Judging by their titles alone, a reader might expect that *Abandoned Families: Social Isolation in the Twenty-First Century*, by Kristin Seefeldt, and *Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties among the Poor*, by Joan Maya Mazelis, focus on very similar subject matter. Both concern themselves with social ties among the poor, a topic that has long been of interest to scholars and has been debated intensely since Carol Stack first documented the necessity of kin and fictive-kin ties for poverty survival (Stack 1974). Since Stack’s work, however, poverty scholars have failed to consistently find evidence of such vital and enduring social ties, whether to kin or non-kin.

Findings from qualitative and ethnographic work from the past forty years vary in the degree to which they find evidence of social network ties, social isolation, and/or transient or “disposable ties” (Desmond 2012) among the poor. Given the continuing confusion over exactly what role social support plays in poverty survival, particularly in the era since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, there is much room for the contributions of these two books. They approach these issues from such different angles and directions, however, that they are seldom in direct conversation with each other and instead prove to be complementary. Their contributions are perhaps stronger together than separately, and collectively the two books provide an important background for understanding modern U.S. urban poverty and the ways in which social support can—but often doesn’t—aid in poverty survival.

Mazelis’s book looks directly at the social dimensions of non-kin support and ties, focusing on reasons for the decline in social-tie reliance, as well as attempting to answer how we might go about fostering the creation and long-term sustenance of such ties. The presentation of sustainable ties “as ties between nonkin that provide deep, meaningful support and have the potential to last over time” (p. 17) is helpful for understanding how the poor can come to rely on one another and utilize shared resources to survive.

The book looks in depth at the case of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU), a grassroots organization in Philadelphia whose aims include “building a collective response to poverty and demanding greater state aid for the poor” (p. 11). The research consists of qualitative interviews with female KWRU members and nonmembers in order to...
to understand the degree to which the organization is able to help its members forge sustainable social bonds. Mazelis makes a compelling case, arguing that despite members’ greater levels of disadvantage compared to nonmembers, the organization’s structure and rules do aid members in creating and sustaining enduring social ties. The case study illustrates the important role of the private, nonprofit safety net in the post-PRWORA era, as the welfare state has become stingy, bureaucratic, and unnavigable for many of the most vulnerable citizens.

While the book focuses on institutional support through KWRU, Mazelis argues that the barriers to building social ties are mostly individual in nature, citing individualist outlooks, lack of trust, and the shame and stigma of poverty among the reasons why poor individuals do not generally create social ties on their own. She finds that while individualistic cultural norms and understandings keep people from seeking social support, intense need forces their hands into reliance on KWRU and, through the organization, into social ties with other poor individuals (p. 21). The book’s chapters explore the strength of the ideology of individualism; participants’ reasons for avoiding social ties—including fear of crime, violence, stigma, and gossip; and the desperation that drives many to overcome these barriers and seek help through KWRU.

From there Mazelis explores the structure of the organization itself, focusing on its reciprocity requirements of members and the ways in which KWRU helps them to form long-lasting, non-kin ties to other members. The book’s conclusion argues that social service agencies should use KWRU as a model for allowing the poor to invest simultaneously in human and social capital through providing services, while requiring volunteer work and reciprocity from members in order to encourage lasting ties to the organization and each other. Mazelis argues that in the current climate, our best hope for improving the plight of the poor is to invest in the private safety net in these ways. Overall, the book provides a compelling portrait of the ways in which social support can benefit poor individuals, as well as how to create the conditions in which non-kin ties can grow, develop, and flourish over time.

For Seefeldt, social support is conceptualized differently. The social abandonment the book describes is not simply a lack of kin or non-kin ties, but rather abandonment by society itself, including individuals, employers, the welfare state, and other social institutions. Although her book also uses in-depth interviews with women, the topics it explores go well beyond individual relationships to interrogate the ways in which low-income “strivers” in Detroit are failed by larger economic forces and policies that leave them without opportunities to advance, no matter how hard they try.

While Seefeldt does interrogate some of the reasons for the lack of individual-level social ties among her population, she is not content to allow either social ties or the private safety net to take responsibility for improving the lives of the poor. Rather than suggesting that individuals and private organizations can or should plug the holes in the current safety net, she meticulously details the ways in which multiple social structures and social institutions have contributed to the declining fortunes of Detroit’s most disadvantaged residents through policies that deliberately disenfranchise them.

The book begins with the premise that these residents are consigned “to separate, unequal, and segregated labor, post-secondary, and housing markets that do not offer the same opportunities for advancement and wealth-building that are available to others” and that “protections that were once in place . . . have been stripped away” (p. 4). After introducing the field site, the book goes on to describe in depth how abandonment has occurred in multiple social spheres, including work, higher education, finance markets, housing, and the social safety net. It argues that crippling debt is the result of these forms of abandonment and finishes with a discussion of ways to address and reverse abandonment and remove structural impediments to upward mobility for low-income and poor strivers.

Throughout the book, the analytical focus remains on the social-structural and institutional levels rather than the individual, often portraying the research participants as lacking agency within a rigged system that actively abandons them. According to Seefeldt’s analysis, whereas social isolation
can be viewed as a latent function of policy and economic shifts, social abandonment is often the manifest intent of policy. It is here that Seefeldt makes her most important contribution to the discussion of modern poverty, suggesting that poverty and the lack of upward mobility are not accidental but are actively and purposefully created and sustained by social institutions.

Seefeldt goes on to provide policy suggestions that focus primarily on repealing and replacing policies that have limited opportunities for upward mobility among vulnerable populations. This requires active regulation of predatory lending, for-profit educational institutions, and housing markets and again focuses on structural and institutional solutions to poverty rather than relying on individuals or grassroots organizations to provide solutions to systemic problems.

Together, these books cover multiple sides of social isolation and lack of social support and provide thoughtful suggestions for poverty alleviation and improving access to upward mobility. They help fill in some of the gaps in existing literature, illustrating the various ways in which structural, cultural, and individual-level factors combine to impede mobility and basic survival for the urban poor. The books do touch on overlapping issues, as both include important analyses of housing instability and similar portrayals of the pitfalls of investments into higher education for the disadvantaged. They are both important updates to the existing canon on urban poverty, and both attempt to provide realistic solutions to address the problems they document.

While they are important contributions, both books have noticeable shortcomings. Both Detroit and KWRU have been the subject of multiple studies of poverty, race relations, and institutional interventions that impact disadvantage. Neither author makes a persuasive argument for why an additional in-depth study of their case is needed or what theoretical or empirical holes the studies fill. While both books are methodologically sound, neither uses particularly innovative techniques for learning about these issues. Neither book spends sufficient time investigating or analyzing race or gender in their case studies or samples, and neither includes men in the sample, thus reinforcing the idea that poverty is a feminized issue and underinterrogating gendered aspects of poverty. Both books also have flaws in writing and conceptualization that may undermine their effectiveness in reaching broad audiences.

Despite a compelling introduction that sets up the case study and piques the reader’s interest, the Mazelis book is at times repetitive and awkwardly written. The author often provides unnecessary extraneous detail about participants that interrupts the flow of the argument without adding much narrative richness. The practice of allowing participants to choose their own pseudonyms also results in several very jarring names—including both “Shy” and “Why”—that stand out and distract versus drawing the reader into the book’s world. The book relies heavily on previous poverty studies, to such an extent that at times it is unclear what it adds to those previous works, and stronger clarification of how it elucidates what is already known would be helpful for understanding its unique contribution.

Mazelis also seems to take for granted that social ties actually are a positive adaptation to poverty and fails to critically analyze the reasons beyond shame and stigma for disinvestment in social ties. In this she misses an important opportunity to further interrogate the role of the increasingly sparing welfare state and the possibility that sustainable social ties are no longer realistic in a setting of deep poverty, in which no one has enough resources to share reliably with anyone else. It is not surprising that individuals who receive substantial support and services through KWRU are more capable of creating sustainable social ties than those who do not, which may speak less to the networking successes of the organization itself than to the possibility that sustainable ties are heavily tied to resource availability. Furthermore, when the social ties formed through KWRU do fail and become disposable, Mazelis argues that ties to the institution are substitutable for human connections, thus undermining her own arguments regarding the importance of non-kin social ties and their potential for sustainability.

The Seefeldt book has its own limitations, including also a tendency toward redundance between chapters. Its larger issue concerns...
the analytical concept of “abandonment” itself. On the one hand, this concept is important in its portrayal of poverty as being actively caused by policy-makers, versus something that the poor have brought upon themselves either actively or passively. On the other hand, the concept is so broad as to become somewhat meaningless, thus losing some of its analytical power. All things that negatively affect the poor are filed under “abandonment” in this book, whether they are individual, institutional, or interactional. Small business failure becomes an issue of abandonment in the same way that social isolation, for-profit colleges, erratic work schedules, and predatory lending are. When is a social process or institution guilty of abandonment per se, versus exploitation of the poor? When is a particular issue an example of abandonment versus an outcome of it?

Given the wide range of different processes that fall under this large umbrella, its analytical utility is unclear. How does it advance understandings to file all of these issues under a single category? In what way does this concept help to clarify understandings of the plight of the poor in the post-Great Recession neoliberal social environment, versus confusing multiple processes by suggesting that they have similar causes and effects?

Despite these shortcomings however, there are a number of ways in which the two books provide important contributions, particularly in their concurrence on specific themes. Both authors clarify the copious ways in which neoliberal ideologies and policies contribute to social isolation, from other people as well as from mainstream institutions necessary for economic and social success. Mazelis does a good job of bringing in cultural understandings, particularly achievement ideologies, shame, and stigma, as major barriers to building collective consciousness or protective ties among the poor. She further provides an important road map for private-sector organizations seeking to replicate KWRU’s successes, including the combination of shared work, resource distribution, exchange oversight, and community-building. Seefeldt succeeds in bringing together a broad range of structural and institutional players to show how they systematically block the possibility of economic success and upward mobility for the poor. She argues for rebuilding the public safety net, presenting a blueprint for increasing class mobility and reducing the strain on the poor.

Both books present important critiques of credentialism and the false promises that many higher educational institutions and programs offer those desiring upward mobility. Both also point to the deterioration of urban neighborhoods as an important factor undermining social ties and social capital. Together the two books provide a rich portrayal of the multiple ideological and policy pathways through which neoliberalism has contributed to declining fortunes for both the extremely poor and those who are trying to improve their fortunes through playing by what were once the rules. Together they also provide a comprehensive overview of the multiple levels on which poverty affects individuals and undermines survival, mobility, social connection, and self-respect.

References