

MIKE LIVERMORE: Welcome to the *Free Range* podcast, I'm your host Mike Livermore. This episode is sponsored by the Program on Law, Communities, and the Environment at the University of Virginia School of Law. With me today is Michelle Wilde Anderson, a law professor at Stanford, and author of the recent book, *The Fight to Save the Town: Reimagining Discarded America*. Michelle, thanks for joining me today.

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Oh, thanks, Mike. I'm so glad to be here.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So it's such a beautiful book. It's just wonderfully written. The stories are just incredibly compelling. It's just really a pleasure to read, and I encourage the listeners to pick up a copy. I have actually listened to it on Audible on the audiobook version and it really sings in that format. But maybe just to orient us, could you give us a little maybe thumbnail description of the project and what the book is all about?

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Yeah, sure. Thank you so much for that generous introduction, that's really sweet of you. I did edit it to death. So I hope the sentence did show all of that TLC. So the book is-- I'll start with the subtitle, the subtitle is *Reimagining Discarded America* as you said. And that's really a look-- The book really sits with that problem of the giant areas of the country that have not yet found a foothold in the modern economy.

And in particular, it's sitting with one specific really hard policy problem, which is that we have a lot of cities, including small towns and rural counties where there's so much poverty layered across the entire tax base that it's hard for the local government to sustain basic services. So I think of this problem as governments that are both poor and broke or places that are both poor and broke. And those are mutually reinforcing problems that when a place is really poor, it is more likely to be broke, and when a place is broke, it is more likely-- its people are more likely to stay poor.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah, part of the format of the book is that you select four quite different places to kind of tell the story of places that, as you say, are both poor and broke. And I'll say that this book and the stories you tell have personal resonance for me. I grew up near a town in upstate New York, in a region of the state that's had some economic hard times, and I think the town that I grew up near-- the biggest town that I grew up near fits the definition that you have in the book of border to border poverty which is-- The town I grew up in is 33% below the poverty line, which is above the criteria that you have, which is either 20% or 25%.

Yeah. And then the median income compared to the state is 60%. And I wasn't sure if that was family income or personal income but it's both for this town Binghamton, New York, that the median personal income is 60% of the state, and median family income is 50% of the state. So I think that falls well within the criteria that you have. And a lot of the problems that you describe in the book, I definitely am familiar with from my own hometown.

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Yeah, I think the Hudson Valley, I could have included Newburgh, New York, in this book. I didn't, but there's a bunch of towns in New York that would qualify under the definition that I use. But like you said it sits with four places and I chose them because all of them are-- First of all, they're just exceptional places in their own right. Their histories are rich, their leadership is really good right now. And they have a larger story to tell when you put them next to each other because they're really different from each other.

Four places represent, I think, the larger range of towns facing this problem of being poor and broke. So some places like that are big cities, some are smaller cities or inner ring suburbs, and some are rural areas. And similarly, this problem ranges from all White places to predominantly Black or Latino places to super diverse places. And finally, this problem ranges across politics and ideology.

So I wanted to hold places that consistently vote conservative, consistently vote progressive, and places that swing back and forth. So I chose four places that are different from each other and therefore help to dislodge any kind of story we might tell about why places face this problem along lines of race or ideology or scale. But these four places are kind of one of a kind as all towns are. They have their own unique history and their own unique networks of people, but they have a lot in common when you put them next to each other too.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah, and one of the things that is really fun and interesting and different about this book that you've offered us is, as you say in the book, it's not a data-driven wonky policy book. I dove into the wonkiest part which was the definition of border to border poverty. But other than that, it's not full of statistics, it's not full of charts and graphs.

This is a book with narratives with stories in them. And so I guess one question just to ask is, why that approach? Why not a policy book? Why was it important to take on the storytelling role or the storytelling project? Is there something wrong with the stories that we're currently telling about these places, and how do you see your book fitting within this kind of narrative of the town maybe or of these towns in any case that we have in our culture?

**MICHELLE
ANDERSON:**

I love that question, and I thought so much about this issue. There were times when I really thought I wanted to do a more data-driven policy book. We have some books-- like I'm thinking, looking at my desk right now, Alan Mallach's, *The Divided City* is an outstanding policy book that deals with some of the bigger public policy challenges that are at the base of this book. We have some good examples out there of policy work.

But I think as I went deeper and deeper into this project, really in all the years since the Great Recession when I started to work on municipal financial collapse, I noticed that we have really dominant stories that we tell about broke places and about poor places. And those stories deal with violence and street crime. There's kind of bullets flying in the middle of a hellish landscape kind of story.

We have corruption stories in which we don't listen to any or don't pay attention to any news out of towns like this except when there's some kind of public scandal or mismanagement event that draws attention to them. We have stories of hopelessness, almost like eulogistic writing of dying places in which we sort of grieve the past and engage in this kind of nostalgic memorialization of a lost heyday for these places.

So we have really dominant narratives about poor and broke places and they're kind of everywhere. And I started to really believe that those narratives themselves were destructive to the political will to keep working on these hard problems. And because millions of people live in places like this you cannot simply wish them away. And I think the Electoral College and the Senate-- the structure of the Senate should always remind us that at some level our politics and the structure of our government are bound to show up for the places where Americans live, and if we don't, then they will take the government in the direction that they wish.

So there's a larger narrative problem, I think, we have or almost a kind of mythology about these places that does a lot of damage. So I didn't want to sugar-- I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do what in photography is called ruin porn. And I didn't want to write a happy, heroic, look at these amazing people they've got it. Yay, clap and then we can all walk away from these hard problems.

So I really tried to as a narrative matter sort of hold both of those truths at the same time. Like, yes, these problems are devastating. The hardships are real. The challenges are intergenerational at this point. And there are extraordinary people that are working on these problems, and we can't just wish these places away.

MIKE
LIVERMORE: Yeah. So that all is-- that makes a ton of sense. You brought up the Senate and Electoral College-- this is, I guess, my law profession [INAUDIBLE] I noted that. And so my question that just comes out of that is just kind of what your thinking is on that. So it sounded like possibly that this was actually like a justification for the way that we have the Senate apportioned by states and the Electoral College or it's a feature of that system.

So I was just curious to have you say more because I will admit, I don't talk to too many defenders of the Electoral College or the kind of apportionment of political power by states that we have in the Senate. Folks offer various arguments for why that's a bad idea. So I was curious if you had an alternative perspective because I think that would be worth airing because I don't hear it very often.

MICHELLE
ANDERSON: Yeah. I mean, you're not going to find me, Mike, as a defender of the Electoral College. And given the distribution of our population right now, normally you'll find me as a defender of the structure of the Senate given modern urbanization. But what I really meant by that comment is-- let me back up and just say-- this is the language that I use in the book.

I think there's a strand of thinking out there that's dominant primarily in econ, but a strand of thinking that I label the suitcases solution, which is this idea that the answer to chronic poverty is that people should move toward growth and move toward jobs. And if you think of that spatially, a lot of how that looks is moving people, for instance, out of the Rust Belt and toward the Gulf or toward the West.

And here you and I are as both environmental law scholars living in the era of climate change. The idea that we're going to solve our long-term problems as a nation by moving our people away from the freshwater patrimony of the Great Lakes, and toward the inundation zones of the Gulf is honestly totally absurd, but also financially frightening. Because the heroics levels of infrastructure that would be needed to spare the Gulf from climate dislocation is so expensive.

I mean, when I look fiscally at Florida's future, it is dark. And let it be said here that the state of Florida has such predictable municipal bankruptcies and state grief in front of it, in its finances-- Anyway, I digress. The point is that here we are, we have this suitcases kind of fantasy that we can move people toward opportunity.

And I think what we saw in 2016, although this has been brewing for a long time before that, what we saw in 2016 was a bunch of homeowners in places like Pennsylvania who were having trouble making a decent living and supporting their families, who said, no, thanks, to the offer that they should go be a tenant janitor on a floodplain outside of Houston.

And I think that's kind of the larger problem in our politics right now is that you've got a lot of people that said, I can't move. I won't move. What you're asking me to move toward in terms of the cost of housing and the cost of living is just as unsustainable as what I've got now, and so I'm not going to do it. And so we're seeing lower levels of migration toward those kinds of job opportunities.

And there that loops us back to this kind of structure of our government problem, which is that if this example kind of Pennsylvania homeowner says like, no, thanks, I'm not moving to Texas. They have the power of the Senate and the larger structure of government to demand attention on their own turf. And I think that's a bigger kind of reality of our politics right at this moment.

And that whole discussion will lead us in the direction of picturing this as a rural White problem but honestly, the post-industrial America is super diverse. And that's a major distortion of the Trump coalition, and the sort of populist moment that the people who are most dislocated in the economy and facing regional scale concentrated poverty are all White, that's just not true.

So in this book, I'm really trying to hold the larger stretch of places that are dealing with this larger problem of what's our future, and how do we make this a town where people could leave to move to opportunity, God bless them, they could stay here and have a decent quality of life. But this town is not going to trap them in intergenerational poverty.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah, there's so many interesting things going on there because, as you mentioned, there's a lot of misunderstanding of the Trump coalition. In part because I think-- there's plenty of evidence that the poorest folks in the United States are not the ones that are voting for Donald Trump.

There are kind of specific demographic characteristics that the Trump voters have. I mean, the Trump coalition itself is very White but, of course, that doesn't mean that dislocated people and people that live in poverty are overwhelmingly White, that would be very misrepresentative of our actual situation.

So that's itself a very interesting thing. Another piece, of course, our politics that are relevant here is just that at the end of the day voters can vote and voters will have their voices heard. If it's through the Electoral College or the Senate or some other situation, the cultural and economic power can be highly concentrated. And that does translate to a certain amount of political power, but I think at the end of the day, if you just neglect people and you just allow places to be disinvested that's going to show up in the political process one way or the other.

**MICHELLE
ANDERSON:**

Yeah, and that's such a beautiful landing spot because I really came to observe so closely just over and over again-- I did 250 interviews for this book, I talked to lots of people who really are on the front lines of these problems, and a theme that I heard over and over again is that trust in government and trust in strangers, just any level of institution, civic society that starts to-- civil society, sorry, starts to really break down when a place has been stuck in poverty or when it has become this sort of larger poverty trap for a long time.

And that breakdown in basic trust and cooperation is especially destructive when people don't have much money. Because the reality is that when you don't have a lot of cash, people have to work together and sort of pool their staff, their expertise, their resources, their equipment, they've really got to start to coordinate their efforts in order to advance.

And so at some level, *The Fight to Save the Town* part of this book, the part that was so redemptive and just hopeful for me in reporting it, was to see how people weave society back together, and really try to rebuild the basic trust. And I think as you think about the layers of the government primitively, kind of federal, state, local, if-

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And as you know, levels of basic trust in government in America tend to be higher at the local level, but in places like this, they can be quite low. And once there's no trust anywhere up the chain, it really does lead to a larger rot in democracy. In which people lower their expectations for government, they start to fantasize about heroic alternatives to democracy, they start to really kind of disengage in voting and participation and--

Anyway, so that's the vicious cycle part of it, and really what I was trying to sit with and find and celebrate at some level in this book is people who are creating the virtuous cycle are really trying to turn their community toward a form of participation and change. Really saying like, what do we want, and working together to achieve that.

And I think that will really-- It does, I mean, you can see it in these towns, it filters back up the chain. If you teach people to be participants and leaders in a local government they're going to turn out in larger scales of politics too.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah, I mean, this just is like-- goes back to some of the founding kind of notions of why we have government the way we have it set up, is that having local government services as kind of a training ground and an opportunity for people to participate in politics and having those experiences is very important and it's very different from a condition where there's just the one remote Washington DC-based government or wherever. One remote centralized government run by experts and elites that you have no day to day-- you experience it day to day in the conditions of your life, but you don't have a participatory role to play except maybe occasionally voting.

**MICHELLE
ANDERSON:**

Yeah, and, I mean-- Sorry, Mike, I just can't resist but just focusing because it's such an interesting line of discussion to me because-- So in these types of communities there's a very strong perception of the dominance of government, even in places that are super weak locally. So by definition, every place that I've written about in this book has a very weak local state. It has a collapse in basic local services that in wealthier places we take for granted.

So 911 that has no officers to dispatch or no emergency services to dispatch. Absence of staff to get the water treatment formulas correct to deliver clean water to people, or an absence of access to public water at all. And closure of public libraries. I mean, on and on, these basic services that we take for granted start to collapse.

And yet, in these weak state places, people have a sense that government is dominant and it's coming from federal policy, whether it's environmental law or immigration law, and it's also coming from state law because states fund the incarceration systems and so much of the cost of answering poverty with policing. And they also fund the courts that enforce contracts, including leases through eviction law.

So one of the things I observed is that because we don't-- the average person doesn't always have a clear sense of who does what in government, you can live in a very weak state environment like Detroit, and still feel like the government is dangerous and present in your daily life. Also, child dependency, I should have mentioned that. The dominance of family law through the state systems means that people have a sense the state is strong, maybe too strong sometimes, in ways that endangers their liberty or their families and/or their housing or so forth.

Anyway, so it's all these distortions that happen. And again, the more positive spin that I'm trying to sit with in the book is people who are really trying to rebuild that local level so that government's trying to do something for you other than just punish you. I mean, what does it mean for government to look out for you and your family?

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. I want to turn back to this at some point, the kind of question of rebuilding trust and how that works because it is a fascinating component of the book. And just to reiterate, it is so fascinating such a distorted thing in a sense that as the state gets dialed back, it's the ways that you're going to have positive interactions with the state that get dialed back first.

And the residuum is police, and evictions, and child protective services. And, of course, we need all of those things, I mean, to varying degrees, but if that's all the people's experiences with the states are-- with the state at large is they're not going to provide a very positive impression of the capacity of the state to do good in their lives.

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Exactly, yeah. And what's interesting about really broke places is that the government can't-- local governments now, just talking about cities and counties, they really don't have a lot of money. They can't fix that problem by writing in with big programs as one county commissioner said it in Oregon-- The book sits in one county in Southern Oregon called Josephine County, but I did a bunch of research on other counties in Oregon too. And a county commissioner elsewhere at one point said, the cavalry is not coming.

And he really meant the higher tiers of government. As in, Oregon is not coming, DC is not coming, we're going to have to figure out some of these problems on our own. But also it's interesting-- at the local level people don't have the resources to kind of buy their way out of these problems either. And so the reconstruction that has to happen is across the private sector too. It's sort of getting business owners at the table. It's getting nonprofits coordinated with one another. It's getting churches involved. It's really starting--

It's trying to sow that fabric of civil society back together so that institutions can work together again. And government can participate in that. It can lead in that sometimes. And it can certainly throw some weight around because in very weak places, as weak as local government is, it's often one of the biggest employers left in the town. And so it's got some weight to throw around, and it's got to be part of the solution, but it can't be the only answer.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So just for a moment, I wanted to return to the suitcase solution question and the moving away-- moving to economic opportunity argument. Because I'll admit to someone who's done that, someone who's moved away to economic opportunity. And just in observing my hometown where I grew up, one of the things I note is that folks who graduated from college, basically, none of them still live there. And the folks who didn't go to college-- a huge percentage of them did, so the folks who kind of had opportunities outside tended to pursue them.

And so I wanted to maybe press on this or take a devil's advocate just to flush out the idea. So the argument from the economist position that kind of-- we're taking a very idealized economist position, would be there was an economic logic to a lot of these places, there was industry. Again, where I grew up there was manufacturing of a certain kind that produced a lot of jobs.

That's just gone. Globalization, automation, these big forces that exist that are kind of just economic realities have-- or that are baked in even if we didn't have to make those choices, we've made those choices, and they've undermined the economic logic of these places. And we kind of have two options. Either we can subsidize them indefinitely. And that would be the idea over time, the state, as you note in the book, states make up a smaller proportion of local governments budgets and more is being driven by kind of local taxes.

We could reverse that and subsidize these places by providing more revenue from the state or from states or from the federal government. Again, to provide the economic perspective on this, that creates an incentive for people to stay where they are rather than moving to economic opportunity and that would be bad because it reduces dynamism and overall productivity of the economy.

And that they were caught on the horns of this dilemma. Either we face the difficulties that you chronicle of gradually declining places. And that's bad, and we can recognize that's bad. But the alternative would be to just kind of keep them on life support for a longer period of time. And as a consequence, we're going to get a lot of the same types of harms, but we're just going to prolong in that.

So I think that would be something like the case in broad strokes. I actually think make a very compelling argument in the book that gateway cities in this way provide us with a out-of-the-horns of this dilemma. But I just wanted to offer that kind of argument for your comment in response.

**MICHELLE
ANDERSON:**

Yeah. It's such an important line of debate at the big picture regional policy level and just as we think about redistribution of federal taxes. So I'm really glad you asked. So the first thing I would say is that with respect to stories like yours of moving toward opportunity, that's wonderful and that's deeply embedded in American culture.

And that form of liberty that we can move toward opportunities, that we can sort of move toward education, that we can try and better our families life is-- God forbid, I should try to disturb any of that individual liberty. I would never even try. I would actually quote Jessica Andors here who's an incredible advocate in Lawrence, Massachusetts, that I worked really closely with in learning about Lawrence.

And at one point just said, quote, "Lawrence should be a good enough--" Sorry, "Lawrence should be good enough to get a good start. It should be a healthy enough community that people can come here. Be welcome. Learn English. Retain their own language and culture. Pass it on to their kids. And get a start even if they do move out and go other places." And to me that captures beautifully the aspiration. Like, yes, part of the job of these places has to give people the opportunity to move. That's their job is to help people get out.

The problem is that when you leave these places to die on the vine for 40, 50 years as we've done, people end up unable to move because the town breaks them first. And I think we are now decades into the consequences. The opioid crisis is just a symptom of this longer problem, that you leave this problem-- and lots of people don't move in part because they're so broke that they don't have the few hundred bucks to kind of get out and get a start, let alone a security deposit in an expensive place.

So it's actually harder and harder to get out given the intensity of the poverty, but also the levels of violence and exposure to drugs, like, really break some people first. And so again, I don't want to engage in the kind of pathologizing of these communities or kind of pretend-- I don't want to engage in that kind of dystopic rhetoric about them, but I think the experiment that we could solve deindustrialization through domestic migration has run for 40 years and here we are.

And at the end of the book-- I won't go deeply into it but if folks read it I would-- on your line of questioning, I wrote an epilogue about a woman named Joanne Pena, who has a really tough run as a child and ends up as part of her childhood in Lawrence, Massachusetts, again. And then makes it out of Lawrence like all of her siblings. They all kind of make it to Sun Belt high opportunity zones. In Joanne's case, she makes it to Virginia.

And in Virginia, she gets the best job of her life. She makes \$40,000 a year, which for the cost of living in her town is putting her in debt, but she's scrapping out a living, super proud of that income. And then there's a series of hardships that hit Joanne as they do in life, and especially for people that have larger networks of kind of scar tissue in their families that come from long-term poverty.

And she gets, like, knocked off of this life that she's building in Virginia. And it's Lawrence that takes her in again, really through social services and the strength of the networks and the community and some of the programs and efforts that I'd written about in Lawrence, that really find Joanne and get her back on her feet. And when she's back on her feet, what does she do? She leaves again.

And to me, that's exactly what Lawrence needs to do. The idea is not to trap Joanne in Lawrence, she doesn't owe Lawrence anything. But look at what Lawrence has done. Lawrence has sheltered her family, sort of taken them in at times when they really needed that. And you used this term gateway cities that I write right about in the introduction. I love that term because we have a pretty common way of describing poverty traps. People stuck in intergenerational poverty and unable to get out of their town but also their status.

And I think we need to really think about what the alternative is to that. What is a gateway city? And that term comes from Massachusetts State policy. There, it's used to capture first homes for new Americans so that people can learn English and sort of assimilate or integrate into the larger American culture. But I like gateway cities as a socioeconomic aspiration too, that people have choices and they have chances.

The town is going to be good enough that they have a basic level of education and personal safety so that they actually could leave. So anyway, that's the thing. And yes, there's a larger public policy debate that has to do with indefinite subsidization of so-called dying regions. But to me, sitting here in 2022, where we've reduced subsidies over the last 40 years, and we've really kind of run this larger experiment about whether these places would all depopulate to zero, and, nope. So see e.g. opioid crisis.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Right. Yeah, and just this idea that to have the idealized smooth functioning labor market where people are moving to opportunity, it's kind of nice theoretically but people need resources to be able to do that. They need to not, as you kind of have said-- if people have these bad experiences growing up, they're just not invested in it, right? They just lack educational opportunities. I mean, investment in early childhood from parents, from the state, in terms of schools and so on is just incredibly important for people's long-term prospects.

And if we're just failing to make those investments for huge tranches of the American public, we just can't expect them to be in a position to participate in the contemporary labor market. And so they're not going to move because, as you note in the book, the less money you have in the bank the more you have to rely on your social networks and family connections and the like to loan you money in an emergency or--

I use the analogy of just literally moving from one place to the other. You can do it by having friends come over and help you pack up or you can hire someone, that's kind of, like, the choice. And if you don't have money, and you don't have friends, then you literally can't move because you can't physically move your stuff around. So I thought that was a really important contribution. And it's something I had not frankly given much consideration to is the importance of building the foundation that people need if they're going to be participating in this smoothly functioning dynamic labor market.

**MICHELLE
ANDERSON:**

Yeah, that's so well said. And I have two stories again on this theory that people need stories to ground an alternative understanding to these problems. But I have two stories in response to that. One is a woman-- she's not actually in the book, but she was an amazing woman that I met in Flint and I did a long interview with her. And she was in her young 30s. She had two teenage sons that were coming into-- probably about, if I recall, something like ninth grade and seventh grade or so.

And she had grown up in Flint. Her mom lived in Flint. She was dying to get out of Flint. Dying to move toward opportunity. Really wanted a better life for her sons. She is African-American. She was incredibly worried about raising Black boys in Flint, and wanted to move. And so she got her family to Dallas. She got the three of them, not her mom, to Dallas.

And she really thought her sons were safer there. She really felt like it was working for them. She was eking out a living. It was very hard to make ends meet, but she felt like they were safer. And then her mom got really sick. And she could not afford to have her mom in Texas. There was no way to kind of get her mom out of Flint. There was no way to sustain her mom's health care and so forth in Texas, let alone her housing to get her an extra room.

And so the daughter did what she felt duty bound to do, which was move home to Flint to care for her mom. And it was just a basic example of these sort of generational pulls that people feel. The reality is that she's a daughter, and she's also a mother. And at some level, she's got these responsibilities pulling in different directions. And so that's one thing that I've just never forgotten. Like, people have to remember these are real people with families. They have deeper responsibilities than just their job prospects.

And then the second thing is-- I don't live in Palo Alto, but I work there. And Palo Alto is, as your listeners will know, a very, very wealthy town that has systematically blockaded high-density housing, and any form of affordable housing. It's been an exceptionally regressive town in terms of its housing policy for the most part.

And so that's Palo Alto. It invested \$76 million in its library system, which I see is very symbolic because I wrote about Stockton where many of the low wage workers for Palo Alto economy live. Palo Alto has the university. It's got two giant hospital complexes. Tons of restaurants. It's got this teeming low-wage service workforce that helped to drive Palo Alto's commercial economy.

And so those workers are coming in from towns like Stockton, which means they're spending about three hours a day away from their kids. And Stockton's entire library system had to be pulled out of the poorest neighborhoods sort of saving the main branch by kind of drinking the whole system back to the center. So they couldn't even afford to keep their libraries in low-income neighborhoods open at all, in addition to many other dramatic budget cuts.

And meanwhile, Stockton is 325,000 people. So what's a suitcase solution for Stockton? Like, that's a giant city in any other city-- in states that are less populous. And California, that would be a ranking big city. And so the idea that you're just going to get everybody out of Stockton is just absurd.

And meanwhile this larger-- The prosperity in Palo Alto is dependent on the people of Stockton. So there are big picture moral questions to me that sit across dynamics like that of what does Palo Alto owe Stockton? Not nothing. Anyway, so I don't want to get too preachy but-- And I think in the last year I looked at it, Palo Alto permitted 80 new housing units.

MIKE Oh, it's just ridiculous.

LIVERMORE:

MICHELLE ANDERSON: The idea that we're going to solve Stockton's problems by waiting to relocate people, I think, is not realistic. All it does-- It's important. I mean, I think Palo Alto's intransigence over affordable housing is a terrifying public policy problem that is all over the Bay Area, and it deserves concentrated answers. But meanwhile, Stockton's raising up all these kids and it's going to keep doing that every single year. So the question is what future, what opportunities do those kids have?

MIKE ANDERSON: Yeah. One of the really interesting observations in the book, just kind of feeding off of this, if we were assuming that the suitcase strategy isn't going to work or we found-- was that an assumption at this point we could say that we tried and it hasn't worked is what does it mean to reinvest and to take the focus off of draining people out of an area but instead say, OK, we are going to provide reinvestment.

And one of the contrasts I take from the book is kind of a redevelopment approach. Which, put money into the downtown. Make some fancy lofts. Present a location as a place where young professionals can come. And the prices are lower. And rents are cheaper. And you can get on Zoom and you can work that way. Or put in a stadium, put in some nice restaurants, or whatever.

That's one approach which you contrast with an alternative around investing in current residents. So what is that contrast? And what have we learned from experiences with the redevelopment approach? And what do you see as some of the key markers of a existing resident-based model of investing in these places?

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Yeah. So you described it well. I think that for decades so much of local public policy in towns like this has been focused on downtown redevelopment as a kind of a Hail Mary. That if you invest in the downtown, and you make it pretty, and you bring some jobs and some activity, that you'll attract tourists to spend money there. Suburbanites or whatever it is, and you'll bring back new residents. And people will spend money in the town, et cetera.

And I really believe in built environments. I'm not a kind of-- I'm married to an architect who does very high-density housing and really believes in the impact of the built environment on people's psyche and their safety, and so forth. So changes can be really important and a gutted downtown is not good for a city. So I understand that.

Having said that-- so that's option number one. It's like big splashy redevelopment of the downtown. Option number two that we've been trying at for so long, just throwing good money after bad, has been giant subsidies of big employers. So your listeners will be very familiar with the-- just race to attract Amazon's HQ2 and the just unbelievable lengths that states and cities went to try to attract Amazon's HQ2 to their town.

And in order to try to seduce Amazon to pick them in this giant national competition, places really agreed to just slather Amazon with benefits. Whether it's infrastructure investments, or tax exemptions measured by the decade, or rebranding of their parks using Amazon's name. I mean, just one thing after another. Like, what can we do for you?

And so local governments have been doing both of these things. Like, heroic redevelopment, heroic economic development, these big subsidy packages. And there's been so much ink spilled in the urban policy literature about the problems with those things, and the failed promises, and the cost benefit analysis that is fake and looks good up front but never delivers the jobs or the tax revenue over the long run.

So we've known about the problems with those two strategies for so long. And there's all kinds of reasons that local governments still play those games. Because officials want the ribbon cutting, they want the press release of the good news. There's a focus that within a quick electoral cycle, you can make progress on deals, like, in either of those categories.

What I wrote about in the book was pushing aside those kinds of interventions for a moment. I wrote about what it looks like to try to invest in your people. Which is entirely designed to make more Mike Livermores. How do we give the kids of this town a chance to leave if that's what they want? And so how do you invest in the people of your town not just in some outside chain movie theater that says they can sell a few tickets. So that's what this book is really about and it's about the--

In Stockton, I wrote about the really important reparative anti trauma work that has to happen in places that have dealt with very high levels of violence over time. As so many kids have-- and just adults have been witnesses to violence and been in families that have lost loved ones to violence, and have lost loved ones to incarceration as the main answer to violence. This is an experiment that has been playing out for a long time in American public policy and Stockton is an epicenter of incarceration as an answer to violence.

So you get a lot of fallout of just trauma from all of this exposure to violence and the loss of loved ones. So in Stockton, I really write about that reparative work of helping people to feel safe in their own bodies, to move again through the city, to work with each other, to work with strangers, to really try to free them from the costs of this violence over time.

And then in Lawrence, I looked at really incredible work to build systems of adult education to get people up the chain in jobs and income. Really like, what does it look like in the 21st century to try and raise adult wages? And Lawrence is working on that problem in ways that are totally fascinating and brilliant in my opinion.

In Detroit, I wrote about the work to try to stabilize housing from what it has been. A catastrophic and ongoing foreclosure crisis in the city, way beyond the Great Recession and up to the present. And Detroit, unfortunately, is emblematic of a lot of Rust Belt towns where there's been a lot of reinvestment in large scale real estate portfolios that are being sold at a song.

And that return of big capital to try and drink up these giant real estate portfolios is leading to very high rates of foreclosure, of incredibly poor families across the Rust Belt. So they're working on that problem, which is a macroeconomic kind of change in where big capital is flowing, but then also coming down to ground as an urgent displacement crisis at the household level. So that's on the housing side.

And then in Josephine, I really wrote about rebuilding trust in government in a place that's super right-wing or at least politically where there's very low levels of trust and expectation of government at all. How you mobilize people for a kind of grassroots movement to reinvest in their government.

So anyway, these are deeper resident-centered solutions that are really trying to get at these larger problems in wages and housing and safety. And you don't cut ribbons on stuff like that. The politicians aren't going to get as much immediate credit, but the work it's the work that has to be done, in my opinion. You don't get to kind of shortcut it.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah. And just immediately, all of those examples in the book really, really come through. And one of the impressions that I got was just how different all of these stories are, right? There is something that holds all of these stories together, which is conditions of border to border poverty, and disinvestment, and certain challenges that they face. But then the solutions-- at least the solutions that you focus your stories around are very different from each other.

And so I wonder just abstracting up to a higher level, is this just the kind of thing where each town, each population, each place, requires its own set of solutions, its own set of just activities or whatever to address its own particular challenges? Or are there kind of broader lessons or general principles that can be applied that are more cross-cutting that could be implemented in a more systematic way?

**MICHELLE
ANDERSON:**

Yeah. I mean, so one of the things I say in the introduction is that I don't think we're ready to write a playbook yet for this kind of resident-centered government. And I'm not even sure such a thing would exist. What I was interested in trying to do in the book was really create a sort of proof of concept or sort of hold out these examples of progress that are being made.

And also, I use that word progress really carefully to remind us that you can't wait for transformation in single generations. These are problems that have been accumulating for so long. And so you're not going to have a single mayor who puts on their red cape and saves the day. So instead, we have to be looking for signs of progress not just resolution. But in any event, it's a proof of concept that people can move on these bigger challenges, and that in these towns these were the kind of locally adopted responses.

Having said all of that-- Well, one other thing I'll just say about it is that over and over again I also heard that people who really work on the frontlines of these challenges rarely believe that you can box up their model and just export it to another town. And here, I'm reminded of something that-- This again is Jess Andors. She's very wise, so I guess it's not a surprise that I quoted her twice in one interview.

But Jess Andors in Lawrence was describing to me the difference between Lawrence, and then Lowell, Massachusetts, and then New York City. All of whom have high levels of concentrated poverty in immigrant-rich context, in which a lot of people are foreign born. And she was saying how it really matters that in Lowell, a lot of the migrants to Lowell came from places beset by war.

In which it was incredibly dangerous for people to speak out in public, as she put it at one point very vividly, speaking in public could get your brother's head cut off. So she said that's really different than Lawrence where there's a lot of economic migrants who've really come to Lawrence seeking jobs and are coming from poverty push factors not war or not as commonly pushed by war. And she said-- So that's an important difference between Lawrence and Lowell. You have to build different kinds of organizing tactics for communities that are really afraid of public participation, than you do communities that are not.

And then similarly, she was saying New York City is different than both of those, where in New York City people are not going to open their homes to each other. It's just such a giant scale of city, much more housing turnover and so forth. And so you can't build an organizing model in which people open their living rooms to a bunch of strangers from their block. Well, you can do that in Lawrence because it really sometimes does feel like a small town where people will open their homes to each other if they're given the right kind of structure and formula for doing that.

So anyway, her point was that these places, you have to show up for the people you have. You have to learn about them. You have to understand the kind of backgrounds that bring them to this moment. And if your goal is to try to build networks of action and cooperation among them, you've got to listen to who that community is and sort of adapt your strategies for their needs. Yeah, so I think that's important. So that's the big caveat. It's like, yeah, this is not a boxed policy list.

Having said that, I do think that at some level there's no getting around. That some of the work that has to happen in places like this is mutual aid at the institutional level. So after the pandemic, we talked so much, of course, about mutual aid among individuals, young people shopping for older people's groceries and so forth.

But I think part of what I'm documenting across these four places is the way that you also need mutual aid at the institutional level. And there's a lot of different ways to build that kind of cooperation and joint enterprise. And each of these four chapters as examples of that. But I think at some level, that kind of social repair and social cooperation is a necessary and probably universal component of progress.

And a universal component of hope. Like, at some level, do people believe that positive change is possible in their community? Do they have a sense of friendship and joint purpose with other people around them? So maybe that sounds generic, but the truth is, I think, sometimes we lose sight of that because we think that if we just got this one federal grant program exactly right, that everything would be better. But at the end of the day, that federal grant program's got to land on a real network of local people who know how to work together effectively and deliver.

MIKE
LIVERMORE: Yeah. So thanks so much for taking the time to chat with me. This has been a really fun conversation. I've got one final question for you if you'll indulge me. It's a little-- I noticed in the book that you have an affinity, I think, correct me if I'm wrong, with labor history. There's various kind of-- the Wobblies show up and various figures in American labor history.

And I wondered if that was intentional, and if there's some relationship here between what you think of as the problems of the contemporary era and something we can get out of the labor history that we have in the US that is often I think buried or sometimes can be forgotten.

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Oh, that's such a cool question, Mike. I don't know. I mean, I might need to think about that. I didn't notice that I have that hard-wired attraction to the labor movement. But I probably do. I mean, it's interesting in American-- If you go back to our speeches and kind of our political discourse, I think there have been very few periods in our history where we've really had an explicit language to talk about poverty and really focus on empowerment and solidarity and progress on the problem of entrenched poverty.

And certainly, the labor movement is one of those periods. The '60s, and the beginnings of the Poor People's Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement at some level are such flowerings of that kind of language and leadership and writing. And I think that in the aftermath of the '80s in which so much pathologizing of poverty and the undeserving poor rhetoric sort of became so prominent. We just have less of that.

And I think about Reverend Barber in North Carolina as such an important leader, and sort of giving us current language for really thinking about where poverty comes from and what to do about it. And even figures like John Kerry are sort of temporary moments of vocabulary even, for sort of focusing on poverty. And Sanders and Warren in their way, too.

So in any event, that's all to say that, yes, I'm drawn to people who actually write about, who talk about, who think about poverty as a source of strength and solidarity, and who really believe in the power of people, and who don't talk about poverty as kind of this stigmatized condition of want. So I think maybe it's related to that.

At a narrow level, the story of the Wobblies comes up as you know because it's so fascinating to me the historical echo that in 1912, Lawrence was famous for a really important strike in which they managed to get up textile wages by 15%. And that underlying question of sort of, OK, that's how you do that in 1912. You strike against single employers that are dominant all across the region. But here in the early 21st century, like, that's not going to be the model.

If you want to get up wages by 15% you're going to have to do something different. And so what I was really sitting with in Lawrence is like basically 100 years later when they really started this adult wage effort in Lawrence. What does that look

like now? And a lot of things have changed. One thing that has not changed is the terrible pathologizing of Lawrence, then and now.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. Well, thanks so much for this book and for a really interesting conversation. It's really been a pleasure chatting with you.

MICHELLE ANDERSON: Thank you so much. Those were terrific questions, Mike. That was really a pleasure.