

# Learning about barriers to economic mobility

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Nazli Kibria, a Professor of Sociology, studies migration, race, family, and childhood with a focus on South Asia and the Asian American experience.. Her work looks broadly at how social inequalities and injustices impact the lives of families and communities. Credit: Boston University

In late 2019, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Voices for Economic Opportunity Grand Challenge, a call for ideas from individuals and organizations to broaden the national conversation about poverty and economic mobility. Nazli Kibria, a professor of sociology at CAS, teamed up with Karen V. Hansen, a professor of sociology at Brandeis University, to propose the [Cascading Lives Project](#), a website and digital learning toolkit that shares people's life stories and their experiences of downward mobility. They were one of 28 groups who received \$100,000 grants for their projects.

The project's title refers to the concept of cascading events—such as a loss of income or an illness—that often precipitate subsequent declines, whether social, personal, or financial.

"When people undergo a personal or [economic crisis](#) and don't have the resources or the safety net to cope with it, there can be this spiraling, or cascading, process," says Kibria, a professor of sociology and the associate dean of the faculty for the social sciences. "It was important to us to look at people's entire life stories because we can't understand the impact of a crisis unless we look at it over the long term."

One of the project's primary goals is to encourage [young adults](#) to change public opinions and negative stereotypes about poverty. The digital toolkit is designed to facilitate conversations about economic inequality and mobility in [high school](#) and college classrooms.

Kibria, Hansen, and their research team, including Max Greenberg, a sociology lecturer at CAS, hope the project combats damaging narratives about poverty in the United States by amplifying a diverse set of voices and experiences.

Kibria discussed the project with CAS.

## **CAS: How did this project come about?**

Kibria: We had originally submitted the proposal before COVID, and then we received news that we got the grant at the start of the pandemic—a collective cascading moment itself. We scrambled to figure out what we could do and couldn't do to complete the project in this new environment, but it actually worked out really well. We conducted life histories with people over Zoom. We interviewed people three separate times over the course of a year to see how they were coping with the pandemic, which has obviously been an economic shock for a lot of people. We decided to narrow our focus to mostly people working in hospitality because that was a sector that was really impacted from the get-go.

Now, we are working to create an educational resource website, which we're hoping will be useful for educators in a lot of different places. We focused on high school teachers and developing the materials for them, but we also think the website and the teaching materials and the stories could be used in college courses.

## **What drew you to this project?**

It felt very personal because I am a parent of a child with special needs. He's now an adult, but at the time of his diagnosis and all the years of therapy afterwards for severe intellectual disabilities, I felt sort of the

spiraling impact because that is a circumstance where it's very difficult to hold on to other parts of one's life. One's career, relationships with family, friends, and their community—everything is threatened. Fortunately, I had a lot of support, but this project felt very real to me. I could understand how one crisis can just kind of spiral and cascade. I felt like I was on the precipice of that myself.

## **How many interviews did you conduct and how did you find and select interviewees?**

We interviewed more than 30 people, predominantly in Massachusetts and Georgia. Part of understanding how people cope with crises is the kind of structure of institutional support they have—access to health insurance, things like that—and Georgia and Massachusetts have very different profiles. It was a nonrandom selection process. We contacted various hospitality organizations and associations, groups for restaurant workers, hotel workers, and so forth, and tried to deliberately sample so we had a spread of people in different kinds of jobs and at different career levels. We also tried to get a racially diverse sample.

We looked for people who were willing to share a lot about their lives, and to do it over the course of a year. Our goal was to get a varied understanding of people's lives in these circumstances. So, our methodology was very much qualitative and focused on getting the richest information possible.

## **What else do you hope to do with this project beyond the website and learning modules?**

We are working to publish [academic papers](#) about our findings and hope to write a book. We're still thinking about that. We have thought about writing a book of biographies and related materials specifically geared

toward young adult readers.

## **What lessons can these people's stories teach us about economic inequality and mobility, and the impact of economic crises on families?**

One basic lesson, which perhaps is not so surprising, is that the ability to cope with an economic crisis really depends on the resources you have, whether it's savings, family that is able to provide you with a safety net, those kinds of things. But beyond that, what really came through in our interviews was the impact of support from local government, from school systems, and also from community organizations like churches.

A lack of support can really throw someone off. We spoke with one woman, Patricia, and hers is a story that I can very much relate to. She worked as a booking receptionist at a major downtown Boston hotel. Before COVID, she had negotiated a schedule that worked for her childcare needs. She needed the daytime schedule because without it, she couldn't take care of her children when they came home from school. One of her children has special needs and she needed to be home for his appointments with therapists. Then, when COVID hit, she was furloughed. When the hotel was bringing people back, they couldn't give her the same schedule and she couldn't go back to work because she was told that she had to work in the afternoon and evening. So you can see how these cascading events play out.

These stories show us the resilience of people and how they creatively cope. These stories are not just about hardship and loss, but also about how people deal with it and, in many ways, rise to the occasion.

## **And how do you hope to change societal attitudes towards poverty, whether it's through this project or**

## in general?

That's an important question. I think because we are educators, our focus has been on getting younger people to think more broadly about poverty and about economic inequality. We're convinced that if we can get people to look at someone's life in its entirety, to see their humanity and their life course, that people will develop a different understanding.

So much of what we see is just a single snapshot of people in poverty, one statistic here and there, whether it's as X percentage or whatever, but there's always more behind these figures. If we want to develop empathy, which I think is a critical part of shifting the narrative, we need to get people to understand the human dimension and the long term impact of it.

Provided by Boston University

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