgust with politics, [and] the decay of public discourse” (Rosen). In some small communities, the newspaper may further the public dialogue, especially about poverty. Maintaining this sense of place and responsibility could also help newspaper profitability, as long as newspapers are considered a part of this sense of place. Knight-Ridder chairman James Batten said in the same article, “People who say they feel a real sense of connection to the places they live are almost twice as likely to be regular readers of our newspapers as those who say they lack such ties” (Batten). If newspapers establish the sense of place, they can profit from it as well (Hoyt).

Peggy Prenshaw and Jesse McKee of the University of Mississippi wrote about how to save the sense of place in Mississippi in the 1970s – by covering history and using what the

people have in common. They suggested knowing the lives of the locals, just as an artist in Seattle did:

Victor Steinbrueck's naïve sketches of Seattle's Pike Street Market are brutally honest, including telephone poles, winos, prostitutes and 'adult' moviehouses, yet Steinbrueck's Market Sketchbook helped make the people of Seattle aware that the Pike Street Market, for all of its blemishes, was an irreplaceable treasure. The result was the saving of the smelly, dogeared, wonderful market, and the understanding that Seattle was not going to have its *genus loci* monkeyed with! ... Peculiar celebrations, peculiar institutions and particular gathering spots, fall into the same category, of course.

And this is what local newspapers are best at covering. Journalists cannot forget what newspapers are supposed to do – log the news and give those in the community an awareness of what is happening. Sometimes covering news becomes routine; thus, journalists cannot forget that this needs to be interesting and relevant to the audience by including local people and making them realistic and personable. McKee wrote,

Written and painted representations of farm tenant hovels and other living symbols of poverty may be attractive to readers and art gallery viewers, but those living in them may have distinctly different views. And the views of those inhabitants are most often those presented by newspapers. Such living conditions represent serious social problems that can never be solved without objective, in-depth looks at the subject.

Mississippi newspapers in the 70s wrote about federal programs to benefit the poor and preservation of historic areas under zoning laws, which put the political stories into perspective for readers (Prenshaw, McKee). The entire visual aspect of the paper should take poverty into account as well: "Taken collectively, photo stories may help create totally new feelings of a sense of place. When combined with word stories, they can through newspapers be a major factor in strengthening or weakening a sense of place" (McKee 122).

McKee also notes that

While newspapers can improve living conditions by reporting on problems that need attention, they can also focus on those things that give the South a distinct 'sense of place.' Reporters consistently seek out those things that make the South and its people

different. News concerns the reporting of those things which are out of the ordinary, unique and distinctive —things that add reality to stereotyped images. News stories and feature stories, particularly, help keep persons aware of what their neighbors are doing. They can help keep alive those activities which are indigenous to the South (123).

POVERTY

To understand how to cover poverty, journalists should first examine how poverty manifests itself as a sense of place in the community. Are impoverished people accepted and helped or are they shunned? Who is affected and how does poverty play a role in political, social and economic aspects of the community?

Poverty is news and has become an increasingly newsworthy item as studies from the Brookings Institution indicate more Americans now live in poverty in suburbs than in cities. However, Brookings Institution also said poverty in these areas is not being covered well by the press. Edward Colby commented on the study in a December 2006 issue of *Columbia Journalism Review*, explaining the media could “do more with comparisons of the types of neighborhoods, housing and family structure that are characteristic of urban and suburban poverty.” Colby quotes Paul Jargowsky, an associate professor of political economy at UT-Dallas who has written extensively on the concentration of poverty. Jargowsky says, “families might be able to avoid crime and drugs more easily and have their kids attend better schools, but support services for the poor are still mostly centralized. They might feel more isolated and maybe they’re not accepted by the members of their community.” Part of covering a community through sense of place is knowing the different demographics in the community. As evidenced by the study, poverty may be prevalent in places journalists would not consider. To begin covering poverty, the newsroom should split and observe each sector of the community and how residents relate to other sectors (Colby, Jargowsky).

The Columbia Journalism Review also reviewed in January 2001 the overarching coverage of poverty in the news. Trudy Lieberman interviewed Cathy Trost of the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families, who said “no one paper covers poverty in a seamless, energetic way” because it’s not something “that newsrooms demand.” Lieberman details three exemplary jobs within that year. The Orange County Register did a piece on “motel children” about orphaned kids who have to survive in run-down rentals on their own. After the series, Lieberman wrote,

more than 1,000 people responded with letters and phone calls. Says Saari, “It threatened nobody. It gave them sadness and surprise, rather than fear.” Community residents donated some \$200,000, 8,000 toys, and fifty tons of food. The Orange County Board of Supervisors ordered an audit of services for children living in the motels. A private organization launched a \$5 million capital campaign to build transitional housing.

Lieberman cites the motel children example to explain that a narrative focus on a trend or a group of people could relate poverty and the group’s sense of place in the community (Lieberman, Trost). Something along the same lines may exist, although perhaps not as dramatic and significant, in our fourteen Georgian newspapers. There may not be orphans living on their own, but what about latchkey kids who may need an afterschool program when parents are away at a second job? Targeting the story of one struggling family would strike a chord and provide a familiar concept to families in a small town.

In the St. Paul Pioneer Press, a series called “Poverty Among Us” focused on the “idea that the poor are not far off somewhere, but right in the midst of readers’ lives,” says editor Walker Lundy. Reporters wrote stories about families considered to be involved in the community. The series is a perfect example of linking poverty and sense of place – stories about well-known community members will help readers to identify. A feature on the effects of a bill

or the economy on a “normal” family encourages the concept that this prevalent poverty is not across town but in their own backyards (Lundy).

Also included in Lieberman’s article was a review of how poverty coverage has changed at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. In 2001 the paper didn’t have a poverty beat, but editors said it was on their minds. Seven years later, news organizations are continuing to search for a way to cover poverty with relevance. “If I were assigned to the poverty beat, I would be overwhelmed,” AJC reporter Jane Hansen told Lieberman. “Where would I start? With health care, nursing homes, crime, the schools?” Hansen correctly identifies what our survey results indicate – the beat is so large and important that topics for a poverty reporter would fall into separate beats. Instead, it would be necessary to split the coverage of poverty along those lines and among the beats already found in newsrooms. Hansen covered a series about children, focusing on individuals and their daily struggles and targeting how government agencies were failing to do their job to help. Two years earlier the AJC covered the “growing underclass” in Gwinnett County, profiling ten families living in poverty in the midst of the developing affluent area. It examined the cost of poverty to county residents in terms of taxes and social services. Continuing to incorporate people (especially families) by using specific economic influences (taxes) and incorporating local government response can establish sense of place relevance and importance for readers.

The need for poverty coverage at some newspapers is apparent, but how do journalists cover it without making readers numb to the issue? Trista Vincent examined this in the Ryerson Review of Journalism in 1999 by observing the newsroom conversation at *The Toronto Star*, when it had two reporters assigned to cover social policy and six others who wrote about issues pertaining to poverty. Fred Kuntz, the *Star's* deputy managing editor said, “The best poverty

stories are those containing a narrative and offering true, real-life, human drama, as well as the historical context of the issue, quantified facts about the scope of the problem and informed and dispassionate discussion about the causes and possible solutions.” This all-encompassing responsibility is tough, but Kuntz thought it was possible. One of the staffers wrote a story in 1994 about three community members who benefited from public housing but also critically analyzed non-profit housing. Once again, establishing sense of place by addressing a local, addressable, and historical issue through a personal narrative is crucial (Vincent, Kuntz).

A RATIONALE FOR CHANGE

In these cases, the media seem to have investigated and covered poverty significantly through the 90s and up to 2001, so what has changed since then and why has it not changed society dramatically enough? Did coverage actually decrease, rise slightly with the concern following Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans, and drop off the radar once more?

Mary Ellen Schoonmaker, an editorial board member at *The Record* in New Jersey, asked *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne Jr., a political writer who covers poverty as well, to suggest ways to return poverty to the front burner at newspapers in a January 2008 *Columbia Journalism Review* article. She asked if it was relevant for audiences and if it is even possible to consider covering poverty as a newsworthy item.

“I actually think there's a structural bias in the media against the poor. Newspapers are built to cover the wealthy and the famous much more than they are built to cover the working class or the poor,” he replied. “There is no part of the newspaper routinely devoted to the coverage of the problems of poor people, or struggling working-class — or even middle-class — people” (Schoonmaker).

In the same Brookings Institution report on suburban poverty in the 2006 *Columbia Journalism Review* article, Edward Colby speaks with David Shipler, a former *New York Times* reporter and author of *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, about news coverage of poverty. Shipler said, “The run of the news now pretty much ignores poverty because government is not involved in making it an issue by trying to address it, and that means it doesn’t get covered. And it’s not on the radar scope of most editors ... You don’t get a lot of breaking news on the subject, so it’s hard to get stories into the paper” (Colby).

The same reaction is common among many professional journalists, who resist change in the way they cover the news. Exactly what purpose would covering poverty serve? Why does it matter? Newspapers merely cater to the profitable and the decision-makers, right? Those in poverty don’t read newspapers anyway, right? Perhaps, but research has shown that journalism can create the public dialogue that stirs change by inspiring those who do not experience poverty.

This is especially true because the upcoming election is returning social issues to the table, and because of this, Dionne claims that turning back to poverty coverage is particularly important. For smaller newspapers that cannot send reporters to cover exactly what candidates are saying, it’s important to explain what policy changes could mean for the small towns:

Certainly John Edwards has made this a major theme of his campaign, and I think Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton are doing that to a degree — both have given serious poverty speeches. And in Congress, with the s-CHiP debate, for example, the state children's health-insurance program, you're opening up on a national level, day after day after day, a debate about how poor and lower-middle class and middle-class kids get, or do not get, health care. So I think the environment now is more conducive to real coverage of these problems and this issue than it was just two or three years ago.

Dionne explained an effective article he read about a mother who works at Burger King as one of her three part-time jobs to care for her kids, who come to work with her and play

behind the counter. Using people to explain poverty and the statistics associated with those stories is probably most effective, he said,

I think the stories of folks like that are very compelling to readers. I think stories illustrating what these numbers about the lack of health-care coverage mean, or what the imposition of higher co-pays or insurance costs mean to actual people, are compelling stories. . . . these abstract issues and explain them in light of people's actual experiences," he said. "Readers who are not poor can relate especially to stories in which they could imagine themselves if their luck ran out, or if they were born into different circumstances. And because many people

these days who aren't poor feel under various financial pressures, there are ways to link their situations to the situations of the poor.

Schoonmaker asked Dionne if journalists should worry about stereotypical, emotion and guilt-provoking coverage that could possibly cause readers to become numb to the problem. Dionne explained his confidence in covering poverty effectively:

In terms of whether this turns people off, there are books that have been best-sellers that call our attention to this. One thinks of the classic, *The Other America* by Michael Harrington, which had an enormous effect in making us pay attention to the poor," he said. "There are Barbara Ehrenreich's books [such as *Nickel and Dimed*] that were very compelling to a lot of people. So I don't think this coverage turns people off, nor does it all have to be downbeat. A lot of stories about the poor are heroic stories of people who despite the odds are trying to do the right thing.

According to a study published by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, coverage of poverty does not seem to cause a biased opinion of the poor. The study found that there was no significant difference in the influence of photographs on college students in news stories about poverty. Jae-Hong Kim, a communications doctoral candidate at Penn State, studied the pre- and post-attitudes of Caucasian college students' attitudes toward U.S. welfare policy and perceptions of African Americans in news stories about poverty. There

was not a change in attitude in relation to race, which suggests that journalists need not worry as much about stereotypes when covering these necessary news stories (Kim).

Schoonmaker asked Dionne if it is possible for journalists to cover poverty without bias and to explain stories accurately, but still with human perspective. Dionne said he thought so.

The best journalists have a kind of empathetic ability, the ability to see the world not just from their own perspective but from somebody else's perspective. At its best, journalism is an interaction between an empathetic view and a critical view, which is: How does the world look from this perspective.

What journalists cannot do is fall back on apathy with poverty coverage. The Community Service Society of New York evaluated the decreased coverage of poverty in New York in 2004 and determined that coverage had dropped, because newspapers catered to readers' wants instead of needs, favoring more trivial news. In existing poverty coverage, articles tended to contain stereotypes, which "can lead to the conclusion that there is no need for public investment in poor neighborhoods," or were misleading and incomplete. "Just as damaging has been the media's refusal to look at underlying problems of poverty," they wrote. Poverty is news, and journalists cannot forget it in the local newspapers.

HOW TO DO IT

Studies have shown that poverty goes hand-in-hand with crime, education, health and other regularly-covered newspaper beats. How poverty can be incorporated into these beats rather than be seen as a beat alone needs to be considered .

Crime

An article in *The Telegraph* of Calcutta, India, discusses a sociological survey commented on by local police, saying poverty and crime go hand-in-hand. The Telegraph article quoted police who said poorer residents in the area are tempted to commit crimes for money when exposed to an increasingly affluent culture. The police also linked education, crime and poverty together by saying, “Because of a lack of education, these people are unaware of the consequences of their action.” As the point of the story, it is said best through a quote. Journalists covering poverty do not need to explain the complexities themselves; local officials can explain the situation with authority.

- **Statistics.** Journalists should scan national crime surveys and studies and apply the data on a local level. The Federal Bureau of Investigation website offers annual statistics on hate crimes, violent assaults and thefts in particular cities across the nation. Local police departments offer similar numbers as well.

- **Location.** It may take a bit of analysis and time, but reporters can break down crimes by specific location in the town, locating which streets attract the most crime. Most likely, these streets will be the ones with poverty characteristics.

- **Quote sources.** Government officials, police and even local psychologists or counselors, can act as sources to explain poverty and crime trends in the area and why this is the case. Census data could quantitatively back up the observations

Education

Grasping the local news nut information is vital. In March this year police from Topeka, Kansas were arguing for funding pre-kindergarten because, they said, high-quality early education programs prevented these children from becoming criminals later. Not only is this a news story, but it helps to explain why less education (and probably a lower salary) is more

likely to produce criminals. The effects of community poverty on education could be addressed in the following stories:

- Evaluation of free and reduced lunch program
- Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP goals are often not met at poor schools because performance is down. Articles explaining the meaning behind each facet of the evaluation could shed light on dropout rates, test scores and larger community problems.
- Measure of top-notch teachers. Coverage of teacher success might include: evaluating how many teaching jobs are open, profiling qualified teachers and interviewing administrators to gauge teaching needs.

Health

CNN published a story in September 2006, quoting doctors and even a former president saying poverty and poor health are intertwined. “New research indicates that it's not just the poor who are getting poorer,” wrote reporter Sabriya Rice. She explained, “an analysis of poverty rates and health published in the September issue of *The American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that people living in extreme poverty tend to have more chronic illnesses, more frequent and severe disease complications and make greater demands on the health care system.” She also profiled Bill Clinton’s Global Initiative – a non-partisan group of world leaders trying to match problem-solving with resources with poverty as one of the issues.

- Health insurance. A coverage of local health insurance policies offered by local companies and accepted by local doctors could be informative for those who are poor. A profile on a family without health coverage would explain the impact.

- Studies. Just as Rice used the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* study, local journalists can watch national trends and apply it to their markets. Local hospitals may be able to offer basic numbers for illnesses, treatments and types of payment methods.

- Local clinics. Profiles on free health care nearby can help those who cannot go anywhere else and can inform those who can afford a doctor that some community members need help.

Business

A May 2007 cover story in *Business Week* explored “the poverty business” in which some U.S. companies exploit the nation’s working poor for profit. They begin the story by focusing on a 28-year-old female who lived on food stamps and welfare with her children in Albuquerque, and continued by looking at these aspects of the business of poverty:

- Scammers. The two *Business Week* reporters then described how U.S. companies keep the nation’s poorest at their lowest. “In recent years, a range of businesses have made financing more readily available to even the riskiest of borrowers. Greater access to credit has put cars, computers, credit cards and even homes within reach for many more of the working poor.” Local newspapers can run columns on how to maintain good credit and avoid falling lower.

- Helpers. On the other hand, journalists can also profile the local businesses that help the poor. What is the Chamber of Commerce doing to help citizens? Are business owners aware of all conditions in the community? Profiles on local thrift shops or organizations such as Habitat for Humanity could encourage help from residents.

- Follow the money trail. Taxes, gas prices and other money matters affect all walks of life, but focusing on community members’ struggles with food stamps can enlighten some and allow others to relate.

Government

Also in the Calcutta crime story an officer said, “The basic problems of these people need to be addressed first. With the help of NGOs, we plan to give a platform to these people and make them aware of the outcome of their action.” This example perfectly explains the continued action of the news story, but also helps to target another angle for poverty stories – what the government is or is not doing to help.

- Legislation. Journalists should follow bills as they are proposed in Congress and explain them on a local level. How would this bill affect the community specifically? On a local level, what is the city council proposing with millage rates or zoning and construction changes?

- Non-profit organizations. Along with profiles on Habitat for Humanity, what are leading organizations in the community doing? Is the main church in town holding a soup kitchen? How can residents help? Other government groups – city hall, the police department – may hold events to benefit the poor as well. For small town newspapers especially, positive events are newsworthy and maintain a sense of pride in community members.

- Holidays. This may not seem relevant to poverty and government, but follow what groups are doing on days granted free from work. It might be interesting to see who is granted vacation time and what different sectors of society do with it. This is not just a focus on the lower end but on the richer side of the community as well.

Lifestyles

Similarly, newspaper journalists can take a lead from magazine writers and consider extended features about poverty and its effects. *The New Internationalist* reports on issues of

world poverty and inequality, but a May 2005 issue boasts several articles that could easily be copied in a small town publication.

- Children. This can be taken in many different ways through the education beat, but a feature on what activities and trends are popular for students can reflect the community's lifestyle. Is there a prevalence of gangs? Do children expect to finish school and attend college?

- Families. A look at households in the community says a lot as well. Are many single-parent families? This subject can become touchy, but a focus on people can retain the effective narrative outlook.

- Tips. *The New Internationalist* offered "how to" articles such as "how to live simpler" to encourage people to cut down unnecessary spending. Advice columns on how to create good credit or avoid debt would work well here, too.

Combinations

Although poverty can be covered separately in beats, it does not have to be restricted to separate beats to tell a story. Journalists need to consider all sides of the story before forming conclusions, especially when considering a news story with statistics. After a study released in the UK showed skin cancer to be more prevalent among the wealthy, newspapers across the area headlined the idea and studied how leisure time at the beach could affect the issue. However, another reporter commented in the internet newspaper, *The Huffington Post*, in June 2007 on the neglected elements of the story: "It is possible that patients from lower socioeconomic groups do not present for medical care," which would lead to under-reporting of skin cancers. The reporter quoted doctors who explained that people in poor neighborhoods are more likely to have their cancers diagnosed late, which leads to lower reported numbers and a higher chance of death. This is probably also directly related to health care services and work compensation, by which poorer

residents cannot afford to miss a day at work to take care of themselves, and thus become even sicker. Writing articles, again quoting local professionals, reporting illnesses, spotlighting a free clinic in the area, or writing a brief news story about flu outbreaks could build trust and appreciation within the community for the newspaper.

Keeping everything local is also crucial. Journalists at small publications cannot forget that to incorporate sense of place, they must be a part of that sense of place. Adam Lusekelo, a WPR correspondent, wrote in January 2003 how word-of-mouth news is most important in his area of coverage, Tanzania. Although technology is much more advanced in southern Georgia, a favored mode of passing information is still word-of-mouth gossip. With a mission to report the community's daily news, small-town journalists must get back into the communities to find the stories of compelling interest. For example, in Newnan, Ga., a reporter wrote a crime article last month about a gas station being caught paying off customers who won when using gambling machines in the store. By only talking to the police, the reporter missed the local owners' story, making the story libelous, in a sense. This is something that should not be ignored, especially in small towns. Everyone has a different side of the story, and when it comes to poverty in local newspapers, journalists should focus on the people.

SPECIFIC IDEAS

But how exactly do we do this? Local journalists should apply what other journalists have done in their markets. A good way to start is to pick a focus.

Individuals and their stories

- In Columbia University's graduate journalism school, Jett Stone writes about the "vicious cycle of poverty and health in Greenpoint" by describing the scene, weaving in

problems of health care and explaining it through the eyes of an individual. He balanced the focus on individuals by speaking with government officials who defended their positions as well.

- Likewise, Leon Dash explained his method behind his Pulitzer-winning series called “Rosa Lee & Me” about a mother and the intermingled poverty, crime and drug use in one family as seen through her, her children and five of 32 grandchildren’s eyes. As Dash describes, “I became absorbed by Rosa Lee's story – and deeply troubled. I also realized that the series that followed – on the intergenerational nature of underclass poverty, crime and drug use in one family – would disturb and anger some readers.” Although writing about successful people who overcome barriers is important, “these individuals and families are not part of the crisis in urban America. I was interested in writing about the crisis. Every one of us should be alerted to it. I wanted readers to be uncomfortable and alarmed,” he said.

Although Dash’s process of following Rosa Lee for four years and interviewing forty people for a series is more extensive than what small town journalists can probably devote to a story, the commitment to finding the truth is necessary to portray poverty stories in small communities. Dash said, “People often asked me, ‘What is the solution?’ There isn't one clear answer – the many problems in families like Rosa Lee's are too intertwined. The third-grade reading levels of Washington's criminals, however, do offer one clue: They tell us when the criminals stopped learning. There are, after all, very few high school graduates in prison.” And this is where journalists could break down poverty problems in their own towns – local education systems, local health institutions and local job opportunities.

Social and physical communities with a sense of place

- In another successful story about poverty, Daily News staff writer Liz Mineo won first place in the New England Press Association category “Coverage of a Racial or Ethnic Issue” for her series “The Brazil Connection” about the legal and illegal stream of immigrants between a community in Brazil and New England. It also focused on the people through their desire and opportunity to support their families, and the pain when they are unable to do so.

- National Public Radio proposed a program that would work with radio stations to produce in-depth coverage on community issues of importance. A Flagstaff, Arizona station, KNAU, focused their sense of place project on “Poverty with a View” by exploring the challenge of living in a town with low-paying jobs and a high cost of living. The stories covered legal and undocumented immigrants from Mexico, migrants from California and Native American reservations, the scientific research recruitment challenges, housing trends as seen in Sante Fe, New Mexico, in which local families were priced out of homes, and a focus on the arts community with artists who are successful and others who are starving.

Legislation and its effects

- Milford Daily News staff writer Danielle Ameden won first place in the same category for smaller daily newspapers. She wrote about a controversial bylaw Milford approved to inspect overcrowded apartments. She suggested other avenues for articles could include the closing of a homeless shelter, school failure that blocks children from rising out of poverty, health costs in a community, family structure breakdown and poverty, the lack of transportation and a lack of jobs due to lack of transportation.

Multimedia as a different kind of storytelling

- Now how do journalists incorporate sense of place in the face of what Salvesen calls the “several threats to a sense of place, such as our nation’s restlessness, the homogenization of the built environment and the emerging digital age”?

- Several effective and emotional stories have been portrayed through audio and visual elements online. Likewise, a personal focus suggests an interest in engaging the public in a dialogue. Students at Washington-Lee University created the “Poverty-Journalism Interactive” in December 2006 to encourage journalists to comment on recently-published articles and techniques for covering poverty.

OUR RESULTS

Of the fourteen newspapers researched, none included poverty as a sense of place characteristic. Although some editors said poverty should be included as a sixth characteristic, a few actually denied being located in an area of persistent poverty. For the most part, however, editors did name significance in the beats the training program can teach journalists to target with poverty coverage – education and economic factors – by using already the editors’ sense of place characteristics – traditions, history, feelings of a small community and shared political and religious demographics. The training program must build on what is already in place. This may be best considered through evaluation of the last question on the survey for each newspaper.

One group of editors said poverty is included in coverage through other beats, which is what the training program will promote. Jason Winders of the *Athens Banner-Herald* said poverty is usually mentioned as part of the “urban feel” discussion. Likewise, Dwain Walden of the *Moultrie Observer* said there was a lot of poverty in the area, and coverage usually falls under “political structure” and “local economy” responses. Within the local economy section, he would include it in industry, retail, housing and poverty levels. Additionally, Peggy King of the

Cordele Dispatch said she probably should have mentioned poverty because it ties in with the “illiteracy” sense of place factor. King said it is a poverty-stricken area with a high rate of people dependent on the government. These editors acknowledge the community’s demographic and give an appearance of trying to cover it in the news. Training should remind reporters at these newspapers to keep demographics on the front burner and incorporate coverage through common knowledge in the community of the problem in business and education stories.

Another group of editors recognized poverty in the area but said it was located more in the surrounding areas. Mark Lastinger of the *Thomasville Times Enterprise* said poverty was a considerable problem. He said that, although Thomas County was an oasis and surrounding counties were worse, Thomas County is an employer for the outside counties. According to Lastinger, per capita income in Thomas County is higher than any southern Georgia county except Lowndes. It seems Lastinger is denying persistent poverty in the hub sector of his market. Additionally, Jim Hendricks of the *Albany Herald* said poverty falls under the “economic challenges” category he named. Dougherty County, for its size, has three strong private schools. Next door, Lee County “siphons off” the higher income residents. He said poverty is related to indigent care, has employer perceptions and is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Also, Jim Healy of the *Statesboro Herald* said the newspaper is in a smaller community but has less poverty because Georgia State University draws jobs. He said poverty is less prevalent in the town versus the surrounding counties, and poor people are not seen in abject poverty around Statesboro. Healy seems to be unaware of his area’s characteristics. In this group, the editors need to be informed that poverty is prevalent in their target market areas and should be covered even more extensively because of the surrounding areas in poverty.

A third group acknowledged poverty in the area and the importance of the coverage. Ken Eysaman of the *Union Recorder* in Milledgeville said that poverty would have been mentioned as a sixth sense of place characteristic. He noted much rural poverty in the area, not split by race. However, he did not indicate how the paper covers the issue. Kerry Klumpie of the *Brunswick News* indicated the same but did say poverty touches education. "It's a cycle, choosing to stay in poverty if not educated," he said. "Low-paying jobs are because of low skills." Jack Williams of the *Waycross Journal Herald* said the area does have persistent poverty, with 25 percent minority and 52 percent of the workforce lacking a high school diploma. He said the newspaper has not been able to grow as rapidly because many cannot read. Reporters must be cognizant of what persistent poverty really means, he said. Along the same vein, Dubose Porter of *The Courier Herald* said poverty is "a part of life" that the paper has no choice but to cover. "There's not a lot to explain about the demographics because the reporter will face it on the job," he said. Reporters will learn how poverty affects health, education and other areas while covering city council meetings. "The education beat includes this in test scores and free lunch programs," he said. Porter further explained a loss of seven thousand textile jobs years ago still affected the area, and the business reporter would cover the loss and subsequent economic issues in his beat. But does the business reporter cover an extensive story like this, including poverty in it? With this group, training would have to make sure the newspaper is making an effort to cover poverty. Instead of assuming readers know about the effects of poverty in the area, the newspapers may want to try writing specific features on poverty or using community examples in business stories.

In a final trend group, three editors tended to deny poverty in the area or the need to cover poverty in the news. Flo Rankin of the *Tifton Gazette* said poverty is a separate issue under

the “unemployment” sense of place characteristic. One measure of poverty is the number of free lunches, which isn’t as high of a number in Tift County, he said. Rankin said Georgia is divided into three tiers of overall economic health and Tift is in the middle. In LaGrange, Andrea Lovejoy of the *LaGrange Daily News* said the standard of living is above the state average, although the coverage area has all the issues associated with small towns in southern communities. Lovejoy should consider covering the poverty in Hogansville and other areas just outside of LaGrange. Additionally, Kay Harris of the *Valdosta Daily Times* spoke about a series the newspaper did on “hidden poverty.” She said it is ignored in terms of public policy and because there is a “wealth effect” and pride in the community. “There is an inflated sense about St. Simons Island, that the whole place is like Sea Island,” she said. Instead of conforming to the mindset of the community, these editors should take a hard look at research and investigate why their markets are labeled as persistently poor. Training will have to remind the reporters of these newspapers to get out into the community and observe what’s happening. Maybe it could be a story idea to contrast perception and reality in the community.

CONCLUSION

Sense of place is how people in the community relate to their surroundings. To relate to the readers, journalists must use sense of place in their stories through local history, landmarks, emotion and a focus on local people. Poverty is news and should be covered, and journalists must cover it without bias, stereotypes and exaggerated content. This again can be done by focusing on individuals and balancing government response with it. Journalists must cover poverty not as a separate beat but as a horizontal beat through the effects it has on a community’s education, health, crime and business beats. Quoting local officials and statistics to help explain the affects can be useful. To get journalists started with story ideas, they should look to other

exemplary articles to influence public dialogue and begin change. To expand coverage to the increasingly important and competitive Internet, small town newspapers should find specific stories of families to feature audio and video components online. This program could create an online discussion forum for reporters and editors from the fourteen newspapers to communicate ideas and successes, especially because they hail from similar markets. In specific response to the fourteen newspapers, the program should be tailored to most effectively help those who do and do not acknowledge or cover poverty.

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