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Poor People's Survival Strategies: Two Decades of Research in the Americas

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Abstract

Nearly a half-century ago, two scholars north and south of the US border called attention to the role played by reciprocity networks in poor peoples' survival strategies. This article provides a synthetic picture of the qualitative research on those strategies, focusing not only on mutual aid networks but also on clientelist politics and popular protest. These are, we argue, oftentimes complementary ways of everyday problem-solving. Furthermore, most research on survival strategies has overlooked state and street violence as literal threats to poor people's daily survival. Our review systematically describes the individual and collective strategies poor residents use to navigate daily dangers. We advocate for the incorporation of personal safety into the study of poor people's survival strategies and identify as a promising research endeavor a simultaneous attention to ways of making ends meet and coping with interpersonal and state violence.

INTRODUCTION

Fifty years ago, anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz conducted the fieldwork research that would eventually lead to her now classic *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown* (Lomnitz 1977). Published first in Spanish as *¿Cómo Sobreviven los Marginados?* in 1975, it surfaced almost concurrently with another anthropological classic on the same topic, Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (Stack 1974). Both works launched a research agenda on the role of reciprocity networks in the survival strategies of the urban poor in Latin America and the United States, respectively. Half a century later, that line of empirical inquiry is still quite vigorous throughout the Americas (Alzugaray 2007; Burwell 2004; Camargo Sierra 2020; Desmond 2012, 2017; Edin & Lein 1997; Edin & Shaefer 2016; Eguía & Ortale 2004, 2007; Fernández-Kelly 2015; González de la Rocha 2001, 2020; Gutiérrez 2004; Harvey 2011; Jarrett et al. 2014; Lubbers et al. 2020; Newman 2020; Raudenbush 2020; Sánchez-Jankowski 2008; Small 2004; Small & Gose 2020; Svampa 2005). Alongside networks of reciprocal exchange, research in Latin America has examined patronage or clientelist networks and contentious collective action as prominent ways of obtaining basic needs such as housing, food, and medicine among the urban poor (Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017; Fischer et al. 2014; Holland 2017; Holston 2009; Perez 2018a,b; Rossi 2017).¹

The first aim of this review is to provide a synthetic picture of the literature on poor people's survival strategies (Desmond 2012, Desmond & Travis 2018, Gutiérrez 2004, González de la Rocha 2001). Although there is vast and excellent scholarship in other parts of the world (Singerman 1995; Bayat 1997, 2013; Cammett 2014; Ejrnæs et al. 2020), we focus our review on the scholarship conducted during the past two decades in the Americas. We survey and synthesize the qualitative research on mutual aid networks but also on clientelist politics and popular protest as oftentimes complementary ways of everyday problem-solving.

Mapping these strategies is particularly relevant given the spotlight that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has placed on economic inequalities, material deprivation, and fragile social safety nets. Without question, the strategies that the poor adopt to make ends meet are utilized, pushed to their limit, and/or altered altogether to manage new uncertainties during extreme times (Deparle 2020, Jourdan et al. 2020).

Most research on subsistence strategies in the United States has overlooked state and street violence as literal threats to poor people's daily survival (Auyero & Berti 2016, Harding 2010, Penglase 2014, Perlman 2011, Ralph 2014, Robb Larkins 2015, Soss & Weaver 2017). Thus, the second aim of this review is to systematically describe, through a close reading of ethnographic work conducted in marginalized neighborhoods in the Americas, the individual and collective strategies their residents use to navigate daily dangers. As this review shows, once we incorporate personal safety into the study of poor people's survival strategies, we see the enduring relevance of kin and friend networks of the kind analyzed by Stack and Lomnitz. Even though these same networks might not be as extensive and/or effective as once thought to be for the acquisition of food and shelter [and might even be more exploitative and abusive than previously thought (Del Real 2019; González de la Rocha 2001, 2020; Lubbers et al. 2020)], they are still crucial for dealing with interpersonal and state violence (Auyero & Kilanski 2015).

Our review complements and extends the arguments made in two recent articles published in this journal (Brady 2019, Desmond & Western 2018). In his detailed review of central poverty causation theories (behavioral, structural, and political), Brady calls for more interdisciplinarity

¹Following most of the recent literature on the subject, we here use clientelist and patronage politics as interchangeable terms (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007, Levitsky 2003).

and further integration between poverty research conducted in the United States and developing countries. Our review covers empirical anthropological and sociological (mainly ethnographic) research conducted north and south of the US border by both US- and non-US-based scholars.

Desmond & Western (2018) advocate for a multidimensional approach, one that understands poverty “not simply [as] an economic condition but [as] the linked ecology of social maladies and broken institutions” (Desmond 2015, p. 3). Poverty, they emphasize, is “correlated adversity that cuts across multiple dimensions (material, social, bodily, psychological) and institutions (schools, neighborhoods, prisons)” (Desmond & Western 2018, p. 308). They also warn ethnographers against “reducing people to their hardships” by ignoring the many instances of “resilience and creativity” (Desmond & Western 2018, p. 310; see also Di Nunzio 2019). In dissecting the various strategies poor people adopt to not only stay afloat but also improve their lives (to subsist and to get ahead), we pay attention to those instances while staying realistic about the harsh experiences of deprivation and hopeful about the possibilities of (partially) overcoming (some of) them (Ortner 2016). Poverty is multidimensional, and so are the strategies poor people use to survive and (seek to) thrive—or, in Marx’s [2011 (1867)] classic terms, to engage in simple and expanded reproduction.

Desmond & Western (2018), furthermore, call for a relational approach to poverty, one that focuses on transactions and processes linking actors with unequal power. We heed this call by zooming in on survival strategies that connect not only actors occupying similar positions in the social space (as some of the literature on networks of reciprocity still does), but also actors with unequal power (poor residents, brokers, state officials). Survival strategies, our review shows, involve both horizontal and vertical relations—some of them connecting the destitute with established political authorities. We thus place politics [defined as “interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interest, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties” (Tilly 2008, p. 6)] at the center of discussions about subsistence (Phillips 2018, Small 2004). Poverty is indeed relational, and so are poor people’s survival strategies (see Wacquant 2022).

Given the scarcity of combined attention to the United States and Latin America, our review emphasizes similarities in how the urban poor throughout the hemisphere manage to obtain material resources and cope with daily violence when markets and state fail to provide food, shelter, medicine, and safety for them. In the United States, the traditional safety net on which the urban poor could count has been slowly but steadily deteriorating (Allard & Small 2013)—it is now common to speak about “state retrenchment” when describing protection, or a lack thereof, for the most vulnerable (Klinenberg 2015, 2018). However, not all arms of the state have contracted. As repeatedly documented, the state’s repressive branch continues to expand, deeply penetrating low-income neighborhoods (Fernández-Kelly 2015, Goffman 2015, Rios 2011, Soss et al. 2011, Wacquant 2009). The repressive treatment of urban marginality is also widespread in Latin America—though important variations exist (Cent. Estud. Leg. Soc. 2019, Müller 2016, Willis 2015)—but recent political developments (again, with important country-to-country variation) have brought the state back to social policy (Weyland et al. 2010). Although it is not uncontroversial to speak of a postneoliberal turn in Latin America, scholarship agrees that governments throughout the region have expanded social spending and extended their safety nets—at least in the form of food assistance (Hunter & Borges Sugiyama 2014).

We begin with a summary of the key contributions made by Lomnitz and Stack to our understanding of poor people’s strategies of survival. We then move to review the literature on networks, organizations, and informal institutions that are central to the ways in which the marginalized acquire food, shelter, and medicine. Given the size of the literature, we do not cover other needs,

such as transportation (Blumenberg & Weinstein Agrawal 2014), or the now growing scholarship on the varied ways the poor deal with natural disasters (Jabeen et al. 2010, Usamah et al. 2014). Among the informal institutions upon which the poor rely to address their needs, we pay particular attention to patronage. Highlighting squatting as a way of addressing housing scarcity, we emphasize that, contrary to much of the scholarship on these two political phenomena, patronage and contentious collective action are not mutually exclusive but complementary problem-solving strategies among the poor (Auyero et al. 2009).

The second half reviews poor people's ways of coping with lack of public safety. Here we note the role played by neighborhood ties, informal institutions, and collective action in confronting the widespread interpersonal and state violence that shakes their daily lives. We conclude this review by pointing to issues that need further empirical investigation—prominent among them is the underexplored potential tensions in the reliance on kin and friend networks for both material subsistence and protection against interpersonal and state violence.

We are aware that the concept of “strategy of survival” is not devoid of theoretical glitches.² Since both terms (“strategy” and “survival”) could be misconstrued, clarification is in order. On the one hand, “strategy” might evoke images of explicit and deliberate choices made by individuals when, in fact, many of the ways in which the poor manage to cope with deprivation are part of a taken-for-granted, implicit repertoire of action that (a) is not always the product of conscious calculations or overt discussions and (b) emerges out of collectives beyond individuals. The concept of strategies seeks to capture the dynamic interaction between choices (often the product of deep-seated dispositions) and (objective and perceived) constraints, risks, and uncertainties (Bourdieu 1977, Fontaine & Schlumbohm 2000, Hintze 2004, Lamaison & Bourdieu 1986). Scholars working on the topic in Latin America have noted that households and families, not individuals, are the fundamental units out of which these strategies emerge (Chant 2002, Eguía & Ortale 2007, González de la Rocha 2001, Hintze 1989), while also noticing their conflictual features. Stack (1974) also notes that traditional conceptualizations of the nuclear family (father, mother, and child) fail to accurately capture the extended, complex, tension-riddled, and sometimes geographically unbounded units that together devise and deploy strategies. Anthropologist Dennis Rodgers (2007), to offer a particularly luminous example, provides a detailed ethnographic reconstruction of the noncooperative and segmented character of one poor household in urban Nicaragua.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that, except for extreme circumstances (concentration camps, for example), people always do more than merely survive.³ Concepts such as resiliency or livelihood point to the many other dimensions of poor people's lives. We retain the notion of survival because, as we focus on ways of acquiring food, shelter, medicine, and safety, we are zooming in on that “very specific space in which physical persistence is insecure” (Phillips 2018, p. 8) for those living in the lower regions of the social space.

²Argentine sociologist Hintze (2004) offers an insightful overview of the use of this and related concepts (*estrategias familiares de vida, estrategias de existencia, estrategias de reproducción*) in Latin American social sciences. She states that the term “*estrategias de supervivencia*” (survival strategies) was first used by Duque & Pastrana (1973) in their study of Santiago de Chile's poor. For a detailed study of food strategies of survival, readers are directed to Hintze (1989).

³We thank Loïc Wacquant for identifying this shortcoming in the notion of strategy of survival. Wacquant (L. Wacquant, manuscript in preparation) also suggests the term “strategies of persistence” to highlight the efforts the poor make in maintaining their “social being and position in its manifold facets rather than just material sustenance.”

CLASSICS ON MATERIAL SURVIVAL

Both Lomnitz's *Networks and Marginality* and Stack's *All Our Kin* are classic references in the study of how the urban poor manage to subsist when the resources provided by market and state are not enough.

Networks of reciprocal exchange are central in the daily lives of the residents of Cerrada del Condor, the shantytown of about 200 houses in Mexico City where Lomnitz conducted fieldwork between 1969 and 1971. Life among those who lack "any reasonable security features, such as job security, social security, or a reasonably safe monthly level of income" evolves "like a complex design for survival. Age-old institutions, like *compadrazgo* (fictive kinship or godparenthood) and *cuatismo* (a traditional form of male friendship), are mobilized to reinforce and strengthen the structure of local exchange networks" (Lomnitz 1977, pp. 2–3). According to Lomnitz, given the absence of local government action (a context quite different, as we see below, from Stack's), "the basic insecurity of marginal existence can be compensated in only one way: by generating mechanisms of economic solidarity, based on the full mobilization of the social resources of the individual" (Lomnitz 1977, p. 91). Exchange networks are defined by "the flow of reciprocal exchange of goods, services, and economically valuable information," including information, job assistance, loans, services, and moral support (Lomnitz 1977, pp. 91, 201).

A few years after *Networks and Marginality*, Lomnitz coauthored *A Mexican Elite Family* (Lomnitz & Pérez-Lizaur 1988, 2006). In this historical and anthropological study, the authors demonstrate how and why culture and kinship shape economic and political behavior. Unlike the poor from Cerrada del Condor, who regularly extend their social networks through *compadrazgo* and *cuatismo*, elite families restrict their social networks to close kin who can be trusted in economic and social relations. Comparing and contrasting both books is a useful exercise, one that emphasizes how among the poor both solidarity and kin status are achieved via the constant exchange of material goods and services. This necessitates "residential proximity, usually in domestic units of the extended family in which exchange seems to increase" (Lomnitz & Pérez-Lizaur 1988, p. 21). Among the elite, by contrast, solidarity is "expressed through participation in family rituals, and business deals, jobs, and contracts" (Lomnitz & Pérez-Lizaur 1988, p. 21); economic resources are distributed through patron-client relations among men, whereas information is gathered and distributed by "centralizing" women.

Unlike in Cerrada del Condor, state aid was quite widespread in the poor neighborhood Stack (1974) called "The Flats"—many of the African Americans among whom she conducted her fieldwork in the late 1960s "were raised on public welfare, and now, as adults in their twenties to forties, are raising their children on welfare" (p. 27). And yet, residents were keenly aware that "the minimal funds they receive[d] from low-paying jobs or welfare [did] not cover their monthly necessities of life: rent, food, and clothing." The urban poor, in Stack's detailed account, "immerse[d] themselves in a domestic circle of kinfolk who [would] help them" (Stack 1974, p. 29).

Thus, much like their counterparts in the Mexican shantytown, Flats residents adopted "strategies for coping with poverty" (Stack 1974, p. 9). Among the resources, possessions, and services kin and friends "swapped" were "food, stamps, rent money, a TV, hats, dice, a car, a nickel here, a cigarette there, food, milk, grits, and children" (Stack 1974, p. 33). This reliance on "cooperative support" was, according to Stack, a "resilient response to the social-economic conditions of poverty" (Stack 1974, p. 124), and the obligation of reciprocity implicit in those exchange networks was deemed a "profoundly creative adaptation" (p. 43) to conditions of material scarcity. In a paragraph that encapsulates findings analogous to those of Lomnitz, Stack (1974, p. 57) writes, "Men and women in The Flats. . .search for solutions in order to survive. They place their hopes

in the scene of their life and action: in the closed community, in the people around them, in kin and friends, and in the new friends they will make to get along.”

NETWORKS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Inspired by Lomnitz and Stack, a vast literature in sociology and anthropology, both in Latin America and in the United States, examines the role of social networks in helping the poor cope with material scarcity.⁴ A recent review (Lubbers et al. 2020, p. 17) discusses three “contrasting but also partially complementary” approaches to articulating exchange networks among the poor. In showcasing variation in functionality and reliance on mutual aid, the authors provide a good map of where the current controversies lie with respect to the actual role played by solidarity and trust in subsistence strategies. The first perspective, which they call “pervasive solidarity,” emphasizes the consistent use of extensive kin and friendship networks in order to obtain material resources that neither state nor wages from informal or formal jobs provide. A contrasting perspective, labeled “pervasive isolation,” portrays a startlingly different reality, placing emphasis on the erosion of said ties and the isolation of the poor. Along these lines, and already early in the 2000s, sociologist González de la Rocha (2001) noted that due to increasing economic hardship in Mexico, poor people’s survival strategies (based on a diversity of incomes and on networks of mutual help) were no longer viable—we have moved from “resources of poverty” to a “poverty of resources” in González de la Rocha’s often-cited formulation. Other scholars describe not only the depletion of resources that used to circulate within these networks but also their different valence. Rather than reciprocity, “toxic ties” (Del Real 2019)—ties that, intentionally or not, can become abusive, exploitative, and/or degrading due to power differences—are said to be quite general among the most vulnerable (in Del Real’s case, undocumented migrants). This empirical focus on adverse aspects of social ties is welcome given the lack of attention to horizontal abuse and lateral animosity in urban poverty research (Wacquant 2015). Lastly, the “selective solidarity” approach highlights coexistence of isolation and varying use of ties to seek help among the poor (Raudenbush 2016). According to Lubbers et al. (2020), the reasons behind these different diagnoses range from the substantive (i.e., the various populations under study) to the contextual (different political and economic conditions) and methodological (ethnographic fieldwork, survey research, etc.).

Ethnographic and qualitative case studies show that, consistent with Lomnitz’s and Stack’s original findings, the poor still rely on networks of mutual aid to obtain food, shelter, and medicine—though the degree to which these actually serve to make ends meet is quite varying (Burwell 2004, Jarrett et al. 2014). The extent to which social networks facilitate upward mobility is, even more so, a matter of empirical dispute (Menjívar 2000, Newman 1999, Smith 2016). These reciprocity networks often work in tandem with informal and/or illicit work and heavily rely on informal institutions (such as gangs and patronage), a vast array of organizations, and (more or less transgressive) collective action to claim resources oftentimes held by the state (whose successful pursuit often depends on strong networks) (Diani & McAdam 2003).

Poor women studied by McCurn (2020, p. 234), for example, occasionally “turn to work in the underground and illegal economies as a means of economic survival” to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. They engage in a range of what they refer to as “hustles,” or “the grind,” to make money—including prostitution, drug sales, theft, selling of stolen goods, and insurance scams.

⁴A strand of scholarship in Latin America groups the many relational strategies through which poor people seek their survival under the term “social economy” or “popular economy” (Coraggio 2014, Salvia & Chávez Molina 2013, Sarria et al. 2004).

Drug-peddling has also been identified as a way through which the poor, especially youngsters, seek to provide for themselves and their families in the absence of other economic opportunities in distressed urban communities (Auyero & Berti 2016, Black 2009, Bourgois 2003, Gay 2005). A vibrant underground (off-the-books) economy, oftentimes embedded in local community-based networks, helps the poor to survive (Dewey 2020, Goldstein 2016, Venkatesh 2009).

Although networks of mutual aid are still central to accessing resources such as food, money, running errands, clothing, childcare, and transportation among Raudenbush's (2020) African American informants in "Jackson Homes," they are not really operative when it comes to obtaining health-related resources (drugs, insurance cards, crutches, inhalers, canes, walkers, wheelchairs). For these, poor residents routinely rely on intermediaries—i.e., doctors, friends, family members, and street entrepreneurs—who sell medication and other goods in the underground economy. Allowing the poor to "circumvent formal organizational boundaries" (Raudenbush 2020, p. 17), these intermediaries "either enable direct access to health care facilities or informally distribute resources like medication and medical equipment to care-seeking individuals" (p. 7).

In his thorough nine-year-long study of five poor neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles, Sánchez-Jankowski (2008, pp. 95–97) also notes the relevance of personal networks among residents, particularly the special role that "caretakers" played in helping poor people financially and in obtaining information for needed aid. But poor people do not only count on strong, weak, and/or disposable ties to make ends meet (Desmond 2012, Edin & Lein 1997, Edin & Shaefer 2016). They are also engaged in economic and voluntary civic organizations through which they acquire material and symbolic resources for themselves, their families, and their neighborhoods (Dohan 2003, Marwell 2007, Small 2004). Public and private nonprofit organizations [for example, organizations such as Dress for Success (Kilanski 2015) and Workers Defense Project (Scott 2015)] provide access to housing assistance, clothing, job training, legal defense, adult education, treatment for substance abuse, and food. As Allard & Small (2013, p. 10) put it, "local organizations are central to the opportunities, choices, and outcomes of the urban poor." Organizations such as churches, childcare centers, and community centers not only are direct providers of goods and services for the poor, but they are also the places where those still-relevant networks of mutual aid are formed and sustained (Small 2009, Small & Gose 2020).

INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Sánchez-Jankowski (2008) highlights the manifold engagements poor people establish with various institutions in their efforts to stay afloat and thrive—from state-managed public housing projects to local gangs. Residents of low-income neighborhoods count on local gangs to address housing conditions—lack of maintenance, for example. He describes cases in which landlords who refuse to respond to residents' demands for upkeep might see their properties destroyed by the gang or might suffer physical threats. Both anthropologist Lawrence Ralph (2014) and sociologist Sánchez-Jankowski (2008) show how local gangs sometimes join residents in their struggles against redevelopment and relocation (gentrification). Ralph reports on gang members attending meetings with city authorities alongside local residents and supporting their organizing efforts. Sánchez-Jankowski (2008, p. 293) describes more direct measures:

When the city government announced the possible removal of some residents to make room for new business construction, the gangs attempted to raise the area's official crime rate so that businesses seeking to invest large amounts of capital for new ventures in the area would be discouraged from doing so. They started vandalizing cars to raise the general crime rate and then moved on to firing shots in the area and calling the police or having other residents call the police so that the violent crime rate would be raised as well.

Anthropologist Donna Goldstein (2016, p. 200) notes how in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, gangs are also "called upon to right the wrongs of everyday life, and in this role they are tolerated and even venerated."

Patronage/clientelist networks are one of the most important "informal institutions" (Helmke & Levitsky 2004) upon which the Latin American poor count to solve their daily needs. It has been well-documented that in poor neighborhoods, shantytowns, and squatter settlements throughout the region, many residents solve the pressing problems of everyday life (access to jobs, state welfare, food, and medicine) through patronage/clientelist networks, defined by their reliance on brokers as key actors (Álvarez-Rivadulla 2017, Arias 2009, Auyero 2001, Levitsky 2003, Szwarcberg 2015, Zarazaga 2014). Brokers act as gatekeepers between patrons (the holders of resources) and clients (the potential beneficiaries). Depending on the (not always legal, not always overt) support of the local, provincial, and national administrations, these problem-solving networks work as webs of resource distribution and protection against the risks of everyday life. One of the most detailed accounts of the resources provided by brokers (locally known as *punteros*) is provided by political scientist Rodrigo Zarazaga (2014). Throughout poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, brokers provide "jobs, workfare programs, food, medicine, clothes, shoes, coffins, school materials, appliances, bricks, zinc sheets, cash, marijuana and other illegal drugs" to their low-income followers (Zarazaga 2014, p. 33).

Contrary to a quite mechanistic and instrumentalist vision of quid pro quo exchanges (i.e., patrons through brokers distribute goods and, in response, clients vote for them), what matters most within the daily working of patronage networks is not short-term exchanges that take place before and during elections but diffuse, long-term reciprocity [of the kind described by Stack (1974) and Lomnitz (1977)], based on the embedding of brokers (and through them, patrons) in poor people's everyday lives during normal (i.e., nonelectoral) times (Auyero 2001, Lawson & Greene 2014). True, before elections, brokers campaign door to door, paint walls with candidates' names, put up posters, and mobilize participants for rallies. During elections, they buy votes and/or turnout by the individualized distribution of goods and services. But electoral campaigning and the personalized provision of resources to obtain votes or support during elections are not the only actions brokers (and their patrons) carry out (Weitz-Shapiro 2016). In fact, brokers do all sorts of other things, and they do so year-round, not exclusively during campaigns. For instance, they provide public goods and services (street lighting, garbage collection trucks, bus shelters, etc.) for their neighborhoods. They also run community soup kitchens, health care centers, and sports centers in addition to coordinating the delivery of state welfare programs (Ossona 2019, Zarazaga 2014). Poor residents, in turn, count on them for the solution of daily problems regularly present—from speeding up the waiting time at a state agency to obtaining vital material goods (Auyero 2012; see also Verón 2020).

Brokers as problem solvers were absent in Stack's (1974) Flats—though they are portrayed as being present and quite active in addressing the poor's needs in studies of urban politics in the United States (Guterbock 1980, Zorbaugh 1983). *Caciques* (as brokers in Mexico are known) were also absent in Lomnitz's Cerrada del Condor—but in this case, she points out that this was not "typical of Mexico City squatter settlements" (Lomnitz 1977, p. 186). Much like in contemporary Latin America, the "shantytown features at least one cacique" who connects the community to the state (Lomnitz 1977, p. 186).

While its form has changed in the past five decades, patronage politics also helps residents of low-income neighborhoods acquire resources in the United States. According to Marwell and colleagues (Marwell et al. 2020), the direct, dyadic exchange relations between politicians and voters that characterized the traditional political machine (and that, as we just described, are

still working in many Latin American countries) are no longer operative. In its place, a “triadic exchange” comes to characterize a new type of machine politics, one in which politicians

build stable, exclusive relationships with a subset of nonprofits in their own district, in order to provide services and benefits to their geographic constituencies. The exclusivity of the relationship makes local nonprofits highly dependent and vulnerable. However, on the other side of this relationship, council members depend on local nonprofits to build and maintain support from their shared constituents. (Marwell et al. 2020, p. 1592; see also Marwell 2007, Marwell & McQuarrie 2013)

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Desmond’s work has highlighted the role played by “disposable ties” in helping the urban poor access shelter. When facing eviction, “brittle and fleeting” relations “formed with new acquaintances” matter more than stable, strong, networks with reliable kin to secure a place to live (Desmond 2012, p. 1296). Recently, Desmond has also brought our attention to collective forms of fighting for housing—such as the organizations *Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia* (United Renters for Justice) or *Community Action for Safe Apartments* (Desmond 2020). Tenant movements warded off evictions, lowered rents, and “won real concessions from the government, from rent control to investments in public housing” (Desmond 2020) (see also Ralph 2014). These collective struggles for housing are quite common throughout Latin America. Geographer Solange Muñoz (2017, 2018), for example, dissects the work of CIBA (Coordinadora de Inquilinos de Buenos Aires), a grassroots organization that fights for housing rights for the poor in Argentina’s most populous city. As she and other scholars have shown, strong trust networks are usually a key factor in the origin, permanence, and success of these urban movements.

Among strategies for accessing land and homes, squatting and auto-construction are two of the most prominent tactics deployed by the Latin American poor (Fischer et al. 2014). Moreover, Ward has conducted extensive work on self-help housing in Mexico and Colombia (Ward 2012), noticing that this form of shelter is also widespread in the United States (in peri-urban areas of Texas, for example) (Ward 2019).

The Latin American scholarship on land occupations as a collective housing strategy is vast (Massidda 2017, Murphy 2014, Schneider 1995) and ranges from squatting organizational dynamics (Cravino & Vommaro 2018, Merklen 1991) to its relationship to democratic citizenship (Holston 2009). Classic (Collier 1976) and more recent work carefully documents the variety of responses that political parties and governments throughout the region have had toward illegal squatting (from repression to encouragement, neglect, and forbearance—or a combination thereof) (Holland 2017; see also Schneider 1995). In an excellent recent account on squatters in Montevideo, for example, Álvarez-Rivadulla (2017, p. 5) describes the “individual, family, and collective” effort that squatting takes and shows that the poor’s harsh social and economic reality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for squatting to occur. Drawing upon political process theory (Tarrow 2011), she demonstrates that lack of housing and overcrowding interact with political factors not only for land occupations to surge but also to give them a specific form.

Álvarez-Rivadulla’s work is important not only for her ethnographic documentation of squatting as poor people’s strategy for obtaining housing, but also because she highlights the deep embeddedness of transgressive collective action in patronage networks. Political clientelism has been traditionally understood as separate from and antagonistic to most forms of protest. Clientelistic politics, most of the scholarship on the subject agrees, inhibits collective organization and discourages popular contention. The vertical and asymmetrical relationships that define clientelist arrangements have been conceptualized as the exact opposite of the horizontal ties that are

understood to be the necessary precondition of either episodic or more sustained forms of collective action (i.e., social movements). Álvarez-Rivadulla's work shows that routine patronage politics and nonroutine collective action should be examined not as opposite and conflicting political phenomena but as dynamic processes that, oftentimes, establish recursive relationships. Accordingly, patronage and contentious collective action should be understood as distinct, but sometimes overlapping, strategies for solving pressing survival problems and addressing grievances.

Land occupations are certainly not the only kind of transgressive collective action that the Latin American poor engage in. Fahlberg et al. (2020) recently reviewed a variety of strategies to obtain jobs, education, health services, housing, and public infrastructure in Cidade de Deus, a well-known Rio de Janeiro low-income neighborhood. These strategies range from the more or less disruptive forms of collective contention to the more individualistic actions—like “making a ruckus” (Fahlberg et al. 2020, p. 8) at the health clinic or emergency room to receive care, or relying on a personal connection to a pharmacist who would give antibiotics without a prescription [analogous to what Raudenbush (2020) describes in the United States]. Additionally, sociologists Perez (2018a,b) and Rossi (2017) examine poor people's transgressive forms of protest (in particular, the staging of roadblocks) to demand the distribution of social assistance (food and workfare programs) in Argentina, while Abello Colak et al. (2014) review community initiatives to fight for housing, infrastructure, and food security (community gardens) in Medellín, Colombia. The urban poor throughout Latin America, as this line of research shows, deploy a wide range of forms of collective action—from highly transgressive to less disruptive, though usually a combination of both. As a grassroots leader from a squatter settlement told one of us in January 2020, “Things (sewage, lighting, pavement, foodstuffs) do not come by themselves. You need to petition, and then make a big mess. You have to go (to the authorities), come back, go again. . . wait until they see you. . . then the people put pressure. When the petition was going to be discussed at the local council, we mobilize (street rallies, roadblocks). That's how you get the stuff.”

COPING WITH VIOLENCE

Ethnographic and qualitative studies in poor neighborhoods in the Americas describe the widespread fear of violent victimization felt by their residents on a daily basis. This generalized concern among the most deprived is consistent with social scientific accounts of the clustering of interpersonal violence in low-income areas in the hemisphere (Moser & McIlwaine 2000, Rodgers et al. 2012, Salahub et al. 2018, Sharkey 2018, Wilding 2012).

A number of factors have been explored and offered to understand and explain the violence that affects ghettos, inner cities, *favelas*, *villas*, *asentamientos*, *colonias*, *barriadas*, and *comunas*: unemployment, inequality, the accumulation of structural disadvantages, lack of collective efficacy (low social cohesion, low informal social control), the systemic violence⁵ of the drug trade, the absence of social infrastructure, residential segregation, and the fragile legitimacy of the state's monopoly of violence in marginalized areas (Auyero & Sobering 2019, Cruz 2016, Duran-Martinez 2018, Imbusch et al. 2011, Klinenberg 2018, Kloppe-Santamaría & Carey 2017, Morenoff et al. 2001, Ousey & Lee 2002, Sampson et al. 1997, Willis 2015).

⁵Systemic violence refers to the interpersonal physical disputes that tend to arise “from the exigencies of working or doing business in an illicit market—a context in which the monetary stakes can be enormous but where the economic actors have no recourse to the legal system to resolve disputes” (Goldstein 1985, p. 496). For empirical examples, readers are directed to Bourgois (2003), Ousey & Lee (2002), Reinerman & Levine (1997), and Venkatesh (2008).

Based on fieldwork in Boston poor neighborhoods plagued by a “torrent of shootings, stab-bings, and fistfights,” sociologist Harding (2010, p. 27) reports that violence is “an almost constant presence, and the threat of victimization or physical confrontation casts a permanent shadow.” Anthropologist Ben Penglase (2014, p. 6) speaks about the constant risk of “being caught in the cross fire of gun battles between police and rival drug gangs” among residents of Caxambu, a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro (Gay 2005, Robb Larkins 2015). Auyero & Sobering (2019, p. 9) examine the “widespread fear of interpersonal violence” experienced by shantytown dwellers in Buenos Aires: “Vivimos con miedo” (“We live in fear”), many of them expressed. Political scientist Jenny Pearce (2019) reports similar sentiments among those living at the urban margins in Mexico. Two questions underlie and unite these varied works: How do the urban poor cope with extensive fear and the very real threat of violence? Are they resigned to and/or paralyzed by it—as the general powerlessness that define their lives would lead us to believe (Desmond & Travis 2018)? The short answer is no—they rely on individual and collective strategies to produce an always precarious safety for themselves and their loved ones (Abello Colak et al. 2014).

Responding to a generalized sense of insecurity, for the past three decades, upper and middle classes throughout the Americas have been increasingly isolating themselves in gated and walled communities with private security (Adams 2017, Caldeira 2001, Müller 2016, Svampa 2008). Sociologist and law professor Jonathan Simon (2007) situates this privileged response as a reaction to state authorities’ governance through crime, a tactic that makes everyone a potential crime victim—even those gated and walled in (for a review of US scholarship, see Vesselinov 2010). In some cases, such as Managua, elites created security “archipelagos” (Rodgers 2004, p. 113) connecting heavily guarded housing compounds with commercial centers via high-speed highways. While poor populations have less capacity to modify urban infrastructure to shield themselves, they still respond to surrounding violence with changes in their building environment. Auyero (2000) and Auyero & Berti (2016) report on the fortification of the homes of shantytown and squatter settlement dwellers. In these places/spaces, residents “build walls to separate their homes from the streets and alleyways, install stronger doors (‘so they can’t kick it down and break in’), and add padlocks to their windows. Not only do these investments make residents feel safer when they are at home, but they also make them feel more comfortable in venturing away, which provides peace of mind that the people, and the things they leave behind, will remain safe” (Auyero & Berti 2016, p. 141).

LOCAL, TACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Regular seclusion inside homes is one typical way of avoiding violence—“I stay in my room, watch TV, and don’t get involved with anybody”; “Right after dinner, we all get inside, and we padlock our door” (Auyero & Berti 2016, p. 139)—for oneself and loved ones. Relatedly, residents’ “cloistering” (McCurn 2018) includes the keeping of regular timetables and strict curfews (Auyero & Kilanski 2015). Based on fieldwork in Sánchez Taboada, a *colonia* in Tijuana, Mexico, Vega et al. (2019) argue that the main security strategy in this violent area is staying indoors and changing family schedules.

Yet, when residents of poor, marginalized areas must inevitably venture into public spaces, they rely on local, tactical knowledge to keep a minimum degree of safety (Harding 2010, Penglase 2014, Sánchez-Jankowski 2008). “Knowing how to live in Caxambu,” writes Penglase (2014, p. 15), “meant knowing how to live in a highly lethal neighborhood, particularly if you were young, male, and black or of mixed race.”

Information about the time, place, circumstances, and potential perpetrators of violence travels through local networks, sometimes in the form of gossip, helping residents to navigate treacherous public spaces. For example, Sánchez-Jankowski (2008, p. 99) shows that

deadly violence with the use of lethal weapons was associated with late evening and morning activity. It was more likely to occur in areas of drug sales and away from areas regularly patrolled by the police. Fighting would occur anywhere but was more likely in areas of greater socializing among residents, such as common areas where sports were played, laundry rooms, and parking lots, at the times when the most socializing occurred. Hence, even in times of considerable violence, this predictability permitted residents to avoid or lessen their exposure to it.

Harding (2010, p. 44) also speaks about a shared understanding about safe or unsafe spaces—“danger zones” where drug dealers congregate—and avoidance tactics among poor youth.

This tactical, context-specific knowledge is not merely a diagrammatic representation of risky places and times, but one that informs concrete actions—from hood hopping (lying about your neighborhood of origin to avoid a fight with a youngster from another neighborhood) (Harding 2010) and school choice (Burdick-Will 2017, Denice & Gross 2016, Hailey 2020, Lareau & Goyette 2014, Saporito 2003) to active ignorance (intentionally not hearing or seeing what people involved in local criminal activities say or do) (Auyero & Berti 2016). As one of Penglase’s informants puts it, “You have to respect certain people, even if you don’t always agree with what they do. You have to pass by and say ‘Hi, how’s it going?’ Smile, and be friendly. Because small dogs don’t pick up fights with big dogs” (Penglase 2014, p. 101).

Another concrete, precautionary action among poor residents is traveling in groups. Both young and old typically avoid traveling alone, especially at night, in shantytowns of Argentina: “We go to parties with our friends, in a pack . . . always. You need a big group to go out, and it’s better if someone in the group is really a badass, so that . . . you know . . . nothing bad happens to you. If you go out in a small group, or worse, by yourself . . . the thieves would grab you and steal your stuff, your sneakers” (Auyero & Berti 2016, p. 143). Seeking the protection of other youngsters who “have your back,” and prevent others from “messing” with you, is also common in poor neighborhoods of Boston (Harding 2010).

Thus, although it is certainly true that community violence breeds isolation (Pearce 2019, Perlman 2011, Vega et al. 2019), evidence from marginalized communities throughout the Americas shows that it also generates routines (i.e., regular, somewhat predictable courses of action) that require connectivity within the household (as when there is a need to coordinate who stays and who leaves, and who goes with whom to the bus stop) and among friends and acquaintances (as when youngsters jointly organize their outings).

Knowledge about the whens, wheres, and whos of violence travels through networks. And, just like networks utilized to obtain material resources (reviewed above) can become abusive or exploitative, social relations allowing residents to secure protection can also turn into sources of danger. *Bandidos*, as youngsters involved in drug dealing are known in Rio’s *favelas* (Arias 2009, Gay 2005, Goldstein 2013, Penglase 2014), share kinship and friendship ties with residents. These ties can serve residents to “avoid being the target of harassment and violence” (Penglase 2014, p. 93), but they can also have a negative impact on one’s self and immediate family as drug dealers’ demands upon friends and family turn compromising. Consequently, while kinship and friendship provide some extra safety to some of Penglase’s informants, they also worry that “these same connections to drug dealers could expose (their families) to violence” (Penglase 2014, p. 99).

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

Case studies also show that poor residents rely on (more or less legal, more or less formal) collective action and local institutions to protest against and to cope with surrounding violence. Peace rallies and other forms of joint (sometimes more, sometimes less) contentious action have

been documented throughout the Americas. Abello Colak et al. (2014), for example, describe a variety of community initiatives (among them cultural and sporting events) to peacefully contest and prevent violence in Medellín, Colombia. High schools are used to provide recreation during times when violence peaks (sometimes as the outcome of heightened competition between local drug syndicates, other times as the result of increasing state repression). Alternatively, anthropologist Lawrence Ralph (2014) describes tenant associations and antiviolence forums (such as the Crippled Footprint Collective) as collective instruments for trying to address skyrocketing deadly violence in Chicago. Local gangs, again, are also counted upon to obtain protection from violent threats in the United States and in Latin America (Fernández-Kelly 2015, Goldstein 2013, Sánchez-Jankowski 2008).

VIGILANTISM

Direct justice in the form of lynching (sometimes involving less than a dozen people, sometimes more than a hundred) (Adams 2017, Godoy 2006, Goldstein 2012, Müller 2016, Ugarte & Derpic 2013) or vigilantism is also a recourse in some poor urban communities in the United States and in Latin America. Sánchez-Jankowski (2008) describes the formation of vigilante groups (groups that operate outside official law enforcement and use physical force to patrol, intimidate or punish neighbors) in urban areas in the United States. Specifically, these groups seek to “reduce the amount of crime” or keep drug-dealing activities out of particular areas of the neighborhood or specific buildings within housing complexes (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008, p. 110). Operating with varying levels of legality, citizen security commissions have also emerged in various poor urban neighborhoods throughout Latin America (Adams 2017)—frequently resorting to illegal detentions and/or social cleansing campaigns. Self-defense groups that respond to violence with violence (Cívico 2012) are also present in poor neighborhoods throughout the region—oftentimes with some stability over time, and other times punctually formed around particular episodes (Auyero & Berti 2016, Gordon 2020, Salgado et al. 2019, Ugarte & Derpic 2013).

DEALING WITH STATE VIOLENCE

During the past two decades, marginalized communities throughout the Americas have experienced increased policing, surveillance, and state-sanctioned violence in their everyday lives (Alexander 2012, Auyero et al. 2015, Goffman 2015, Hinton 2016, Rios 2011, Stuart 2016). Living within this reality can create a climate of fear (Shedd 2012) in which elevated stress levels and hypervigilance may adversely impact the health profiles of residents living in heavily policed areas (Brunson & Miller 2006, Geller et al. 2014, Sewell et al. 2016). However, anticipation of potential criminalization and/or violence also pushes individuals to develop protection strategies for interpersonal and institutional interactions with law enforcement (Dow 2016, Rios 2011, Stuart & Benezra 2018). Responses to the threat of police violence may, in many a disadvantaged neighborhood, look a lot like responses to potential violence more generally.

Prominent among these strategies is the performance of masculinity through a particular set of sustained, embodied acts. Ranging from a meticulously crafted coolness, referred to largely as the “cool pose” (Anderson 1999, Hill Collins 2004, Jones 2009, Majors & Billson 1992), to a glorified aggressiveness in which black and brown residents across the gender and age spectrum act defiantly and embrace domination of others (Anderson 1999; Jones 2009, 2018; Rios 2011), residents routinely put on masks and engage in performances to both cope with and prepare for the threat of violent police interactions. Yet, multiple forms of masculinity exist, and sometimes less aggressive, gentler expressions may be adopted for protection. In a study of black youth

living on Chicago's South Side, Stuart & Benezra (2018, p. 175) find that instead of engaging in outward displays associated with a proclivity for violence, youth "attempt to communicate innocence by exaggerating displays of emotional sensitivity, caring, vulnerability, and passivity." Alternatively, young men turn to their "kin and friend" networks to "get cover" from aggressive policing by overemphasizing or feigning romantic involvement in heterosexual relationships.

In ongoing research, Malone Gonzalez and Deckard (S. Malone Gonzalez and F.M. Deckard, manuscript in preparation) find that black women do not only provide cover, but actively seek or create it for their own protection through witnessing—the mobilization of physical, virtual, or institutional observers to interactions with officers. For those whose lives predominately center around one neighborhood, an ideal physical witness is one who is in close proximity and can be readily available. Yet, at the same time, women recognize physical witnesses may not always be accessible. In such cases, they describe utilizing their cellphones or social media technology to generate virtual witnesses and/or record their encounter for future justice seeking processes.

The aforementioned protective strategies are largely shaped by past and repeated contact with law enforcement. They remind us of the reflexive nature of social actors and their strategic alteration of appearance, behavior, and social relationships in response to the anticipation of violence (Stuart & Benezra 2018). Yet, scholars have noted that parents of socially vulnerable children start preparation for potential police violence long before an actual encounter ensues (Dow 2016, Hays 1996). In black families in particular, mothers engage in socialization through the "police talk," or conversations that attempt to increase children's (primarily sons') awareness of their distinct vulnerability to harm while also equipping them to safely handle interactions with officers (Malone Gonzalez 2019). While black boys are often encouraged to shy away from or counter the controlling image of the thug through image and emotion management (Dow 2016, Stuart & Benezra 2018), black girls are taught to shield themselves from stereotypes of criminality and sexual promiscuity through respectability politics (Higginbotham 1993, Hill Collins 2000, Jones 2009, Malone Gonzalez 2022). Thus, strategies for surviving state-sanctioned violence, especially among the most marginalized, often depend on and emerge out of conversations with, and interactions among, family and kin.

CONCLUSIONS AND TASKS AHEAD

Looking beyond the well-researched cases in the United States, and heeding the call made by Brady (2019) to integrate investigations on poverty in developing countries, our review finds a wide diversity of strategies of survival among the urban poor. Scholarship in Latin America has paid detailed attention to patronage politics and collective action as two key forms of coping with lack of material resources. It has also investigated, much like its counterpart in the United States, the role of exchange networks in survival strategies—noticing how relevant they still are in navigating violence-ridden neighborhoods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented strains among the poor—informal work on which they relied to make ends meet has dried up, and opportunities for organizing and protesting have diminished given lockdowns. From Argentina to Colombia and throughout Latin America, we see that the poor now are more and more dependent on state aid for their survival. To what extent this dependence will translate into the reinvigoration of (always thought to be declining, but always reemerging with renewed vitality) patronage networks is an open empirical question that will deserve closer scrutiny in the years to come.

In the Introduction to this review, we pointed out that the study of survival strategies needs to incorporate personal safety (protection from and prevention of interpersonal and state violence) as a key daily concern of those living at the bottom of the social structure. This criticism is only

legitimate if we are able to demonstrate that failure to do so may cause a misunderstanding of the way in which those strategies work. To a large extent, we treated the strategies devoted to material subsistence and those deployed for protection/prevention from (interpersonal and state) violence as discrete relational universes. It is important to note, however, that these webs of relations sometimes overlap and complement each other in the task of survival—as when the same tie with a close relative that helps obtain a loan to buy food also serves to coordinate a safe return home late at night when the neighborhood turns dangerous. But these same ties that help a household in meeting its daily subsistence needs might bring violence home—as when the cousin who lends you money to pay for your children’s clothes may get you in trouble with a local gang because of his participation in the drug trade, or the boyfriend on whom you rely for extra cash or a car can put you in harm’s way because of his involvement with criminal activities (Penglease 2014, Stitt & Auyero 2018, Stuart 2020). In other cases, the “immersion” of poor people in circles of “kinfolk who (would) help them” subsist (Stack 1974, p. 29) might also bring unintended consequences that act against their literal survival. Only when we think about material subsistence and personal safety simultaneously are we able to see the complementarity or incompatibility of these social ties. How, when, and why reciprocity networks complement each other in helping poor people subsist and in protecting them from violence, and how, when, and why these very same networks might act against one another in poor people’s daily survival, is an issue that deserves closer empirical and theoretical attention.

Three more specific issues also merit further empirical investigation. First, ethnographic work shows the virtues of exploring the relational nature of poverty and marginality (and their attendant risks) from various positions: for example, capturing the experience of domestic work from the perspective of the maids and their *patronas* (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007), understanding eviction in Milwaukee from the perspectives of the evicted and the landlords (Desmond 2017), or interrogating policing in Los Angeles by studying patrol officers and the homeless (Stuart 2016). Throughout the Americas, plenty of work is conducted on the ways in which state (welfare) policies shape poor people’s strategies (Edin & Shaefer 2016, Hunter & Borges Sugiyama 2014), but research on how decisions and actions among those who interact with the poor (but ultimately lead separate lives) enter into the survival strategies outlined here is still scarce. If we are to achieve a truly relational understanding of poverty, much more research needs to be done on these consequential interconnections.

Second, our examination of safety and state violence has brought attention to an underlying theme often underexplored in accounts of survival strategies and reciprocity networks: the role of criminal justice contact. While research shows that the urban poor endure concentrated policing and surveillance (Anderson 1999, Rios 2011, Jones 2009), and that justice contact via citations, bail, and monetary sanctions has become a common and recurring feature of daily life (Harris 2016, Kohler-Hausmann 2013, Page et al. 2019, Scott-Hayward & Fradella 2019), justice contact is largely absent in both classical and recent works on reciprocity networks in the survival strategies of the poor. While classic ethnographies of poor minority neighborhoods were written before the expansion of the criminal justice system (and thus might explain the lack of attention; see Anderson 1978, Liebow 1967, Stack 1974), in recent times, when justice contact and surveillance loom large, a dearth of research remains. One exception is Fader’s (2021) study of men living in a Philadelphia neighborhood heavily impacted by mass incarceration. She finds that in an effort to reduce the risk of attracting police attention, they stay at home and actively avoid building social ties, a strategy termed “network avoidance.” Still, open questions remain: Under what circumstances does criminal justice contact—in its varied forms—sever ties, revitalize unwanted connections, or rally support and promote unity? How does it alter local logics of reciprocity? Is it a stimulus for the development of toxic ties or a power leveler among network members? Whether the focus

is on the earliest stages of justice contact, like securing bail funds for a defendant pretrial, or on later processes, like reintegrating an individual back into social life following incarceration, survival networks are undoubtedly present, activated, and/or broken and may provide a fruitful area of exploration for future research.

Third and last, future work should also consider how survival strategies, both collective and individual, have been transformed in the digital age of technology, smart phones, and social media. In *Ballad of the Bullet*, Stuart (2020) details how the Corner Boys, a young, gang-affiliated rap group in Chicago, develop “new, creative online strategies for making ends meet. Specifically, they’ve learned to exploit the unique affordances provided by digital social media to capitalize on a burgeoning market for urban gang violence” (Stuart 2020, p. 2). While their “DIY-style gangsta rap” (Stuart 2020), music videos, and social media uploads can generate spoils like “cash, housing, guns, sex, and a ticket out of poverty” for themselves and their social networks, their online performances also elevate offline threats like gang rivalry, physical injury, arrest, and even death. In fact, these performances can even become evidence in criminal cases, with defendants unintentionally handing prosecutors the key (i.e., online boasts, Facebook messages, YouTube videos) to prison sentences or noncustodial punishments.⁶ Consideration might also be given to how disadvantaged populations more broadly use technology and social media to meet basic needs, but also as a resource for generating local, tactical knowledge, for expanding ones’ survival network, or for dealing with state violence (i.e., recording police encounters).

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⁶We thank Loïc Wacquant for making us aware of this additional consequence.

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