

The *real* "hidden prosperity of the poor"

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When I saw the headline in the *New York Times*—"[The Hidden Prosperity of the Poor](#)"— I thought of something very different than what Tom Edsall's commentary is actually about.

Edsall highlights an insidious and specious argument about income inequality made on the right. In essence, the cost of basic human needs has gone down in relation to income, while consumer goods have become cheaper and cheaper. So even poor Americans might have a little disposable income to buy nicer stuff. Thus we don't have an income disparity problem, and there's no reason to worry about the concentration of wealth.

Edsall's analysis of this argument is certainly helpful—especially if a person is tempted to buy this "hidden prosperity" idea in the first place, perhaps because one spends exactly zero time with poor people.

But when I saw the headline, my thoughts immediately went to a woman who will never be a part of income mobility in America. She will always be poor. Because she couldn't navigate government bureaucracy very effectively, she lost her food stamps at the beginning of this year.

Her many friends have filled this gap. One friend declared that he was going to split his disability check with her. Every time he goes grocery shopping, he buys one for her and one for himself. Others provide food bags and send her home from visits with extra loaves of bread, frozen veggies and jars of peanut butter.

I also thought of an unemployed man who is working to connect a young, severely depressed artist with a local pottery studio. He comes in so they can work together in his (too-plentiful) free time. His poverty is creating the wealth of both art and connection.

Another man recently came to the community meal where I work, having used his food stamps to buy enough ground beef and tortillas to make us his mother's

enchiladas. He was the only person—rich or poor—who brought us food that day, and his contribution was the feast that we provided.

That to me is the “hidden prosperity of the poor”: community, connection and mutual love. It can’t be—or at least almost never is—registered by economists, and that makes it all the more precious.