



White Working-Class Views on Belonging, Change, Identity, and Immigration

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We need a David to [slay] Goliath... I think God has given us our David and we should put him in and let him take the giant down.

Executive summary

CONTEXT

This report presents an analysis of white working-class communities' perspectives on belonging, change, identity, and immigration. Recent studies about the white working class focus on national politics, religion, and immigration; this study tells a national story from a grassroots perspective with an eye toward the prospects for cross-racial coalition building between working-class white communities and communities of color. The project's goals were to increase understanding about white working-class communities in America, to disrupt the negative narrative about the white working class by contextualizing its issues and challenges, and to put forward practical ideas for cross-racial coalition building.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do current definitions of *white working class* fit with the experiences and views of this group of people?
2. To what extent do national representations of the white working class—as a disconnected and racist segment in American society—reflect reality?
3. What are the possibilities of building cross-racial coalitions between the white working class and communities of color, as the country transitions from majority white to minority white?

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a comparative qualitative approach that aimed to give voice to the white working-class communities across the United States. We had 415 conversations in five sites: New York City (“Global City”), Dayton, Ohio (“Rustbelt”), Phoenix, Arizona (“Sunbelt”), Birmingham, Alabama (“The South”), and Tacoma (“Pacific Northwest”). These conversations took place during the presidential election cycle from August 2016 through March 2017.

In each site, we followed three steps. First, the study

started by interviewing up to 15 key informants drawn from political, city, and civic leaders. These included elected officials, leaders of political parties, trade union representatives, and civic organizations such as places of worship, community and nonprofit organizations, and the business leaders. Working alongside local organizations and advocates, we convened multiple focus groups with white working-class residents, with the aim of reaching up to 30 people in each site. These focus groups occurred in neighborhoods and suburbs with established white working-class populations. Additionally, we organized up to 25 informal interviews with white working-class people we met in “third spaces,” such as in diners and bars and at community events. In total, the aim was to engage with over 70 people in each city, or 350 people in total. We received an enthusiastic response in each city and ended up meeting with 415 individuals.

After completing the fieldwork and preliminary analysis of the interviews and focus groups, we returned to each city and presented our interim findings on national and local themes. In this final step, we brought together the study participants not only to reflect on our findings but also to discuss ways to move efforts on local cross-racial coalitions forward. These workshops occurred between April 2017 and July 2017.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

ARE DEFINITIONS OF THE WHITE WORKING CLASS RELEVANT?

Definition is fluid and complex

The classic definition of white working-class communities tends to be framed with reference to ethnicity (self-selecting as white), income (generally earning less than \$52,000 per year), level of education (non-college graduates), or occupations (“blue collar jobs” such as construction). Our research demonstrated that the classical definition is too narrow to capture those who define themselves as white working class and thus misses the range of lived experiences

of white working-class people, their economic challenges, and their occupational realities. Across all our case study sites, participants outright rejected the classical definition. Indeed, searching for a standard definition could be viewed as a fruitless exercise. In arriving at this conclusion, we are airing the view from grassroots discussions that *white working class* is an elastic term that is interpreted in many ways.

A common finding from the study was the referencing of economic insecurity to arrive at defining *white working class*. This cut across people with college degrees, and those who were earning over the \$52,000 a year threshold. At first glance, these people hold the credentials to gain entry into the American middle class but did not feel they were experiencing the positive benefits from being part of this club. Many claimed they were living “paycheck to paycheck” and had very little economic flexibility in relation to their job. In short, they were being dragged back into the expanding working class from the shrinking middle class because of economic insecurity. Additionally, those participants aligned themselves with the struggles articulated by those holding traditional “blue collar” and even part-time hourly work. From either end of the spectrum, working-class communities are simply not getting ahead.

More than deviation from the classic definition, or economic insecurity, it was the crystallization of a common set of values that bound our participants together as “white working class.” These values included being hardworking (going to work every day, not calling in sick, earning every dollar), family focused (looking after one’s children, spending time with family), honest (following the rules), direct (speaking the truth), supporting each other (helping family and friends when in need), and not depending on welfare (doing everything it took to take care of self and family without getting handouts). Apart from connecting with their peers, common values also enabled working-class communities to differentiate from groups perceived not to belong in the category, such as minority communities, immigrants, and the wealthy.

Division within the white working class: Who belongs in this group?

The conventional view of the white working class as a homogenous category is far from reality. The hundreds of conversations we had with white working-class individuals paint a far more fragmented and fluid view, ranging from people who were college-educated professionals to those whose education had ended at high school, from those with income over \$52,000 to people with minimum-wage jobs. White working-class communities were economically stratified, and only the previously mentioned common values held these disparate groupings together. It should also be noted that, throughout our study, the terms *working class* and *middle class* were used interchangeably, referencing the aspirations of the former and the insecurity of the latter. It was telling that white working-class participants wanted to distance themselves from others they thought did not belong in their group, even though they were white and poor. Typically, “trailer trash” or “hillbillies” were viewed as being outside the white working-class community because they were perceived as uncouth and dependent on welfare. However, those who were labeled as “trailer trash” or “hillbillies” also claimed to be working class and shared the same values as others who deemed themselves white and working class.

Focus on “working”

Throughout the study, and across our sites, participants focused on the “working” of white working class. Belonging to the white working class meant contributing to society by going out to work, earning money, and thereby supporting one’s family. Related to the importance of work in labeling one’s class affiliation, the decline in stable blue-collar jobs (manufacturing, for example) resulted in values becoming even more critical in forming the basis of white working-class identity.

Whiteness was mostly unspoken among participants in the study. People did not refer to themselves as white, rather as “working” or “working class.” In most conversations, the term *white* dropped out of the picture entirely. However, it could be argued that *white* was nowhere and everywhere, especially in referring to social change brought about by

newly arrived immigrants, or the growth of communities of color. We heard participants referring to neighborhoods back in the day as being “good” (i.e., white) in contrast to the current “poor” conditions associated with the growth of communities of color or immigrants in their neighborhood and city. Immigrants and racial minorities were viewed largely as a racial “other” first and were seen as being outside the working class even though they shared a similar economic position to white working-class communities. In this context, immigrants and communities of color were viewed through the lens of race rather than class, whereas white working-class communities perceived themselves through class rather than race.

The absence of whiteness manifested itself in discussions on white privilege. Participants felt they were struggling because they lived paycheck to paycheck, had two or three jobs, and worked hard to put food on the table. Their limited economic means and lack of upward mobility did not seem like white privilege. More than this, examples were provided where their whiteness was seen as being a disadvantage in terms of “reverse racism” in the labor market, the preference for immigrants as the building blocks for economic recovery, or the way that politicians discounted the contribution of white working-class groups in electoral politics.

IS THE VIEW OF WHITE WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITIES AS DISCONNECTED AND RACIST ACCURATE?

Not all white working-class people voted for Trump

One of the most powerful national narratives, both before and after the 2016 presidential election, was that white working-class communities underpinned the success of Donald Trump. Our study showed that the picture was much more complicated. Participants found significant failings in both candidates, and the most common refrain across all sites was the problem of voting for “the lesser of two evils.” Very few people found the language deployed by Trump to describe communities of color, or women, to be acceptable.

Individuals were genuinely conflicted, and we found many instances of families, friends, neighborhoods, and communities being fragmented by the partisanship of the 2016 campaign.

Hillary’s failure to embody white working-class values

White working-class perspectives on Hillary Clinton ranged from visceral dislike to lukewarm support. Typically, the views expressed about her focused on being untrustworthy and dishonest, as well as accumulating a fortune from not working hard. This marked her as being outside the working-class values noted above as being the cornerstone of working class identity. In addition, she was seen as a member of the political elite and an “insider” in contrast with her political opponent. Across our study cities—very different in terms of demographics, politics, ideology, and culture—we heard consistent criticisms against Clinton and the Democrats that ultimately proved to be fatal for Hillary’s campaign to become the first female president.

Is a vote for Trump a vote for a racist?

Our study was keen to explore the view that white working-class communities are racist. Again, this was situated in the discussion of the 2016 presidential election, which the research straddled, and which provided a platform to discuss with participants. Across all sites, racialized language was used in discussions. Some of this was explicit, but on most occasions language was coded in referencing crime, welfare dependency, and competition for housing and jobs.

People who supported Trump, and those who did not, recognized that he was the public voice of private disenchantment. The appeal was not that his campaign was racist but rather that he personified an insurgent, anti-establishment rage against “politics as normal.” Among participants, Trump managed to connect to working-class values by being perceived as a “straight talker” and “honest” as well as being prepared to protect and secure working-class jobs and communities by his position on scrapping the North American Free Trade Agreement. Trump’s message—“Make America Great Again”—connected

with white working-class communities who looked back at a golden past and hoped for a better future. In many ways, Trump was the hope and change candidate in 2016, as Obama had been in 2008, albeit representing different constituencies. Indeed, across our study sites we found examples of white working-class voters who had voted Obama in 2008 and then switched to Trump in 2016. For those we spoke with, Trump's appeal stretched beyond a narrow racist lens; economics trumped race. Those white working class who voted for Trump believed he could restore their sense of economic stability that has been taken away.

Conflation of economic and cultural insecurity

The study is peppered with racialized language, regardless of who the participants voted for. This was particularly true when participants discussed neighborhood change, economic decline, and blame for societal problems. Recollections of the past are seen through a period when neighborhoods and cities were largely white and working class, crime was low, and there was an expansive pipeline from school to work, which enabled the white working class to comfortably support their families. This nostalgia sits in jarring contrast with the current situation. Narratives about demographic change link social and economic decline with higher levels of crime and greater competition for jobs. The American Dream feels unattainable, with participants lamenting disruption and loss of working-class spaces as well as voice.

More than once participants mentioned "strangers" in their own communities. People were disconnected and disrupted by the conflation of economic and cultural change. They felt less secure about their economic situation and were concerned about demographic changes that impacted local and national security as well as what it means to identify as an American. This "perfect storm," allied with the loss of political voice, was the basis for disconnection and rage against the establishment.

Emphasis on fairness and equal treatment

White working-class participants in the study

emphasized the importance of fairness. They worked hard, working two or three jobs in some cases, and recognized that you had to play by the rules. The expectation was that this would lead to rewards and social mobility, but the reality was different. Our participants were struggling economically and living paycheck to paycheck. The concept of fairness—a cornerstone value—was not being applied equally. People pointed to the willingness of government to allow racial minorities, refugees, and immigrants to access welfare and social services while the white working class was being left behind and ignored. In short, this was "reverse racism" aided and abetted by government that kept white working-class communities in the slow lane while racial minorities sped past them. This was perceived as being unfair and unequal. For example, they supported immigration and viewed it as important for the development of the US, but they also believed that "illegal" immigrants were breaking the law and not playing by the rules. Discussion on immigration was not about favors but fairness; a better system was required to manage migration.

THE PROSPECTS FOR CROSS-RACIAL COALITIONS BETWEEN WHITE WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

White working-class communities are racially diverse

Those in the white working class do not live in homogeneous families and communities. Rather, they interact at the personal level with racial and ethnic diversity in their own families, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. Intimate and valued cross-racial relationships exist across all study sites among family members and in friendship networks. These included being a biracial couple, living with a roommate of a different background, and having multiracial grandchildren. Informal and casual interaction occurs outside the privacy of home, such as in the workplace, neighborhood streets, public institutions, and public spaces. Participants spoke regularly, in both positive and negative terms, about the changing demographic makeup of their homes, neighborhoods, cities, and nation.

White working-class people embrace racial diversity but struggle to engage with it

Participants expressed considerable excitement about diversity in their neighborhoods. They generally felt comfortable attending formally organized community events and eating at ethnic restaurants; but they experienced discomfort and frustration, and at times some hesitation, with getting to know neighbors with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Having to deal with unfamiliar cultures and languages posed a barrier to developing meaningful relationships with neighbors. Getting to know people of different racial backgrounds was easier when racial minorities or foreign-born residents shared the working-class values discussed above. We met a handful of white working-class community organizers who were actively trying to bridge divides between communities. In most cases, these interventions were at an embryonic stage and required investment and time to have an opportunity of succeeding.

Few intentional efforts at cross-racial coalition building

When asked about cross-racial coalition building around common causes, participants could not come up with many concrete examples. Few local institutions and community organizations are doing cross-racial coalition building. The examples we uncovered were limited, informal and “do it yourself,” such as a neighborhood organization planning a park clean-up. Many supposed cross-racial coalition examples ended up being little more than a case of “parallel play” rather than an integrated effort of racially diverse groups of people collectively working together for a common objective. Participants provided many examples of possibilities to bring people together, such as through interfaith events, neighborhood activities, and community gardens. Veterans saw the military as a successful model of integration and cross-racial coalition building; but that did not necessarily translate to coalition building outside the military. Reversing the paucity of intentional efforts, whether formal or informal, is hindered by a lack of capacity, funding, and political wills.

Younger white working-class participants were more open and optimistic about living in a multiracial society, but they too did not have many examples of where it was actually occurring.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE SITES

The study found overlapping themes emerging across all five sites despite differences in location, history, demography, size, and politics.

New York City: Discussions took place in Brooklyn neighborhoods with strong Catholic, Italian, and Irish immigrant histories. Residents recalled tight-knit neighborhoods and looked to the future with mixed feelings: sadness and excitement. Here, the white working class has strong ties to unionized public professions in fire, police, and sanitation. Racial and ethnic diversity has always been a part of these neighborhoods, but the growth of the Muslim population, particularly women wearing hijabs, reminds many of 9/11 and the loss of family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors who responded to the attacks on the Twin Towers. For the most part, conversations about neighborhood change were tied to immigration and national security. Though those we met here represented the most economically stable white working class of our study, they felt a sense of economic insecurity because of rising property values. Concerns about housing affordability were often overshadowed by anger toward Chinese investors who were driving gentrification and “destroying” the character of the neighborhoods. In Brooklyn, Clinton was the preferred candidate, receiving 79% of votes on election day.

Dayton: Conversations took place in historically white working class urban neighborhoods east of the Great Miami River. Residents here embrace their European immigrant and Appalachian migrant history as well as optimism about the growing number of refugees and immigrants from Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America who are revitalizing white-working class neighborhoods through the rehabilitation of homes, creation of gardens, and opening of new businesses. After decades of population loss and economic decline, the city is on the cusp of remaking itself as middle-class residents move back into the downtown

neighborhoods. This phenomenon does cause concern for working-class residents who have weathered the difficult times, feel politically left behind, and resent the special attention given to immigrants, even though they are viewed as part of the process of revitalization. As the city undergoes this transformation, it remains hyper-segregated, with black-white tensions surfacing in conversations about neighborhood integration and safety. Although known to be a progressive area of Ohio, Montgomery County voted 48% Trump, 47% Clinton.

Phoenix: Some conversations took place in white working-class urban neighborhoods with a significant presence of Latinos and immigrants, primarily from Mexico, and others were in suburban, primarily white neighborhoods. Phoenix, Arizona, sits in the middle of some of the nation's most controversial anti-immigrant local and state legislation targeted at undocumented population. Much of this hostility stems from the city's proximity to the US-Mexico border and decades of heavy flows of immigrants. Historically, Phoenix has had an overwhelmingly white population base. This began to change in the 1970s, and Phoenix now is 65% white, and the single largest ethnic category (35%) is Mexican. Maricopa County, where Phoenix is situated, voted 49% for Trump and 45% for Clinton. Maricopa County had the highest number of votes for Trump of all counties in the US.

Birmingham: Conversations took place in working-class suburbs, where most whites live; in the city proper, 73% of the population is African American. Like Dayton, Birmingham is a segregated city with considerable racial tensions; here they have a historical basis because of its place as a key site for the violent struggle for civil rights in the 1960s. The language expressed is less coded than in the other four sites. Birmingham, once known for the "Birmingham Steel" that built much of modern America, has endured considerable urban decline, but there has been recent redevelopment, especially in the downtown area. Additionally, religion and religious values were interspersed in many of the conversations about community life and politics, in contrast with

the other case study sites, where this was much more muted. Although our participants leaned more toward Trump, Jefferson County voted 45% Trump, 52% Clinton.

Tacoma: Discussions took place in urban and suburban white working-class neighborhoods. Tacoma was the least racially diverse city in our study, yet participants spoke with the most progressive language around diversity and immigrants. This is a striking working-class place with the port infrastructure and warehouses forming a prominent part of the overall landscape. Residents frequently evoked the city's working-class identity with proud reference to being a cooperative community and "not Seattle" perhaps referencing the latter's association with money and elites, industry and politics. Many Tacoma residents come from outside the state of Washington and the city is considered to be the last affordable place to live on the west coast. Tacoma is quickly shedding its "Rustbelt" like qualities as neighborhoods gentrify. Yet, white working-class neighborhoods still face many challenges related to crime, poverty and homelessness. Surprising to many, Pierce County voted 42% Trump and 50% for Clinton (higher margin than had been expected) despite the strong union presence and being a Democratic state.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

A new definition of white working class required

The study revealed the limitations of current definitions for white working-class communities, which emphasize income, occupation, and education. This is too narrow to reflect reality. An expanded version of white working class will need to emphasize the importance of common values, economic insecurity, and stratification within this group. In short, the white working class needs to be recognized to be as diverse as many other groups, which will increase opportunities for community engagement.

Urgency of bringing people together

The election of President Trump has focused attention on historical divisions in American society, which have pitted family members, as well as communities, against each other. For those trying to bridge these

gaps, white working-class people need to be heard: they feel politically marginalized, culturally isolated, and economically vulnerable. Because of their material reality, talk of white privilege is a tough pill to swallow. A further challenge is the use of racialized language, including the idea of reverse racism, which offends communities of color. The consequences of not doing anything to bringing people together could further deepen the crisis of division as the country moves to being even more diverse in the decades ahead.

Showcase good local practices

The local, rather than the national or global, could provide the basis for community coalition building between working-class white communities and those of color. Given the reality of reduced federal spending on community development together with a challenging political environment on issues of immigration and race, policy makers need to document and showcase good practice being implemented at the local and community levels. In this way, an alternative prospectus may be generated on how white working-class communities and those of color are engaging in a positive way rather than simply as implacable adversaries.

Increase organizational capacity

Many of the community activists and organizations who took part in the study were willing to build, consolidate, or create new coalitions of interest. However, they were limited in terms of their knowledge, and thus capability, to realize their ambitions. There is a need to increase organizational capacity and know-how, with special emphasis being placed on organizations and individuals who operate across boundaries—that is, organizations and individuals who have credibility and reach with white working-class communities but can work with communities of color for mutual advantage. In this way, a new generation of community leaders could arise that reach across as well as reaching in, thus providing a blueprint to successfully negotiate the country of the future, rather than the past.

*People don't
come together
on their own
yet.*

Background

Context

One form of representation of the white working class is through the lens of racism, violence, and dysfunctionality. It has been positioned as resistant to change and immigration, concerned about being a national minority in their own country, and refusing to be led by the first black president of the White House. Yet this is only part of the story and despite the expansive news coverage, a detailed study of the white working class and its views on belonging, change, identity, and immigration are missing. The present study provides an analysis of the white working class across regional and local differences, as well as variations in gender and age. In the absence of detailed research and grounded analysis, the void is sometimes filled with inaccurate reporting and discussion that defaults to stereotypical assumptions.

There has never been a more important time for applied research from the perspective of white working-class Americans. The country is changing at rapid pace. By 2065, 47% of the population will be white, meaning that the US will be “majority minority” country. This status has been the trend in the largest cities, but increased levels of ethnic diversity are now the reality across the country more generally. The study is embedded in the perspectives of white working-class communities who have been portrayed as being in universal opposition to these demographic changes when in reality white working-class people may embody diverse perspectives, many of which are more progressive than those of educated liberal whites.

The focus of the study is on the lived experiences and realities of white working-class lives. We have provided a detailed and nuanced account that could help to construct a new debate on identity and belonging as the country moves to new and uncharted territory in the everyday politics of race. We especially want to understand the layers of insecurity and how these are mediated between economic factors (loss of working class jobs, fallout from 2007 economic crash) and cultural factors





(immigration, construction of minorities as problematic other). It may be fruitful to explore the interdependence between economic and cultural security. More than this, in creating a space for ordinary people to be given a voice and to be heard the research seeks to explore opportunities for cross-racial coalition building and alliances on issues and themes that are seen to be important across diverse working-class populations.

*We don't
really see race
as a thing
here.*

Literature review

The white working class is represented as being a problematic group that is grounded in norms and behaviors that seem out of step with mainstream society. They seem to be at odds with the reality of increased ethnic diversity and the historic election of Barack Obama, the first black president, blaming others for their economic plight and disengaged from politics. Moreover, they speak about a mythical America that has long disappeared rather than the multicultural future that will shape this century.

Yet this is only part of the story. These discussions position the white working class as a singular, unified group with collective views on immigration, identity, and belonging. A number of excellent and thought-provoking discussions of white working-class communities complicate these overly simplistic characterizations. Yet research on the white working class in the United States remains limited.

Whiteness studies

“Whiteness studies” examine discrimination and exclusion of white immigrants, specifically from southern and eastern Europe, arriving to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 2005). This body of research is conducted by historians who claim that the integration of white immigrants into American society could provide a framework for the inclusion of many different types of minorities that followed. For example, Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants encountered discrimination that restricted opportunities to employment and housing markets, as well as the ability to join social clubs. Those who support this view suggest that communities of color could follow a similar path toward integration over time.

Comparing the integration of white immigrants with the integration of communities of color has been seen as unhelpful, because the trajectory of racist violence, forced migration, and legal restrictions placed on the latter has been very

different than that of the former. For example, the legacy of slavery cannot be compared to discrimination against Italian or Irish immigrants. Similarly, the consequences of the so-called War on Terror continues to shape the day-to-day experiences of Muslim Americans, who are viewed as a “suspect community” associated with terrorism after 9/11 (see Fox and Guglielmo, 2012). The challenges encountered by “Whiteness studies” in being taken seriously as an academic sub-discipline can perhaps be put forward as one of the reasons for the relatively limited output of research on white communities.

Ethnographic studies

Research projects have been undertaken that deploy ethnographic approaches to the study of white working-class neighborhoods, largely in major American cities. Notable examples include Rieder’s *Canarsie* (1985), which illustrates how a low- and middle-income Italian and Jewish area of Brooklyn resisted attempts of racial integration during the 1970s. This study was undertaken in a neighborhood close to Bay Ridge, one of our case study sites. Our research showed that racialized language continues to be used in Brooklyn but that there is a wide range of views from white working-class communities related to race relations. Similarly, Hartigan’s (1999) study of three neighborhoods in Detroit, *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*, demonstrates the complexity of white privilege when applied to white residents with different types of jobs and income. Rather than viewing whiteness as being symbolically opposed to black “otherness,” Hartigan constructed a diversity within white working-class communities that appeared to show different types of friendships with communities of color depending on economic position. In short, white communities with the least economic insecurity had stronger relationships in the workplace and neighborhoods than those who were in an economically secure position. The current study shows similar types of complexity in white working-class communities.

Kefalas’s *Working Class Heroes* (2003) is another ethnographic study (this time in Chicago) and shows how issues of race and class become key markers to defend the neighborhood from outsiders; this is similar to the experiences of people in some of our

case study cities, where class and race were used in tandem. Sometimes communities of color were viewed as a threat to neighborhood cohesion in a very explicit and racialized way. On other occasions, communities of color were coded by being linked to crime or welfare. In a different vein, Linkon and Russo's *Steeltown U.S.A.* (2002) frames the impact of de-industrialization, loss, and memory on working-class communities in the context of a steel factory's closure. They point to how working-class jobs are less secure by being tied to a single factory: if the factory closes, so does the city. Monica McDermott's *Working Class White* (2006) is an account of interracial interactions in Boston and Atlanta as seen by a participant observer in a convenience store. The lived experience of working-class whites appears to shift from being friendly and supportive in the presence of blacks to hostility in their absence. This being stated, McDermott continues to find relationships being brokered between whites and blacks who have common positions in relation to work and neighborhood.

Finally, Arlie Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land* is based on an ethnographic study in Louisiana trying to understand support for the Tea Party among working-class whites who should rationally be allies of the Democrats. Her findings show the deep resentment toward people in society who "unfairly" benefit from government policy—immigrants, communities of color, refugees—and "jump the line." Her subjects see a country that has lost its moral compass, and they feel like outliers in their own country.

Personal narratives

There have been interventions on the themes of white working class by a number of authors who have partly used personal narratives to frame their analysis and description. J. D. Vance's memoir, *Hillbilly Elogy* (2016), received significant publicity for telling the story of a problematic upbringing by poor white Appalachian parents and extended family who had moved to Ohio in search of work. Documenting white working-class communities as being scarred by drugs, violence, and family dysfunction, Vance's portrait is not especially

flattering and appears to pathologize this group. Vance himself escapes his working-class town to win a place at Yale and a career in finance via active service in the armed forces. *Hillbilly Elogy* became a *New York Times* bestseller at a time when the nation at large was trying to find answers to the unexpected success of Trump in the Republican primaries, and then during the general election. This success is summarized by a reviewer in *The Guardian*:

It dropped into a national shouting match that has pitted a hazily defined entity called "the white working class" against an equally hazy "coastal elite" as the Sunni and Shia of the American political scene. The commentariat were at a loss as to explain the ballooning support for Trump, a candidate so transparently unqualified for the job that his candidacy seemed more like a prank than a serious bid for the White House. Vance, articulate and authentically Appalachian, became a regular face on the cable news circuit, a sort of ethnographic native informant about the "other America." (Kunzru 2016)

Several other publications have transcended academic and public discussion. One such book is *White Trash* by Nancy Isenberg (2016), which disrupts the view that class has been silent and unimportant in American history. On the contrary, poor whites were looked on by disdain by other citizens who marked them as being problematic and ascribed pathologies to them. In this way, it could be argued that Isenberg borrows from the "Whiteness studies" discussed previously. Similarly, there is very little recognition of communities of color in discussion of *White Trash* or the associated privilege that whites maintained over these groups.

Think tanks

A body of work reflecting on the political behavior of white working-class voters has been led by the policy community and think tanks. Much of the analysis is focused on the extent and underlying reasons that these voters have switched their allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans in national elections. Consideration has been given to whether the white working class remains an important electoral

demographic when it is shrinking as a population group, even as the United States becomes increasingly ethnically diverse, college educated, and urban.

Contributions have been made by Greenberg (2014), Levison (2013), and Teixeira and Abramowitz (2008), who have to a greater or lesser extent extolled Democrats not to take white working-class voters for granted. This was before the political earthquake that heralded Trump's triumph in 2016. The most recent political analysis was undertaken by Public Research Religion Institute (PRRI)/The Atlantic with a national survey of over 3,000 white, non-Hispanic respondents who did not have a college degree and also included four focus groups in the swing state of Ohio (PRRI, 2017a). Again, this pointed to cultural insecurity alongside the allure of a disruptive candidate as key reasons for white working-class voters' turn to Trump.

Media commentary

Linked with some of the political contributions, interventions have been made by journalists about the challenges confronting white working-class communities in coming to terms with an America that now looks and feels very different from the past. In *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Frank (2004) discusses reasons why the white working class has become more conservative and voted for Republicans rather than Democrats. Walsh (2014) attempts to find out whether the white working class has been lost to the Democrats because of the rise of cultural politics and the move to win over the middle class.

Since the rise of Trump in 2016, it seems that a new industry has been created to understand why the white working class acted in this way and against their economic interests with articles and op-ed pieces appearing regularly in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Economist*. The narrative seems to be clear: Trump was the insurgent candidate against the political and media elite. He tapped into cultural and economic insecurity across white working-class America. The argument is clear, but when

scrutinized, it breaks down because the white working class is not uniform in allegiance. This has been discussed by PRRI (2017a).

As we can see, research and commentary on white working-class communities have been shaped from a variety of sources and approaches. There is no doubt that the number of studies on the *white working class* has increased significantly since 2015, and given that the reality of President rather than candidate Trump, it is likely that more studies lie ahead. A critical point to consider is how white working class is defined as a policy tool and how this is viewed by the people who are defined in such a way. Our study focused on this issue, exploring how policy and practical definitions of what is *white working class* differed from what it means in reality.

Defining white working class

Defining white and working class may appear to be relatively straightforward. Many put forward that this group is composed of non-Hispanic whites who have not completed a four-year college degree (McDermott and Samson, 2005; Teixeira and Abramovitz, 2008; PRRI, 2012; 2017a; Levison, 2013). Educational achievement is used because it is a proxy for human capital as well as probable career trajectory. In short, college graduates are likely to earn 25 times more than high school dropouts (Teixeira and Abramovitz, 2013:3). Deploying education as the main criterion for measuring class in the US is also a practical tool because it enables questions to be standardized across surveys.

Apart from education, income and occupation have also been used to define the working class (PRRI, 2012; Teixeira and Abramovitz, 2008). Occupation creates powerful imagery of the types of jobs historically associated with working class. The view of traditional blue collar employment is typified by the following quote:

From revolutionary days through 2004 the majority of Americans fit two criteria. They were white. And they concluded their education before obtaining a four-year college degree. In that American mosaic, that vast working class was the largest piece, from

the Yeoman farmer to the welder on the assembly line. (Brownstein, 2011)

Occupational typology creates a visceral definition and cuts across educational complications. This is most clearly highlighted by Bill Gates, the billionaire founder of Microsoft, who because he does not have a college degree qualifies as a member of the working class. Clearly this is problematic. Many survey methods do not ask about employment type, and this makes data collection very challenging. Splitting jobs into blue collar and white collar creates a space for normative judgements that may change the nature of research findings.

Income has also been used to define the working class. Teixeira and Abramovitz suggest that those with household incomes less than \$60,000 are working class or, if the definition is tighter, less than \$30,000. (Teixeira and Abramovitz, 2008:4). Income, however, creates problems because people are reluctant to disclose their earnings and survey questions do not consistently ask questions on money earned per household (PRRI, 2012). In addition, income and earnings show geographical variation that makes class comparison across the country almost impossible.

In this way, educational definitions alongside race (white) and ethnicity (non-Hispanic) would seem to provide the most effective, as well as practical, way to frame white working class because data can be easily accessed from existing sources such as the census. Indeed, this has been the standard measure in recent contributions to the subject (McDermott, 2006; PRRI, 2012; 2017a; Teixeira, 2008). But whatever measure is used—education, occupation, or income—the evidence shows sharp declines in the size of the white working class since 1945 (Teixeira and Abramovitz, 2008:6). Rising levels of educational attainment have transformed those *without* a four-year degree from 86% in 1940 to 48% in 2007, with similar changes in occupation and income (Teixeira and Abramovitz, 2008:5).

In a country built on the ideals of social mobility encapsulated in the American Dream, being part of the working class may be viewed as a sign of

failure. Assuming that this is the case, the focus inevitably shifts to the American middle class which is seen as being both solid and successful. This large, amorphous group takes in everyone between the bottom 10% and top 5%, but there is no consistent definition. According to the Tax Policy Center, the middle-class household spectrum earns anywhere from \$42,000 to \$250,000 (cited in *New York Times*, 2012). However, this large group is broken down into lower middle class, middle class, and upper middle class (to cite just three categories). An undisputable fact is that the middle class is shrinking as a result of the economic recession (see Pew Research Center, 2012). According to some commentators, middle-class vulnerability is leading them to tip into the larger working class:

The biggest issue facing the American economy, and our political system, is the gradual descent of the middle class into proletarian class.... this group, what I call the yeoman class—the small business owners, the suburban homeowners, the family farmers and skilled construction tradespeople—is increasingly endangered. (Kotkin, 2014)

Given the above, the boundaries between working-class and middle-class Americans are likely to become increasingly blurred because of economic insecurity, downward mobility, and the problems of gaining the type of job that leads to a middle-class lifestyle. In these circumstances, there is likely to be greater, not less, attention to the white working class. Though the narrow educational definition of class is perhaps the best indicator of who composes the working class, this should not detract from the powerful use of cultural imagery to specific class assignment. According to Levison, the white working class remains a critical and important group to politicians and the media:

... political and campaign strategists suddenly find themselves focusing on the mood in blue collar diners, bowling alleys in working class neighborhoods... as election day approaches while other reporters go on the road and file dispatches from NASCAR races, tractor pulls and country music bars. (Levison, 2013: 36)

The white working class matters in the US, politically,

economically, and culturally. Far from being an insignificant section of the population, the most recent PRRI report (2017a) stated that 33% of all adults in the US could be viewed as white working class, compared to 22% of whites who were college educated. Yet in the discussion of those without a college degree, or in “blue collar jobs,” or indeed people earning less than \$52,000, there is hardly any analysis of working-class values. The collapsing middle class relates to economic insecurity and the very poor; and those who are living the American Dream and belong to the ranks of the wealthy are bound together because they share similar values. This cuts across education, occupation, and indeed locality and possibly provides a new way to reflect on white working-class communities in modern America. Our literature review shows how scholars are charting the lived experiences of diverse and fragmented communities, which, together with a focus on values, provides a different way to define the white working class.

There is... the feeling that working class has been alienated and marginalized... so a lot of working class people think that blacks in America are represented by the Democratic Party, and that their voice is being heard... whereas [that] is not... the case for the working class... They're not talking about... the guy that's... working in Birmingham Steel.

Methodology



Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do current definitions of white working class fit with the experiences and views of this group of people?
2. To what extent do national representations of the white working class as a disconnected and racist segment in American society reflect reality?
3. What are the possibilities of building cross-racial coalitions between white working-class Americans and communities of color, as the country transitions from majority white to minority white?

A qualitative approach

This research study focused on localized lived realities across different sites in the US, speaking to self-defined white working-class residents. By taking a case study approach across five research sites, our aim was to generate a detailed and nuanced account of white working-class perspectives. We were keen to explore what it means to be white, and how *white* and *working class* are understood; views on the immediate political situation presented by the presidential election campaigns (and during the course of the research Donald Trump's presidential victory) as a form of populism; the often mentioned opinion that *white*

working class often equates with non-progressive and racist views; and opportunities for cross-racial/ethnic coalition building and alliances between diverse working-class communities. During the 12 months of the research, the political dynamics shifted dramatically in the US, and some of this has been captured by the study.

This project was informed by a qualitative approach that included the research team's developing of relationships in each case study area with organizations and individuals who acted as key informants and enablers in organizing focus groups and providing access to residents. The qualitative approach allowed for a level of flexibility in the questions researchers asked in exploring lived experiences of residents that gave voice to their unique experiences and also allowed the team to respond to circumstances that enabled us to, for example, organize spontaneously workshops with young people or spend an afternoon with a group of seniors. This approach generated a depth of data and enabled triangulation of findings from within and across the case study sites, giving a richness to the experiences and life stories shared by all the research participants.¹

¹Coventry University Ethics Committee approved the project after a rigorous assessment. This process involved explaining the nature of the study, the methods to be deployed, how these were the best fit to answer the questions posed by the research, how research participants would be protected and how issues of anonymity and confidentiality were to be handled both in collection and in presentation of the data. We also provided for review the interview schedules, consent forms, and project information forms that would be given to all participants.

Table 1: Methods adopted and numbers of conversations achieved

	Bay Ridge	Dayton	Birmingham	Phoenix	Tacoma	Total
Stakeholder Interviews	16	17	14	18	12	77
Focus Groups	28	27	32	27	30	144
Informal Conversations	41	41	13	20	34	149
Interactive Workshops	n/a	n/a	21	24	n/a	45
Total	85	85	80	89	76	415

Locations for the fieldwork

The research aimed to gather the experiences and views of white, working-class people from across the US. To this end the team selected five areas as the case study sites: Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, New York, situated in a “global city”; Birmingham, Alabama, situated in the Bible Belt of the US South, and has a history as the birthplace of the civil rights movement; Dayton, Ohio, situated in the Rust Belt, a term coined in the 1970s as the decline and closing of manufacturing industries shifted away from the Northeast to the Sun Belt region in the Southwest, where we selected Phoenix, Arizona. Finally, Tacoma, Washington, in the Pacific Northwest, was selected as a city that has revitalized itself after a long period of decline since the 1960s and is described as the most livable and walkable city in the US. Two members of the research team worked in each area to develop contacts and relationships and set up the fieldwork.

Methods adopted

It was agreed with Open Society Foundations (OSF) that the research team would aim to hold up to 70 conversations in each case study area. This would give a total of 350 conversations using a variety of methods through a process of non-probability sampling. Table 1 shows that at the end of the fieldwork the team had achieved 415 conversations using a range of approaches.

Stakeholder interviews

In total, the research team interviewed 77 stakeholders. These people were selected from a variety of sources from local state actors and non-government agencies, included the mayor, leaders of political parties, leaders of trade unions, local newspaper editors, and civic organizations such as places of worship, community and advocacy organizations, and the business sector. We used semi-structured questionnaire, organized around key themes and questions. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours. Each interview was recorded and fully transcribed.

Focus groups

Conversations with white, working-class people in each of the five areas was achieved through organizing and inviting residents to focus groups. People self-selected as white and working class. These were organized through key contacts that the research team had established by scouting the areas and through informal networks. “Snowball” sampling was used thereafter, using networks and contacts of initial participants. In total 144 people attended one of 23 focus groups across the five sites. These focus groups were held in people’s homes, front porches, and garden and community centers and organized to fit participants’ availability. Some were thus held on weekends, some in the daytime, and some in the evening. Each participant was offered \$20 as a thank-you for participating. Many participants commented how much they enjoyed the discussion, and some said that it was the first time they had been asked for their views. Again, all interactions were recorded and fully transcribed.

Informal conversations

The research team took an innovative approach to the study; included in the methods were having informal conversations with local people in public settings or “third spaces.” This included bars, cafes, at work (for Uber drivers), local laundromats, on the streets, and at public events. The conversations were written up immediately after the interaction and provided a rich source of unstructured thoughts and opinions on the subject matter. A total of 149 interactions were recorded.

Interactive workshops

A key advantage in undertaking qualitative research is that its flexibility allows the researchers to react and adapt to changing circumstances. For example, we were given the opportunity to speak with a cohort of young people in Phoenix and Birmingham and spent an hour with each group.

Feedback workshops

A key part of the methodology was to return to each case study area with interim findings that would facilitate a discussion and feed into the final report. The feedback workshops were also designed to draw out further discussions on local coalition building across class and racial groups. Half-day workshops were organized to bring decision makers and residents together.

Data analysis

All the data was fully transcribed, coded by at least two members of the team, and analyzed using thematic analysis. This is a popular method in qualitative research that results in a rich description of data that can show both patterns and differences. It is also a useful means of organizing a large amount of qualitative data, which can offer insight to the research questions.

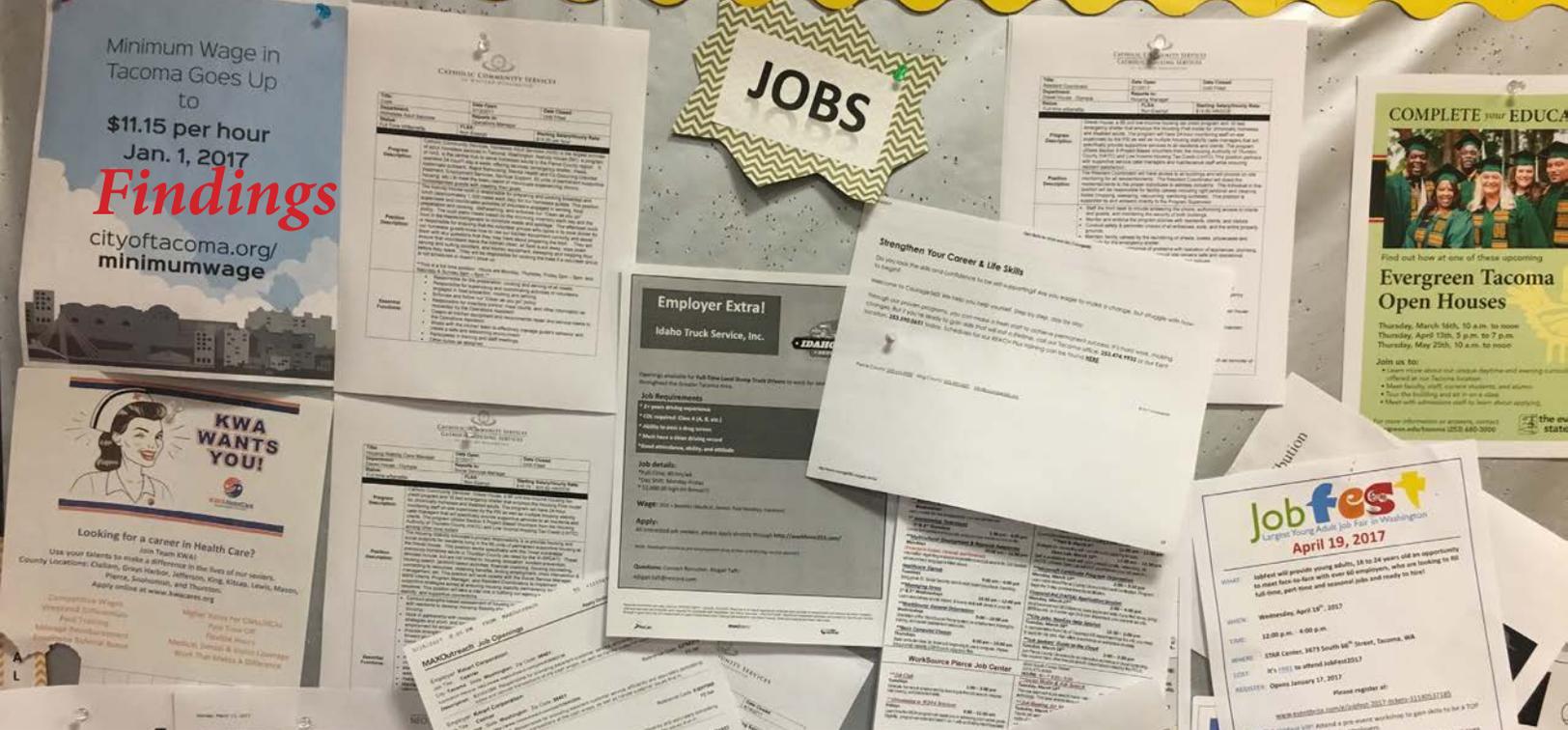
Given the significant amount of data generated from 415 participants, thematic analysis was a useful strategy to adopt because it does not merely count numerical data and identify key words or phrases; instead, it provides meaningful patterns

derived from careful reading and familiarization with the collected data. Thematic analysis generates initial codes that are shared and compared, identifying themes within the codes that are reviewed. The review defines and names themes and ultimately produces a report that reflects both the phenomenon and the research questions that informed the study.

Our position as researchers

The research team was made up of a team of US and UK researchers, two men and a woman. Both men were from the UK and were British–South Asian, and the female researcher was white American. As outsiders, we worked directly with community-based contacts to provide us access into the communities we interviewed and build relationships with local people. This process built trust between the team and participants, enabled focus groups to be organized, and provided credibility to the project. The literature on outsider-insider researchers provides evidence that both positions enhance the entry and data collection process (Kerstetter, 2012). For example, one member of the team had an insider status by virtue of being from the U.S. and outside status as not being from the areas where the study was based. Research has indicated that outsiders are seen as being more objective by participants. We were encouraged by our outsider identity and accepted by participants based on the length of the focus groups, the extent of the conversations, the comments made by participants that they enjoyed and/or had not talked about these issues before, and, finally, by the numbers of people who came together—often in people’s homes at short notice.

*Illegal says you're
breaking the
damn law, let's
do something
about that, what
are we going to
do?! We are going
to give them
some housing,
we are going to
give them some
welfare checks...
And who's paying
for it? Us! the
working class.*



Research Question 1: How do current definitions of white working class fit with the experiences and views of this group of people?

Different starting points on white working class: Not about white

Improving our understanding of who belongs to the white working class is one of the key questions posed by this study. Some of the richest people in the country such as Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, and Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook would be considered members of the white working class based on conventional definitions: self-identifying as white (non-Hispanic) and not having a four-year college degree. This definition of white working class is widely used in academic and policy discussions, but across all of our sites, the term white working class became a slippery concept.

It did not resonate with the lived experiences of those who participated in our focus group discussions, stretching from cities on the east and the west coast, and from the Rust Belt to the South and the Sun Belt. Not having a college degree is not in itself a marker of being part of the working class. This was considered a narrow and reductionist definition imposed by elites, whether

from government, media, or researchers, rather than provided by white, working-class people. Allied to this view, the importance of going to college, or having a college education be a signifier of success, was questioned. This appeared to confirm a surprising finding from PRRI (2017b) on the perception of education as an engine for social mobility:

A majority of white working-class Americans believe that college education is more of a risk than an investment in the future, a view that is at odds not only with white college-educated Americans, but with black and Hispanic Americans as well. And white working-class voters who lost confidence in the education system as a path to upward mobility were much more likely to support Trump in the 2016 election.

The data from the PRRI project points to the importance of work as a way to improve social mobility and secure the immediate interests of family. Our study also shows that having a job is critical to being in the working class, but we want to take this further in a more expansive definition that rests on working-class values. This will be discussed later in the section.

The default analysis, which concludes that the white working class is a bounded community united by ethnicity, identity, and position in the labor market is

erroneous. People themselves spoke about different types of working class.

“White” is unspoken

Our research found that “white” became silent in focus group discussions. It was rarely mentioned explicitly when participants started debating the definition of white working class. Communities of color were not referenced as working class but framed by ethnicity. Rather than seeing this as a deliberate decision on the part of participants to keep their whiteness hidden, a more accurate analysis was that *white* was always implicit in the conversations.

Whiteness and its positionality were revealed as participants discussed issues of city and neighborhood change. For example, focus groups in Birmingham had “common sense” debates about the way the city has changed; tropes ranged from high levels of crime and not feeling safe when driving into the city, poor governance by the Birmingham politicians, and lack of representation or voice. Of course, Birmingham is a majority black city with 74% of the population being African American. These negative perspectives on change could be seen as a proxy for race and pathologies in black communities. Working-class communities did not have to claim their whiteness in explicit terms because it emerged easily from coded language during interviews. In part, the view seemed to be that Birmingham was good when it was a white city but became bad when black people took control.

The refrain “I feel like a stranger in my own community” was repeated in each of the case study cities, lamenting the negative changes associated with increased levels of immigration and diversity as well as economic disruption. Looking back, the community and neighborhood which they had known had been largely white and working class, containing a social infrastructure of churches, social clubs, bars, and grocery stores that provided common points of reference. The reality was that this had been all but swept away by demographic changes. In Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, NY, some seniors complained about going into a grocery

store and hearing people speaking in Arabic rather than English, or Chinese people not saying “hello” on the sidewalk as they passed. Again, whiteness becomes sharpened without being mentioned in open discussion.

College educated and working class

The complexity of defining white working class can be illustrated in the following quote:

And I said like I feel like I am working class. I'm college educated, I have a master's degree, I taught. Because it's not a very high income. Like I'm almost thinking of it in terms of how, in the past like she said I look at, she considers working class to be a blue-collar type of thing. Which would be the laborers etcetera. And to me I said I feel like I am working class. I don't make a high salary. It's a middle income. And that to me is working class. I don't have lots of money. I can't buy the big house; I can't buy a yacht. You know, so I am a working-class person and I'm not a laborer. I'm not uneducated and I feel we kind of have the same view of it. And I think what everyone has said, it can have so many meanings. (Bay Ridge FG)

Here, the person “feels” working class and has been to college and graduate school. Yet the feeling about working class is associated much more strongly with levels of income “because it’s not a very high income,” albeit the parameters of income are not provided. The differentiation is between “a high salary” and “middle income” with *working class* denoting the latter rather than the former. This person is earning a good salary but not enough to be a member of the super-rich, with access to luxury status symbols such as a yacht or big house.

Like many of those interviewed in Bay Ridge, the working class does not form the poorest, or indeed the richest sections of society. The quote above also demonstrates the problem of linking working class with specific occupations. This participant recognizes that laborers and other “blue-collar type of thing” employment was how working-class people had historically been defined. In reality, the number of working-class jobs—laborers, construction

workers, factory workers—has contracted as the US economy moved toward an expansion of the service sector. Again, the conventional framework of defining working class—salary, education, occupation—is disrupted by economic and social change that has challenged the notion of who belongs to the working class.

People interviewed in our study viewed the definition of working class based on the possession of a college degree as not fitting their lived experience. The quote below from a focus group convened in Dayton—the heart of the Rust Belt—suggests that the term is rooted in the past or “antiquated.” As in the discussion previously, going to college does not necessarily result in joining the middle class. The inference being that low levels of income combined with economic insecurity stubbornly keeps individuals within the working class.

I think that the definition of working class is almost antiquated, in the sense that it is today because just like ... said they're college educated but they're still identified as working class and based on the figures, that they would still probably be considered working class. (Dayton FG)

Background as working class

Much more informative than being a college graduate was our participants' describing working class by referencing their experiences growing up. The following definition was made at a focus group in Birmingham. Working class is associated with background and types of job—Administrative Assistant, Police Officer, Hairstylist—that are very different from construction or laboring. Importantly, it is the ethos of work that provides a basis to grasp a grassroots definition of working class:

Working class to me is my background ... my mom was an Administrative Assistant, worked all my life, my father was a police officer. I'm a hairstylist, just, you know, right out of high school, you know, you get out, you work. There was some college education but

just, you know, you work, you go to work every day and you're working class. (Birmingham FG)

Working-class occupations

Our participants repeatedly challenged the notion of that the white working class is a singular and undifferentiated group. This Phoenix resident puts forward different types of working class related to occupational function such as retail (which is part of the service industry) and public sector professionals, such as social workers, who are, like police officers and fire fighters, providing a public service. Income is important to being working class, but education is not:

I think there are different levels of working class. I mean you have my dad, not educated, but head of department [retail] but is still working class. He is not making a significant income but enough to get by ... then there are professionals, like social workers, that are working class and making a difference in the community (Phoenix FG).

Economic insecurity

An important common denominator in arriving at an agreed definition for *white working class* was insecurity in terms of employment, financial savings, and housing tenure compared to other groups, who were viewed as having greater security and an income buffer at times of crisis. Consequently, it could be argued that the boundaries between working class and middle class had become muddied, as many participants we interviewed deemed themselves to be working class despite having middle class professions.

Since the 2008 Great Recession, real incomes have not grown and people are feeling the financial squeeze. The merger between a shrinking middle class and expanded working class may be illustrated by reviewing two of the focus groups that took place in Dayton with participants who viewed themselves as white working class but were very different in terms of background. Group 1 was mostly composed of college graduates, in their late 20s and 30s and working in teaching, computer programming, or the media. Most of these individuals could also be described as

solidly middle class, but instead spoke about their economic insecurity—being on a fixed contract or casual labor—and falling out of the middle class into the working class. Group 2 were non-college educated, mostly in their 20s and 30s, working as roofers, as laborers in warehouses, or as van drivers; they would fit into a category of working class but also spoke about the pervasive nature of economic insecurity preventing them from getting ahead. The symbolic language of working-class existence deployed by individuals in both focus groups, and indeed at the four other case study sites, was “living paycheck to paycheck,” “barely making it,” or “doing two or three jobs.” There is neither flexibility nor a safety net, and the lack of these was essential in framing a definition of working class.

“Pay check to pay check” became a mantra to both define working class status: the immediacy of pending economic crisis if a month of normal income was missed. The social mobility promised by the American Dream had been suspended and replaced by the lived experience of economic hardship, wherein people seemed to be little more than a month away from “serious straits.” The next three quotes, from Tacoma, Dayton, and Phoenix, show how people endure struggle because of the necessity to look after family and pay essential bills.

For me it was just pay check to pay check because if you have kids you take care of, make sure they have clothes on their back ...
(Tacoma FG)

I've always kind of considered working class as if you were to miss a paycheck you would be in serious straits, whereas middle class might be able to get away with a check or two.
(Dayton FG)

I am working hard enough to have the American dream, but I don't just have it. I am doing this whole living from pay check to pay check. (Phoenix FG)

Loss of time

The result of “doing two or three jobs” is manifested not only in the economic struggle but the adverse impact it has on family life. Work, and the workplace, for our participants is not liberating but restrictive in relation to the time it takes to travel to the job. People were poor in terms of money and time but often went to great lengths to secure and undertake employment, which was often seen as an economic imperative to contribute to the life of your family, even if that family time was lost:

In our group, we said that sometimes there's a loss of family time or time in general because you are always at work. (Phoenix FG).

I have to say as a working-class mom, like no matter what, given any situation you know what you have to do as a responsibility, the distance that you have to go, hours you have to work. You are going to do whatever it takes. What aspires you is the family. (Phoenix FG)

I am a janitor and ride a bus [multiple buses]. Two hours to get there and two hours back.
(Phoenix FG)

Official policy measures for describing white working class have been predicated on not having a college degree. However, our study showed that this measure was marginal to the experiences provided by people. Having a college degree was not seen as an automatic entry into the middle class. White working-class people in our study included those who were both college and high school graduates. Some key messages shared economic insecurity, job inflexibility, and the lived experience of struggle, but also the aspiration to provide for a family or achieve for oneself.

“Trailer trash”

The most dismissive depictions in popular discourse are the white people labeled and vilified as “trailer trash.” The term evokes poor whites who live in trailer parks and are on welfare; they display attitudes and behaviors that are out of step with societal norms such as alcohol abuse, uncontrolled children, violence, and lack of care for their personal appearance.

Participants in our study recognized the negative portrayal in the media but were skeptical of the reality of the “trailer trash” stereotype. Some criticized media reporters for attempting to find the most extreme individuals so they could conflate “trailer trash” with “working class”:

We have tornados you know ... they go around, they destroy everything, you watch the news they always find the guy who is out in front of his trailer, that gets tore up, he has like 5 or 6 dogs running around ... cars in the yard ... teeth missing, cussing, but hates the people that are [on] welfare, when you interview him he's not well spoken, that's trailer trash. (Birmingham FG)

People who participated in the study also took umbrage with the view that people who lived in trailers were not interested in changing their socioeconomic position and were cut off from the working class. Some participants recounted their own housing careers, which included spells of living in a trailer, or having family and friends who currently lived in trailer parks. The high cost of housing meant that trailers were, and continue to be, an affordable form of accommodation for low-income communities. Rather than being on welfare, people in trailer parks often worked or looked after their families in the same way as the rest of society. In this context, they were included as part of the working class:

Yes, I grew up in a trailer for many years when we were in the military ... I think people think about trailer trash sometimes, well those are folks that are bums, they're the ones that don't have jobs, they've got 10 kids running around and like that kind of thing. ... They're the working class, so can trailer trash still be working class, absolutely they can be. (Tacoma FG)

The importance of values

Identifying white working class based on an income threshold is problematic. While people agreed that economic insecurity and inflexibility (“pay check to pay check”) are themes that

separate the working from the middle class, there was disagreement on the value of placing an annual income ceiling of \$52,000 in describing a “working class” income. For example, in New York City, that level of salary would likely result in economic hardship, but in Birmingham would be considered a high wage, creating opportunities to be part of the middle class. Regional disparities in the cost of living make it very difficult to categorize working class on the basis of income.

The people we spoke to in focus groups claimed they belonged to the working class despite having a range of incomes, occupations that stretched from being unemployed to being a bus driver to being a physician, and with education stopping at high school to completing college and graduate school. Moreover, the range and boundaries between income and occupation appeared to be arbitrary. However, the common theme that cements these fragmented groups together was working-class values. Income and occupation may change, but values are fixed and cohesive.

In the study, the core values among white working-class residents emphasized the importance of hard work that earns a reward and enables one to look after one's family; the wider responsibility of reciprocity with people who live in your neighborhood and may need support if they have fallen on hard times; the critical issue of honesty and trust inside and outside the family; and not feeling entitled to a good or service without working for it. These values provided a code for white working-class communities to relate to each other, to consider who should be included in the working class. This code helped make sense of the world of politics and society.

Hard work and independence were seen as key to being working class:

I came from ... a very working-class background and it was instilled in me that you take care of yourself. You work hard. And I do think that is a working class. Like I take care of myself, I don't ask for assistance ... I'm going to get my job, I'm going to support myself, you know I'm not going to depend on anyone else so in that way, I consider that a value system, and I think a lot

of working class people have the same thing, value system. (Bay Ridge FG)

The notion of working hard seemed to be a torch that was being passed on through the generations. In this context, working-class people are not seeking assistance from anyone else to help with social mobility “I’m not going to depend on anyone else so in that way, I consider that a value system.” In the following quote, being working class is again associated with hard work and economic inflexibility. You have to work to earn an income and cannot afford the economic consequences of being sick.

I consider the working class hard workers. The ones that go every day, if you’re a little sick you don’t stay home. (Dayton FG)

Moving away from the labor market, participants emphasized the importance of trying your best at all times, supporting your family and wider community, and especially that you can be relied upon in times of difficulty. Trustworthiness and dependability were an integral part of the moral code for many people we interviewed and was self-reinforcing, as the three interventions below from Phoenix and Tacoma illustrate. A minority of those who took part in the study had experience of military service and the common bonds of honesty, reciprocity, and dependability were obvious overlaps with working-class values.

Humility, resilience, family and community, sacrificing for the next generation, hard-working, paying your way ... (Phoenix FG)

Working class values? Well, you put pride in your work or your profession. You try to do a good job, you try to have good attendance, good work ethics. You know you’re dependable. (Tacoma FG)

I think I got this from the military; you just go out and do the best job you can. You report to work early, you leave work late, and you are always there if somebody takes off work, to step in his place. You just establish yourself and build a reputation as being a guy with a

great work ethic. (Tacoma FG)

Our study posed the question of whether definitions of *white working class* were relevant and accurate. The data showed that the narrow framing of this group as white without a college degree did not always hold. It could be argued that this was viewed by participants as a top-down framing by elites. Further, “white” was largely silent throughout the study, with people preferring working class rather than *white working class* to describe themselves. This should not be seen as suggesting that race was redundant. On the contrary, “white” was implicit in the way that participants described communities of color. Largely white neighborhoods as “good” in contrast with minority areas being “bad,” thus correlating these places as coupled with crime and dysfunctionality. The focus was on the “working” of white working class with repeated references to the importance of hard work and how it generates income, independence, and the ability to support your immediate family and wider community.

Prioritizing work and the lived experience of insecurity opened up core values in working-class communities as the glue that held different people with different income and levels of education together in an expansive perception of what it means to be white and working class. People from across the income and occupation spectrum spoke about values of hard work, strong work ethic, the importance of family and community, self-reliance, and dependability as specific values they associated with being working class. By recognizing the way in which values are so important may enable policy makers and researchers to improve their understanding of working-class communities. It also provides a dynamic and fluid definition that is rooted in the reality.

White working class thus becomes a place of destination rather than a superficial definition. The common bond of values provides the calculus to admit or exclude people. Those who were not part of the working class included some communities of color, who were viewed as being dependent on welfare and being entitled, as well as being mired in crime and family dysfunctionality. Their race marked them as a problematic other. Also outside the

working class were white people who were happy to be on welfare. Yet it should also be added that in every focus group, personal examples of ethnic diversity within white working-class communities were provided; participants spoke warmly about being part of biracial families, or standing up for race equality in the workplace, or having personal friends from different minority groups. Being working class was more important than being white, but both could be seen as essential components of a revised definition.

Definition of White Working Class: Perspectives from Key Informants²

The study grappled with definitions of white working class. Key informants shared with residents some of the challenges of arriving at an agreed-on definition of white working class. Like residents, key informants expressed a view that economic insecurity could be included as important in defining working class, and this need not be limited to “blue collar” occupations. “Pay check to pay check” was the metaphor to describe the lived experience of being working class. Our discussions with key informants across case study cities confirmed the complexity of the meaning of white working class.

This key informant, a labor organizer, contrasted the gritty Tacoma with its neighbor, glitzy Seattle.

²As previously discussed, these key informants were individuals drawn from a variety of settings, including politicians and officials from city government, representatives from community organizations, faith organizations, labor unions, and business, as well as the media. Again, we used snowball sampling to identify people to interview. Key informants did not have to be white working class to participate, but many were. Rather the principle objective of key informants was to help frame the research within a local case study context, to help us learn about the challenges of white working-class populations from the perspective of key informants, and to provide possible neighborhoods and organizations that the fieldwork could be anchored in. These individuals were asked the same questions as residents, as we were keen to compare and contrast comments between key informants and our self-designated white working-class subjects. Responses highlighted differences on definitions of white working class, the disconnection with these communities, and varying levels of willingness to engage.

In doing so, this key informant saw value in working-class Tacoma because the people make things happen rather than simply talk about issues interminably. In short, the people of Tacoma work hard—echoing working-class values—and are interested in producing products and earning a wage.

I don't want to be Seattle. I really don't like Seattle... I always tell people that this is a place that if you want something done people will do it. These are the people that take all the dreams that are produced out of Seattle and actually make them a reality... It's very similar [to] Rust Belt cities ... working class people. Just trying to make a living out here. (Tacoma KI)

In the following quote, a key informant from Birmingham in the South emphasizes the similarities between white and black communities in a working-class city. Like Tacoma, with its industrial port and logging, in Birmingham the steel foundries created employment for people. The definition of working class is grounded on the type of work undertaken in these industries.

From the history of Birmingham, I guess you could say a working-class demographic was more of a labor-based position as opposed to a service-based position... if you drop white from your description, I think we're hand in glove with a lot of the issues like what Dayton, Ohio, what you're going to see there, or rural Oregon that when industry left Birmingham in the 50s and 60s the population that was left behind was the working-class population. (Birmingham KI)

The next key informant raises working-class inflexibility—rigid work hours, having to work to support themselves and their family—as one way to think about this group although “that’s a weird way to define working class,” perhaps recognizing that education, occupation, and income are more traditional methods.

I would say, you know, in that middle-income area, you know, not executive level. I really, it's hard, to, you know, at least there's still some flexibility ... they have no flexibility and that's a weird way to define working class. But these

people, it is literally eight to five and there is no out, there is no flexibility, they've got to be there, they've got to have this job. You know, there is very little, if they need to take off for work or anything they have a lot of trouble with that because they haven't reached that level in their career where they can say, "I'm going to be out a few days, I've got some things to do," and it's okay. (Birmingham KI)

In Phoenix, a key informant shows disdain and a level of disconnection from white working-class people: "I mean I think for a really long time I didn't associate or like want to associate with working class." The inference is that the white working class was associated with being a problematic, reactionary, and resistant section of society. Key informants either excluded or downplayed white working class from being part of the policy landscape.

Defining white working class is complex with economic insecurity "getting by financially kind of like paycheck to paycheck" but then not situated within "blue collar" occupations. This seems to consolidate the view of the white working class composed of fragmented groups who have common interests on economic inflexibility. The key informant concludes that even with a managerial title, one who lives "paycheck to paycheck" is part of the working class.

Yeah, I mean I think for a really long time I didn't associate or like want to associate with working class... I think like, to start, working class to me are folks that are kind of like getting by financially kind of like paycheck to paycheck, maybe not in the you know, like, lower levels of organizations in that way some of the more like blue collar work so to speak. And I guess where I have been thinking of myself in that is that like, I definitely work paycheck to paycheck. I am kind of like just about minimum wage in terms of what I make but I'm like a program manager at university. (Phoenix KI)

class values was marginal, and only highlighted by those with working-class or labor union backgrounds. Key informants were also more willing to maintain the "white" section of working class, unlike residents whose whiteness was easily overlooked but remained implicit in discussions. This will be explored in connection to the extent that key informants continue to bestow white privilege to this group.

*I feel like
a stranger
in my own
community.*

In contrast to residents, the discussion of working-



Research Question 2: To what extent do national representations of the white working class as a disconnected and racist segment in American society reflect reality?

Not all white working-class people voted for Trump

This project took place in the middle of the 2016 presidential election, which became a reference point for the study. The overarching national narrative was that white working-class communities underpinned the success of Donald Trump. The stunning success has been described as a victory for “forgotten white voters” (Donnan, 2016) and “a tonic for disaffected Americans” (Dorning, 2016). Reflecting on the path to the White House and the flipping of white working-class states such as Wisconsin, Ohio, and Pennsylvania adds credence to the claim.

However, our study shows the picture was much more complicated than the general analysis. Not all white working-class people voted for or supported Trump. We held focus groups with Trump supporters. Hillary supporters in all five sites. In fact, it is much more accurate to state that

participants found significant failings in both Trump and the Democrat candidate, Hillary Clinton. One of the most common refrains across all sites was the problem of voting for “the lesser of two evils.” White working-class people appeared to be genuinely conflicted and did not fit the description of a modern Pretorian guard for Trump as some have labeled them.

Very few people found the language deployed by Trump to describe communities of color, or women, to be acceptable. Individuals were genuinely conflicted, and we found many instances of families and friends, neighborhoods and communities being fragmented by the partisanship of the 2016 campaign.

I know very few people who are so straight one side or the other... I think it's unfair to say everybody that supports him is of a specific [group]. (Dayton FG)

The participant quoted below demonstrates no enthusiasm for Trump. On the contrary, the way that candidate Trump acted during the Republican primaries left much to be desired. Despite the personal flaws—“I can’t stand a bully”—there was some support for his platform as an outsider who was talking to them about economic struggle and

reviving the economy. This person was a Bernie Sanders–to–Donald Trump switcher, from populist left to populist right, and although this was not repeated frequently across sites, neither was it only an occasional occurrence. Both candidates were fighting against elites, economic and political, and wanted to disrupt the economy and political system. In this they were populist insurgents candidates for change, as opposed to the “politics as normal” that seemed to be presented by other candidates from both parties.

I can't stand a bully but I am pro-Trump because Bernie's out of the race now. (Dayton FG)

Trump as a public voice for private disenchantment

White working-class communities have been viewed as a naïve and unthinking mass of people who switched to Trump. Yet people in our study resented being presented as not understanding politics and policy. On the contrary, we found an electorate that tuned in to the campaign debates on television, read the print media, and discussed politics with their peers on social media and everyday interactions. People were well informed from a number of sources, which made the decision for many very difficult because of weaknesses in both candidates. The following quote summarizes the point being made:

I have actually read his entire platform, I am extremely familiar with what he's talking about, I just don't agree with it. (Dayton FG)

People who supported Trump, and those who did not, recognized that he was the public voice of private disenchantment. He captured an insurgent, anti-establishment rage against “politics as normal.” Among participants, Trump managed to connect to working-class values. Our cohort perceived him as “strong” and “hardworking.” Criticism of his exploiting workers and being anti-organized labor did not puncture support among participants. They pointed out that he had dedicated his life to building successful businesses such as hotels that supported the US economy as well as creating jobs

for working-class communities in construction and laboring.

The manner in which Trump put across his political ideas during the election, as much as the content, shocked the political establishment. By common consent, he was the most outlandish and outspoken candidate in modern times, speaking on issues ranging from banning Muslims from migrating to the US, erecting a wall on the southern border to keep out Mexicans, and accusing China of “raping” America in economic terms. The overwhelming majority of white working-class residents interviewed were also appalled by this commentary. Yet at the same time they valued that he was a “straight talker,” “direct,” and “honest” in contrast with his opponents during the Republican primaries and the presidential campaign. It should be noted that being direct and honest were important values that white working-class people wanted from each other, as well as politicians.

Those who supported Trump repeatedly mentioned his policies for protecting working-class jobs—specifically, his position on scrapping the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was linked to factory closures across the country. Some of our sample connected with key economic symbols of the campaign—for example, Trump donning a miner’s safety helmet and announcing to a June 2016 rally in West Virginia, located in a key area of coal production, that he was going to promote coal as a future energy source; or the Trump campaign website playing on the February 2016 meeting in which a high-level executive from Carrier Air Conditioner in Indianapolis tells angry employees of the decision to close the factory and move to Mexico. These examples played into the narrative of working-class communities as victims of NAFTA and globalization generally, and the prospect that President Trump would secure jobs. Of course, we know that it is going to be extremely difficult for mines to be kept open in West Virginia, and the Carrier plant has now closed down. However, the symbolism of Trump being in these working-class spaces, connecting with concerns and crafting policy interventions, was not lost on people in our study, despite the aforementioned concerns. He had become the mouthpiece of white working-class concerns—the public voice of private disenchantment.

The themes of anger, disenchantment, and need for change peppered focus group discussions in each of our cities. The Trump campaign enabled people to express concerns on economic and social issues they had previously felt muzzled from making:

We need a David to [slay] Goliath... I thank God has given us our David and we should put him in and let him take the giant down. (Bay Ridge FG)

This quote from a focus group in New York casts Trump, like David taking on the biblical giant Goliath, fighting the political establishment, whether this be his Democrat opponent, the Republican Party, or the vested interests in the media. His was an outsider, insurgent campaign that embodied the views of working-class communities who also believe that they have been passive recipients of government instructions that restricted social mobility and took no heed of their concerns. The Trump campaign, for this participant, created an opportunity to change the political paradigm.

The public voice of private disenchantment was a strong and recurring message from those who supported Trump. The quotes below provide a compelling insight into understanding his popularity:

He's not a stupid man, he's showing you the disgust that the American people [feel]. They don't like it?! Too bad because this is how we all feel. (Bay Ridge FG)

He says what other people were thinking but they're too afraid to publicly speak. (Dayton FG)

Here, the Trump campaign viscerally connected with the collective “disgust that the American people feel.” The sense that at long last someone had decided to talk about sensitive issues such as the impact of immigration on communities provided a basis for Trump to access a deep well of grievances and concerns:

He connected with what we're saying, we're talking about working class, he connected with working class people ...[we're] tired of... we send politicians there, the politician is 80 years old, he has got no connection to Joe out here in the middle of the country and here is this guy that comes in and he's talking to Joe. (Tacoma FG)

In this quote from a focus group in Tacoma, it is clear that Trump connected because of his agenda and his ability to speak in a direct way to ordinary Americans (“and here is this guy that comes in and he’s talking to Joe”). In contrast, mainstream politicians are painted as being out of touch with working-class people and not being able to understand or articulate their concerns.

More than being the public voice of private disenchantment, some people in our focus groups felt that the government and the media had suppressed their views. In the following quote, again from Tacoma, this is expressed in a very direct way:

They're scared about culture and security and then when I challenge them and said well you don't think you're teetering on the very edge of being racist they're horrified at the accusation. And what they say is ...look at all this political correctness... We feel muzzled. We feel there's a choke hold on [the] throat of white people and white working-class people. We can't even say what we feel. That's the reason I voted for this guy. Because he's actually saying this stuff that many people across America are thinking. (Tacoma FG)

The speaker complains about “political correctness,” which is seen not as preventing abusive language related to race or gender but is perceived as a government and media campaign that prevents people from speaking in a direct way.

In the next quote, from Birmingham, we see how white working-class people in our study view Trump as being “honest” (a strong working-class value) and a different type of political leader breaking up the establishment:

Regardless of whether I agree with him or not,

he's honest for the most part ... isn't afraid to say anything and that's the first time in my lifetime I have seen a politician say, "you know what, I don't care. I'm going to say it."
(Birmingham FG)

Trump understands the needs of the white working class

In the quote from the Birmingham focus group below, Trump is viewed as a veritable savior of the working class by bringing new investment that leads to factories being saved or being built. By doing this, and supporting white working-class jobs and communities, the country has an opportunity of being transformed:

If he can build that working class again, if

he can get me a new factory back here, and we have more blue collar that will turn this country around. ... I think that financially if he can pull us up, the reason why I'm voting for him ... is because I'm hoping ... he will pull us out financially.... if he can build that working class again, if he can get me a new factory back here, and we have more blue collar that will turn this country around. (Birmingham FG)

The disenchantment is not just related to the economy. The following quote shows how the Democrats are perceived as the party of identity politics. Some in our study had grown up in staunch Democrat families and had previously supported Democrat candidates. Yet the view is that politicians are more interested in looking after communities of color than white working-class communities. There



is almost a sense that Democrats and Republicans alike have avoided speaking to white working-class communities because they were regarded as an outlier in a modern, and increasingly ethnically diverse, America. The Trump campaign, and the candidate, connected with a range of economic and social issues. To those who supported him in our study, he was the “white” David who slew “the politically correct” Goliath:

There is ... the feeling that working class has been alienated and marginalized ... so a lot of working class people think that blacks in America are represented by the Democratic Party, and that their voice is being heard ... whereas [that] is not ... the case for the working class.... They're not talking about ... the guy that's ... working in Birmingham

Steel. (Birmingham FG)

Racialized views

Since the study commenced, there has been much debate and discussion about whether the support for Donald Trump was the racist last gasp of white working-class ascendancy in a country that is going to be minority white at some point in the 21st century (Chotiner, 2017; Glasser and Thrush, 2016; McElwee and McDaniel, 2017). In addressing the question of the racist nature of white working-class communities, it should be recognized that the study was situated through the tumult 2016 presidential election. Not only did people attend and participate in the research in much greater numbers than expected; they were also engaged and animated about the issues of belonging, change, identity, and immigration that that are central to the study.

At the outset, it should be stated that across all fieldwork sites, racialized language was used in discussions. Some of this was explicit, but language was also racially coded by referencing crime, welfare dependency, and competition for housing and jobs. As we noted in defining white working class, people did not speak about their whiteness and instead opted to position their lives in a positive way in opposition to communities of color.

Below a participant from Phoenix appears to suggest that legitimacy was provided to people who held views that were anti-immigrant and anti-communities of color. Previously these were much more difficult to express because they were viewed as problematic and unacceptable.

He gave a platform for a lot of people to come out and speak and they don't have to be nice. (Phoenix FG)

Those who votes for Trump did not see this as an expression of whiteness.

Playing by the rules

A different view is provided by a participant in Dayton. This individual strongly disagreed with the correlation with racism. The individual blames



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the media for “a lot of generalization” and stated unequivocally that his own experiences within friends and family is that they are not racist. Moving on to immigration, and strengthening the border with Mexico, the same person makes clear that he is not opposed to immigration but simply wants immigrants to follow the law. This sentiment—differentiating between documented (“legal”) and undocumented (“illegal”)—was expressed on many occasions throughout the study. Those who took this view commonly stated that the US had been a country of immigration and that this had been hugely beneficial. They wanted documented migration to continue and for people to be processed using legal channels so those who pose a security risk can be rejected. The significant challenge was with undocumented migration. The rationale is that migrants need to follow the rules and that allowing undocumented immigrants in poses a security risk because the government does not know who is entering the US.

I think there's a lot of generalization going on here about those people that support Trump. Because isn't it plausible and I know a number of people who do support him and I would not consider them the least bit racist. Their issues are with security, and most of them like the idea but aren't the least bit bothered by immigration. They just want it done legally. You know, not in the night, across the river. (Dayton FG)

Clinton's failure to connect with white working-class values

In the study, many of the white working class interviewed were strong Democrats and actively disliked Trump for a range of reasons. For the most part, these people showed little or no enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton; their view could be described as lukewarm. Clinton had some support, but many of those interviewed did not support her, with the feelings of some bordering on visceral dislike.

Overall, those who supported Clinton talked about why they disliked Trump, rather than why Clinton was a better candidate. Clinton supporters believed voting for Trump was a vote against the interests of the working class. Those who disliked

Clinton focused on her being untrustworthy and dishonest, weak, dependent on vested interests, and accumulating a fortune by not working hard. All of this marked her as being very much outside a core set of working-class values, which was put forward as being so important in shaping a sense of identity and belonging. Clinton was seen as a member of the political elite and as an “insider” offering “politics as normal” when the white working-class electorate seemed to be wanting change. Across our study cities, we heard consistent criticism of Clinton and the Democrats that they had not connected with the aspirations of white working-class people.

Some of those we interviewed felt that Clinton should not have been on the ballot at all. The use of a private internet server to send public emails appeared to a blatant breach of the law, which should have been punishable with a prison sentence. The alleged misuse of emails was more problematic because her non-conviction only served to underline that, if you were wealthy and connected, a jail sentence could be avoided, whereas for working-class communities the outcome would have been different.

Anybody else she would have been in jail, I am telling you right now, she's nothing but a disgrace to this country and if she wins it's going to be disaster and it's going to be the same thing all over again. Politics aside, I can't stand it! I don't like her ... she's very smug. (Bay Ridge FG)

According to one participant in Dayton, Clinton should not only be jailed but expelled from the country for multiple reasons, including being pro-choice. But what riled up the focus group participants was Hilary Clinton involvement in the deaths of US citizens, including the Ambassador, at the American compound in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012. The episode was raised a number of times during focus groups as “Benghazi” and consolidated the perception that Clinton—along with the email episode—could not be trusted and was fundamentally dishonest.

She doesn't deserve to be in this country, I think she is a treasonist. I think she is a baby killer and I think she shouldn't be here. I don't think she should be on the ballot paper. (Dayton FG)

The problems with Clinton are summarized by one participant in Birmingham. While Trump is also seen as problematic, at least he is viewed as having the virtue of being direct. However, Clinton was viewed as being fundamentally opposed to working-class values:

Hillary is ... a liar, a cheat, you can't trust her. At least we know ... what Trump's going to do. Also, honesty, like the working-class value. (Birmingham FG)

White working-class people in our study felt disconnected from her because she represented the political elite, “insiders,” and Washington DC. Her language and campaign appeared to forget about white working-class voters in preference for appealing to college graduates, minorities, and the urban middle class. The sense was that her life experiences and varied roles in politics—first lady, US senator, US secretary of state—confirmed her as part of the establishment and disconnected from real people rather than being qualified to run for president:

Then she gets up there and talks, she opens her mouth. ... ignorant and stupid. I mean some of the things she says is just ... she is so disconnected, she just doesn't know... Is that because they've been, the leadership ... in politics ... in Washington DC too long and haven't been back out to the communities to where the working class is at and connected to them? They haven't. (Tacoma FG)

She's a career politician who has [bloated] her coffers on the generosity of others, the working-class people. (Birmingham FG)

During the 2016 election campaign, Clinton stated that some of Trump's supporters were “deplorables” because of their xenophobic, sexist, and homophobic views (Jacobs, 2016). The sense that white working-class voters were racist jarred many in our study; they eagerly pointed out the ethnic diversity of family and friends, and how they supported work colleagues who were being subjected to racial and sexual harassment. Many had voted for the first black

president in 2008. “Deplorable” became a form of cultural resistance against a sneering and out-of-touch elite. Indeed, people who attended Trump rallies during the campaign wore t-shirts emblazoned with “I am a Deplorable.” An out-of-touch Clinton made matters worse with her pronouncements about moving to cleaner fuels instead of coal to miners—the very same workers who were being championed by Trump. This seemed to underline she could not understand the lived experiences of working-class people.

She made a mistake when she was down in Pennsylvania, or in, no West Virginia, where she says, “oh we've got to do away with the coal miners.” That went over like a brick. (Bay Ridge FG)

This election is on a lot of people's minds because you know my one friend the other day she was almost in tears, Hilary got nominated, I'm going to have to sell all my property because she's going to raise all my taxes. (Dayton FG)

Well, as I said, and I'm a registered Republican, I've been one my whole life. And if he was running against someone other than Hillary, some other woman.... I am all for a woman president. I have no problem with that at all. But Hillary is a different situation. The Clintons are a different situation due to their track record. I distrust her more. (Bay Ridge FG)

The final two quotes from Dayton and Bay Ridge demonstrate how some participants in the study conjoin the prospect of higher taxes under Clinton together with an acute distrust of “the Clintons.” The combination of visceral dislike, distrust, and disconnection prevented Clinton from being embraced or liked even by people who voted for her.

Neighborhood changes

The starting point to explain neighborhood changes was from a time when cities and neighborhoods were largely white working class and crime was low, and there was an expansive pipeline from school to work that enabled white working-class people to comfortably support their families. Presented in this

way, any change would be viewed as problematic and the contrast with the current situation was stark and jarring.

Demographic change as a result of immigration was linked by some to social and economic decline. The American Dream had been broken, with participants lamenting disruption and loss of working-class spaces as well as voice. People felt less secure about their economic situation and were concerned about changes impacting local and national security, as well as what it means to identify as an American. This “perfect storm,” joined with the loss of political voice, was the basis for disconnection and rage against the establishment.

In this context, racialized language was used by participants to describe their predicament.

Here is an extreme quote from the focus group in New York City, the most global and diverse of the five case study areas. However, it helps to explain the cultural anxiety that others spoke about albeit in more extreme terms.

Like the women too, walking about in those burkas ... I'd like to smack them right in the mouth, that's what I'd like to do! And every time I pass them, I open my mouth. I want to know if it's Halloween.... How do I know if it's a man or a woman? How do I know that they haven't got a bomb strapped around them? ... because they're a bunch of people that hate our guts and that's it period. (Bay Ridge FG)

Bay Ridge is a community where the legacy of September 11 casts a long shadow. A neighborhood known across the city as a place where police and fire fighters make their home, it suffered monumental loss after the towers came down. People who participated in focus groups here, some of whom broke down when recounting the events back in 2001, spoke about funeral services that seemed to go on for weeks and months. So the cultural insecurity discussed in this quote needs to be contextualized within this unique historical backdrop, although we would emphasize there is no excuse for racism or Islamophobia.

People continue to be angry with increased Muslim migration and link this with security problems and terror. The way that people dress is problematic because it is so different to the participants' norms. The possibilities of Muslims being an “enemy within” comes with the view that fellow residents could be on a potential suicide mission. The quote finishes with a fatalistic view of Muslims “because they're a bunch of people that hate our guts and that's it, period.” It closes the door on any prospect of coming together.

More often than not, white working-class people positioned themselves between suspicion of and curiosity about people who were different that came to live in their neighborhood. The following quote from Dayton is with reference to the increasing numbers of Ahiska Turk migrants (refugees from Russia) who have made the city their home. Given the focus on Islamic State in recent years, one of our participants wanted to check whether the new arrivals were friend or foe—“do you support ISIS?” Relieved to be told that Ahiska Turks and Muslims in general do not support Islamic State, and that many Muslims have been killed by ISIS, white working-class people were able to engage with their new neighbors. To us this may sound crass; but white working-class people were direct with people when they witnessed demographic and cultural change in their neighborhood.

You know our background and what we do and how we did it, and they're standing off and we don't know them and we're Americans, come on we're suspicious of everyone.... You asked what we did, what we did, my mother actually came out and asked them, do you support ISIS? (Dayton FG)

Cultural insecurity becomes problematic when immigrants and communities of color are perceived to be supported by government. In the following quote, from the focus group in Birmingham, undocumented immigration and the sanctuary cities movement, which welcomes and supports immigration integration, are lumped together as a form of racial resentment: undocumented migrants break the law and are protected by the police in contrast to the participant's situation as someone who follows the rules. Losing your livelihood within a system that is

unfair fuels anger.

Well there are cases in America where illegals, the police are told they can't ticket them, they can't arrest them. They'll get caught drunk driving three or four times, they'll kill somebody, and then they'll finally get to court. The sanctuary cities, they have that. You can't arrest them; you can't touch them. So, they're above the law while breaking the law, and if I run a stop sign, you know, I could lose my livelihood as a bus driver. (Birmingham FG)

Cultural change as a result of immigration displaces a sense of white working-class identity but also has an impact on local economic markets. This is especially the case where housing is in short supply and demographic transformation may lead to displacement. In Bay Ridge, the agents of change are Chinese communities, and the “victims” are established white working-class residents.

I've had people come up to me ... I own my house. And they come up to me and ring the bell. You sell house? Yeah, they want to buy. But the thing is they go in and they destroy it ... They want to buy us out.... Three friends of mine sold their homes ... to Chinese ... they went in and took everything out ... walls, the sink, everything. Cleared the whole house ... and they just put like bunk beds all over. (Bay Ridge FG)

Here Chinese developers and families are viewed as physically changing the neighborhood and having no respect for the historic character of homes in the area, mostly built in the early part of the 20th century. Others told us about houses being ripped down, gutted, and filled with gaudy fittings and adornments. White working-class people know from the appearance of the houses that Chinese migrants have moved in, and this makes the feeling of cultural insecurity even worse.

Bay Ridge focus group participants told of filing complaints about zoning code violations made by Chinese developers. They expressed frustration with the local government for not enforcing the laws. Residents claimed that Chinese immigrants

are making money but not playing by the rules. Similar claims were made about “illegal” immigrants in sanctuary cities who are not ticketed by the police according to one of our Birmingham participants.

In the above quote, Chinese immigration is a lens that brings together cultural and economic insecurity. The new communities appear to be different; do not follow protocols of established behaviors, norms, or codes; are not white and/or Christian; and seem unwilling to speak English. They become the problematic “other” and do not appear to be taking any positive steps to integrate socially in the neighborhood. The Chinese are also an economic threat because of the way the housing market has been disrupted. The “common sense” view is that Chinese have cash and can buy out older Bay Ridge people, then systematically seek to destroy the appearance of property. They are not viewed as agents of gentrification bringing investment but as people who create disruption and unwelcome social change. The explicit lens is race.

Sometimes that cultural insecurity is noted in the passive voice. In the following quote from Phoenix, the neighborhood was deemed to be “good” when it was largely white and working class before it went “bad” when Mexicans started to arrive in the 1990s.

This used to be a blue-collar area when it was a good place to live. (Phoenix informal conversation)

We discussed the economic insecurity of white working-class communities as the basis of defining identity and telling stories of their lived experience. In our study, white working-class participants also spoke about demographic changes resulting in cultural insecurity.

Immigration has meant new communities moving into previously white working-class neighborhoods. This has led to cultural insecurity, especially in the context of international politics underscored by 9/11, the “War on Terror,” and the “War on Drugs.” In the circumstances, immigrants and communities of color are sometimes labeled as a “problematic other.” However, it should be noted that most of the people in our study, though concerned about change, were also keen to engage with new communities.

Workplace representation and access to education

In our study, participants railed against other people who were “gaming” the system. At various points, and across all cities, different groups were seen as being problematic, including people who were unfairly claiming welfare, undocumented migrants illegally entering the country, and communities of color using affirmative action to secure an advantage in the jobs market or citing racism as an excuse for trouble with law enforcement.

In contrast, white working-class participants emphasized the importance of fairness. They worked hard—two or three jobs in some cases—and recognized that you had to play by the rules. This approach to work, family, and community was predicated on the belief that it would enable white working-class people to reap rewards to live the American Dream of social mobility. Yet in this study, we encountered white working-class people who were economically insecure and fearful about their future. Participants were living “pay check to pay check.”

Fueling resentment among people in our study was the belief that the concept of fairness—a cornerstone value—was not being applied equally across society. Some groups—racial minorities, refugees, and immigrants—were being supported by government while the white working class was being left behind. In short, people viewed themselves as victims of “reverse racism” practiced by government and agencies that kept white working-class communities in the slow lane while racial minorities sped past them toward greater societal rewards and social mobility. This was perceived as being unfair and unequal. Working hard and playing by the rules was not paying off.

The absence of labor unions to protect workers is lamented because it leaves working-class communities exposed. Traditional pathways toward social mobility such as college education are no longer possible for working-class people because of rising tuition fees. The conclusion is fatalistic and gives a sense of helplessness:

... people who are in that class feel as though whatever's going on is not in their favor.... You know, (on) immigration people finally doing the math, it's like them being in the workforce drives the price down. We don't have unions sort of serving as a stopgap measure anywhere; they're no longer playing a role. There's no longer other institutions, which are keeping that there. Education has become out of reach. Other things that were on the ladder are broken. (Bay Ridge FG)

Perceptions of unfairness

Participants were critical of policies on allowing undocumented migrants to enter the country. They were not against immigration per se but wanted people to follow the rules. The individual from Tacoma quoted below is unequivocal and cannot understand the campaign for amnesty and other measures to support undocumented people. Resentment increases from white working-class people because, rather than addressing the problem of illegality, government appears to reward migrants by providing support services to ease integration.

Illegal says you're breaking the damn law, let's do something about that, what are we going to do?! We are going to give them some housing, we are going to give them some welfare checks.... And who's paying for it? Us! the working class. (Tacoma FG)

Fairness means paying into the social security system over a period of time to get support when support is needed. Some viewed immigrants and refugees (the terms were used interchangeably during the study) as being fast-tracked into receiving welfare when they have only just arrived in the country. This is in contrast to an older, nearly blind white working-class man, who after making contributions to social security over a period of time, is denied support by government. This does not seem fair or just and contributes to the feeling that the system is working against white working-class communities:

...who have never paid a dime into social security.... If you're a refugee and you come in

this country they almost will guarantee you if you are disabled and in three months you have your disability social security.... Makes their blood boil. I have got a neighbor that lives next door to me that has applied for, he's almost blind, he's applied for his disability social security, he's worked all of his life and they keep denying him his disability social security.... Yet this man paid into it and he's denied, he's angry. (Dayton FG)

Resentment was not confined to racial minorities and newly arrived immigrants. People who took part in our study were critical of the way rich elites ended up paying less in taxes than working-class workers. There was resentment that the wealthy could hire accountants and find tax loopholes to keep their wealth while the rest of society had to pay their full share while struggling to support themselves and their families. These two quotes from focus groups in Tacoma and Dayton summarize the anti-rich sentiment:

Rich have tax loopholes. Those making \$100,000 to \$30,000 doing all of the work and they don't have any tax loopholes. Below \$30,000 getting paid from government. They get money back from the government. (Tacoma FG)

It makes me feel shitty because we were taxpayers, why does everything have to go to the rich people and we are living in poverty pretty much, we can't pay our bills, we can't buy our home. (Dayton FG)

People in our study were not getting ahead despite working hard and playing by the rules. In the following quote from Dayton an individual is referenced who has worked for a decade in a low-paid, low-skill job without an increase in salary. The inference is that the rich continue to accumulate wealth without working hard:

I have a friend who has worked at Kroger's for 10 years, and he's mad and thinks he wants to quit because he hasn't got any type of raise at all. (Dayton FG)

The experience of veterans was used in the quote below to demonstrate the challenges for working-class communities. Serving your country and coming back with post-traumatic stress disorder does not guarantee support from the state in meeting health needs.

Fought and almost died and lost things not just limbs but their mind and they're still having to fight to get medical care and have to pay for their prescriptions. (Dayton FG)

It is impossible to deny that many of the white working-class people we interviewed for this study demonstrated frustration, anger, and resentment toward those in power. Perspectives on belonging, change, identity, and immigration are laced with levels of discontent that came to the surface during the course of the study.

Participants felt that their voice had been diminished by societal and economic change in their cities and neighborhoods. White working-class communities once had a pipeline from school to work that enabled people to have a level of economic security. Rights were protected by powerful labor unions that ensured that incomes would rise with inflation. The American Dream of social mobility was being realized. However, this was not now the case. A combination of de-industrialization and globalization had led to a changed economic landscape in each of our sites. Manufacturing had contracted, factories had closed, and working-class jobs had been lost. Rather than economic security, many people were struggling to support themselves and their families. It was not uncommon to find individuals working two or three jobs and "living pay check to pay check," vulnerable to losing their homes if economic circumstances changed.

Disconnection was made worse by the view that the participants did not feel represented. Traditional working-class organizations such as labor unions were still present in many communities but were seen as having less influence than was once the case. People felt they had been left behind and discounted by government and political organizations.

White working class as racist and disconnected: Perspectives from key informants

Key informant interviews were important in helping to frame the study. Given the topicality of the white working class, many key informants were keen to contribute to the themes of disconnection, marginalization, and racism.

In speaking with individuals working in city government, not-for-profit organizations, and federal interventions at the local level, it became apparent that there were relatively few outreach efforts to specifically engage with white working-class communities. Partly this was linked to the way that issues of inequality were framed around meeting the needs of communities of color and racism. As a result, it could be argued that white working-class communities viewed interventions from city government as helping other groups ahead of themselves. Indeed, this was expressed by the organizations themselves, who stated that spending was to be used, for example, on integrating immigrants and refugees before other communities. Seen in this context, the disconnection and antipathy from white working-class communities toward institutions may be justified.

Much more discussion about white privilege was generated in the key informant interviews than with white working-class residents in the focus groups. In sharp contrast to white working-class residents, who viewed communities of color benefiting from “reverse racism” practiced by various agencies, key informants were critical of the failure of white working-class residents to accept their privileged position. In the hierarchy of needs, many felt that communities of color, immigrants, and refugees had greater call on resources from public agencies. Key informants were concerned that pervasive and accumulated impacts of racism could not be erased or diminished if privilege was not discussed with white communities.

The following quote from a not for profit leader in Tacoma illustrates the concerns about outreach work to white communities, which could be construed by communities of color as white people

reinforcing their advantages:

We're not here to help preserve white privilege. We're trying to educate people about the oxygen of white privilege that they're breathing. I think there's been a certain narrative nationally that has fueled that victimization, and I think it is ill informed and I think it is a very narrow perspective. (Tacoma KI)

The message we heard from key informants was that white people, including white working-class people, need to stop feeling they are the “victims” when they have had generational opportunities to accumulate privilege. At times the tone from white liberals bordered on blaming the white working class without considering their own role in racism as if voting for Hillary absolved them.

In the study, many residents railed against the problem of “political correctness” and how this had favored communities of color in employment, housing, and other supportive services. Such a narrative was problematic for key informants for several reasons. First, policies such as affirmative action were required to dismantle racial inequality and white privilege so that communities of color could fully participate in the US. Second, “political correctness” is a convenient jibe for white people to justify losing out on opportunities. As the quote below from Phoenix points out, communities of color have routinely lost on jobs because of racism:

So you didn't get the job? Well, political correctness was actually something invested for poor white people ... And then we see white supremacy operate. So, because you're white you just deserve that job? God forbid you didn't get the job because you're not qualified! And that's what Trump frequently has that particular conversation, so white people start believing that they didn't get the job for that reason, especially if a person of color got the job. And yet, if we take a look at affirmative action, affirmative action goes to white women in this country. It has not benefited anyone else. It is part of white hegemony. (Phoenix KI)

The following quote summarizes the perception

and problem; when there are limited resources to support families and communities, white working-class communities want to maintain their power and status, but fear losing out:

... white folks feel, like, a pressure of giving up some of the power and some of like the agency and possibility that they have because other people are getting those possibilities. And instead of looking at it as, like, we can all benefit from it, it's looking at it as there's a finite amount of opportunity and by letting more people have that opportunity it's like affecting us and we're not going to have as much of that opportunity. (Phoenix KI)

Many key informants wanted to support white working-class communities. Yet the practicalities of working in poor cities and neighborhoods with multiple and competing needs meant that this was not possible. The contours of racism and inequality run deep. Our key stakeholders tended to view the white working class as having white privilege as well as being racist. It will be challenging for city government and not-for-profits to get beyond this framework, and it may consolidate the view of white working-class residents that they are being left behind.

The theme of disconnection and disenchantment runs through debates in politics and society. Key informants agreed that the white working class may be justified in feeling they have been forgotten, or are voiceless, locally and nationally. As the next two quotes reveal, some of our key informants feel frustration with the Democrats, who should be the obvious political haven for the white working class. Yet the party has moved to a position that has fixated on college graduates, social rights, and minority rights:

Yeah, the Democratic party used to be the voice of the working class. They used to worry about people that actually worked with the hands, and their pensions, and their healthcare, and everything else. That seems to have gone away here. They're much more worried about your college education, they're much more worried about protecting folks'

other rights ... Minority ... that kind of thing. And they sort of left the working class off the table. (Tacoma KI)

The working class has been abandoned or exiled by the Democrats. In 2016, as the following key informant clearly states, Hillary Clinton was not a good candidate for working-class people to rally around. As part of the political establishment and elite, she did not offer change and hope for people who were struggling. Instead, some white working-class communities switched to Trump, who had a deeper connection with these groups:

... they finally got fed up of the abandonment of the Democrats to blue collar, working class people ... so I'm going to vote for somebody that's making it sound like it might be better, you know. I mean, Clinton had a terrible campaign as far as I was concerned. (Tacoma KI)

An alternative view is given by a senior stakeholder in Dayton. In the following stark quote, white working-class people, and especially seniors, are presented as being part of the problem rather than the solution in promoting racial justice. White liberals often spoke about racism as being a white working class problem. This person clearly has no sympathy for complaints about white working-class people losing out:

...if you're like a 65-year-old white guy in East Dayton and you have story upon story that's layered on your perception of lost privilege ... I don't know if I really want to spend the effort, because it takes effort to do this work ... I don't see like how you can make significant changes ... these are going to take decades so why would I put that time into 65 to 85 when I've really got to move [on]? (Dayton KI)

The following key informant is committed to progressive change and coalition building. The quote speaks about the challenges of talking about race when it is laced with issues of loss, economic, or cultural bias. Here the person is disclosing the discussions encountered in the lived experience of some white working-class people:

And I start talking about like ... I have to

listen, like sort of non-judgmentally and I have to say, like, you know, when you are talking about the fact that Arab and Muslim businesses have sort of taken over Fifth Avenue ... It makes me uncomfortable but I have to kind of acknowledge that you're right in some ways ... I have to acknowledge that ... my boyfriend's favorite bar ... I heard a story about ... the bar owner who ... it was like this awesome bar, everybody was really happy; it ended up going out of business, you know, he was hearing this story from a softball person ... who told me he had said "what's going on, like why aren't there more people here, this bar's amazing" and he's, like, my neighbors don't drink, like, what do I, what, you know, what can I do about it?!" (Bay Ridge KI)

The sense of helplessness of white working-class communities was seldom articulated by key informants in such a clear manner. Typically, key informants were ambivalent on white working-class communities, or spoke in negative terms about their privilege and on occasion equated white working-class people and neighborhoods with racism and racist violence:

The most hideous crimes against black people by communities of white people, have happened in Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, and Howard Ridge. (Bay Ridge KI)

Racism, without a doubt. There's a large section of this nation that has not accepted our current president [Obama]. (Bay Ridge KI)

In conclusion, our discussions with key informants demonstrated the gap between meeting the needs of white working-class communities and interventions by institutions. A pervasive narrative regards such groups as being problematic in forging policies on racial equality, and sees them as a bulwark against change. Such a view is clearly going to be problematic in building coalitions of interest between the white working class and communities of color. However, as the next section shows, opportunities do exist to make this a reality.

I am working hard enough to have the American dream, but I don't just have it. I am doing this whole living from pay check to pay check.

Research Question 3: What are the possibilities of building cross-racial coalitions between white working-class Americans and communities of color, as the country transitions from majority white to minority white?

White working-class communities are racially diverse

White working-class people do not all live in racially homogeneous families and communities. Rather, they interact at the personal level with racial and ethnic diversity in their own families, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods.

Focus group discussions often touched on racial diversity within the personal lives of white, working-class people. On many occasions, participants complicated the idea of white working class by talking about their family composition; they saw themselves as part of mixed-race families. The mixed composition of white working-class families was used both to absolve them from the charge of being racist, and also to show that they did not fit the stereotype portrayed in the media.

I have two grandchildren that are half American, half Asiatic. I have a daughter-in-law that's Asiatic. Wonderful family. Wonderful daughter-in-law. And I love those kids as much as I loved ... the other ones that are Italian/Irish. (Bay Ridge FG)

But having mixed families was also more than just a way to skirt difficult conversations about racism. It also forced many white working-class families to grapple with racism in more intimate and painful ways. Participants talked of the tension between holding on to racist stereotypes or having racist family members when those stereotypes do not resonate with the people for whom they have a strong personal affection:

As far as White and Black, we have a big White population, a big Hispanic population, a big mixed. A lot of our kids are mixed, which is nice in a way because when people

talk about the working class being racists, it's like a lot of them have at least, have mixed children and then it kind of makes the grandparents follow. (Dayton FG)

My father is completely and totally racist.... I've got a sister who is with a Black man right now, and has a mixed child. He would not let her step foot in that house for the whole first year of her life, because of who her father was. Does he love her? Yes. ... I get those dirty looks when I'm at Wal-Mart with my niece, does that make me love her less when people automatically assume that she's my child because she looks a lot like me? No, I own that. Yeah, she's mine, for the time being. Do I tell them, "This is just my niece? I'm sorry, she's half Black, whatever"? No. (Birmingham FG)

Awareness of race and racism

Other focus group participants described how this exposure made them more aware of racism and sympathetic to those who experience racism. In a Bay Ridge focus group, a participant explained that having a Japanese wife enlightened him about how people are treated differently based on their race. Others talked about the emotional turmoil and stress caused by the racist overtones and anti-immigrant rhetoric during the 2016 presidential election:

I have children that are Hispanic and then there's my husband's family who are immigrants from Africa and who are also Muslim. So, there's a lot of feelings going around in my house right now. My children are worried about their grandparents being deported. My husband's worrying about his family who are actually visiting home right now, whether they're going to be able to get back into the country because they're a Muslim, and they're immigrants. So, I feel right now it's, it's a lot of uncertainty. The best thing that we can do is just come together. (Phoenix FG)

Diverse friendship networks

Similar to conversations about family composition, our focus group participants also pointed to

friendship networks as evidence of living with diversity and being comfortable with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

I live with a Muslim and a lesbian, and I'm a straight white male. (Birmingham FG)

My dad was a steelworker and his best friend was a Black man. (Birmingham FG)

I think I have one friend, two friends, out of my whole entire, everyone that I talk to that I am close to that are white. Everybody else has some kind of different ethnicity, race, some kind of different background to myself. (Phoenix FG)

Across many of the focus groups, our participants mentioned that having diverse friendship networks and comfort with that diversity are more commonplace with the younger generations.

... my grandchildren they have Black friends, they have Asian friends. (Tacoma FG)

Each other's kids, it doesn't, their version of race won't be the same, they don't see it, they don't think about it. (Birmingham FG)

Many of the participants placed a lot of hope on future generations to reduce the conflict on race relations and the challenge of immigration. They argued that diversity is normal for young people, whereas for them it was not the norm growing up.

In many of the conversations, our participants used color-blind language, speaking in a way that treats everyone the same, in effect erasing race, culture, and ethnicity as a way to eliminate racism. It is a type of thinking that asserts that race doesn't matter or that one does not see race. For example, it was not uncommon to hear comments about forgetting someone's race.

I have a 40-year Hispanic friend who has been one of my best friends for that long. And quite frankly, at this point you would have to point out that he's Hispanic to me because he's X. (Tacoma FG)

One participant from Bay Ridge talked about neighborhood friends who were Irish, German, Hispanic, and Black. They shared meals in one another's homes. These experiences offer the opportunity to understand different Christmas traditions among friends from different Christian religions and cultures. He went on to say that he saw the ways in which people of different backgrounds could "assimilate" and understand each other. Again, here "assimilate" is code for acting white, or fitting into the dominant cultural norm. And this perception of assimilation could just be a matter of "shifting" identity so as not to disturb the white sense of place that dominates the neighborhood.

Similar to having mixed families, having mixed friend networks was evidence of not being a racist. We asked, "What do you think of the view that's been put forward that white working-class people are racist?" One focus group participant from Birmingham said, "I think it's a lie."

My father was a White male police officer who had two ... best female friends who were Black female police officers. ... I mean they were at our house a lot growing up, it was not odd for us in any way, shape or form. (Birmingham FG)

Some also recognized the problem of pointing to one's only black friend as evidence of not being racist.

Do I have black friends, is that really the measure? Yes, of course, I have individual black friends; however, I know how seldom I am the only white person in the room. (Tacoma FG)

Neighborhood diversity as commonplace

Based on participants' comments, racial and ethnic diversity is part of neighborhood life for many white working-class people. Participants described living in close proximity to immigrants and/or people of color as well as interacting with diverse people as neighbors, at the playground, and through informal conversations.

I grew up in a diverse neighborhood, right. I still have the childhood friend, Frankie; he calls me

brother, okay, when he was the only Chinese man in the neighborhood. ... I still have Puerto Rican friends, alright. (Bay Ridge FG)

There's three Black families on my street, and our school is probably 50% Black. (Birmingham FG)

This is a very culturally diverse neighborhood. I won't mention names; we have somebody born in Brazil, we've got a couple of Puerto Ricans, we've got one from El Salvador, we've got the African American family and their extended family moved in. And then we've got a couple of Whites. (Phoenix FG)

But I love Tacoma for its diversity ... its culture and food. I love food, the food is great. (Tacoma FG)

In Bay Ridge focus group participants talked about hosting a Christmas Eve dinner for the neighbors of different backgrounds. They come together, interact, and share food with each other.

The focus group participants generally characterize the diversity in their neighborhoods as a good thing. We frequently heard statements such as "We are a melting pot." One participant from Bay Ridge explained that there were many Muslim people living near him, and that they "all get along." Another participant stated that she reached out to a Muslim woman with young children to tell them about local resources. But those who embraced the changes also had friends and family who were less than pleased.

The neighborhood has changed quite a bit since I was a youth. You know, it was very much a, it's always been a working-class neighborhood. Italians, Irish, Scandinavians, Greeks, for the last thirty years or so we've had some, some Muslims, some Asians, you know. East Asians come in, and it's been interesting to see the changing of the neighborhood. I embrace it, I know that, you know, America is a nation of immigrants. Some people are not in agreement with me, even some of my friends. You know, I know people personally

who are going to be voting for Trump this year, much to my dismay ... But yes, no I think, I think it's great for the neighborhood. I think it helps to open up people's minds, even unwillingly, in some cases. (Bay Ridge FG)

Rejecting neighborhood diversity

Some believed that those who don't like the diversity just keep to themselves. Others felt that people moved away from the neighborhood if they didn't like the demographic changes occurring.

I think the open-minded people are the ones that stayed. You just work together. (Phoenix FG)

We saw similar judgements toward those who did not like neighborhood diversity. In Dayton, a focus group participant criticized those white working-class neighbors with "unwelcoming attitudes" just because a new neighbor was from a different country, or because they let their kids play in the yard.

Embracing diversity as ongoing change

For others, acceptance of diversity is rooted in a neighborhood's immigrant history, as part of the neighborhood's identity.

We've seen a lot of changes, a lot of changing faces ... Some for the good, some for the bad ... And this neighborhood was founded on diversity ... The fabric of this community in itself was founded between our German families ... and then there was the Appalachian kids ... I think the community, why it is more acceptable, is because we came from all those immigrants. (Dayton FG)

The appreciation of racial and ethnic diversity, particularly immigrants, was also directly related to the physical transformation and economic impacts of immigrants moving in. Focus group participants mentioned the revitalization of neighborhoods, commercial corridors, and even churches as something positive about the changes they saw taking place.

We started to lose our congregation. But then

what happened was all of a sudden, we started getting Russian people moving here, Polish people, Spanish people, Mexican, people from Ecuador and now the parish has a Spanish mass on Saturday and Sunday because it's starting, our faith is starting to grow again. (Bay Ridge FG)

I think that they are the most fantastic residents that we have had because they take such great pride in everything that they own. I've seen them transform house after house in the community that have been vacant, abandoned in this neighborhood. (Dayton FG)

You can tell when Hispanics live next to you ... it has a nice pink house and across the road is green. Back in the days when I came here we had police officers, doctors, and nurses. Where are they now? You don't see them ... you see the nice landscaping, the nice pink house, so you see a diversion. (Phoenix, FG)

Diverse relationships are not hard-wired

Most white working-class people interviewed in the focus groups valued the importance of difference—among family, friends, work colleagues, neighbors. They expressed interest in the everyday lived experience of diversity and making it work. We can count on one hand the number of people who were openly hostile about diversity, race, and immigration. Most white working-class people we met responded in the positive, but they also used color-blind language that people of color would find offensive. Additionally, we found that most of this excitement and support for diversity was mostly superficial once you get outside of the circle of the family. Most interactions occurred in the street or over the fence, but these do not lead to intimate friendships or profound changes in the order of things. In some instances, contact was avoided altogether, with diversity seen as a threat:

When I drive downtown, I keep a gun in my lap. (Birmingham, FG).

We heard a desire to get to know new immigrant neighbors more than actual examples of people getting to know them. One participant from Dayton said she welcomed immigrants living on her street, but she had yet to form friendships with any of them. Focus group participants did reflect on the limits of living in a diverse neighborhood. In one focus group, we asked what if Black or Turkish families invited them to come over to their house:

I would not go ... They don't speak English and second of all, if a Black person ... probably has like grudges or something and that's going to be awkward. And then ... you don't know who's got bedbugs or what you're bringing home with you. Like I'm super strict, I give you like a look down before you walk into the doors, and I'm like I don't know about you. (Dayton FG)

In other focus groups, we heard descriptions of white working-class people sticking together and not connecting with non-White neighbors. One Bay Ridge participant describe the behavior and attitudes of the white working class as “clan-like,” and in Phoenix a focus group described her neighborhood has “clique-y” despite its perceived diversity. Even in those areas perceived as diverse neighborhoods, it was pointed out that not all of the streets are diverse.

We are all white on our street and we're all white on the street next door. (Phoenix FG).

The changing demographics in neighborhoods, and the corresponding impacts on the social, cultural, and economic dynamics, stimulated more racially charged conversations.

When I bought my house ... I didn't tell too many people I was buying a house over here. When I told one guy he said he had friends that lived over here but because of all these Mexican people moving over here they ended up moving north. (Phoenix FG).

Here a woman does not want to tell people where she lives because the neighborhood is viewed as undesirable by whites. The mere presence of Mexicans, in this case, signals to whites that a neighborhood is on the decline and there is reason to

move out.

Perceptions of segregation

In many focus groups, we challenged the participants about the characterization of their neighborhoods. We asked if they lived in racially segregated neighborhoods. Discussions about segregation were at times difficult because some denied its existence, at least where they lived. In one focus group, we asked, “Hold on for a second, Birmingham, 75% Black, and the outlying areas are largely white, is that not a definition of racial segregation?”

No. ... Now there are certain areas where all Black or all White, and you would kind of be an outcast, or an outsider if you moved in. (Birmingham FG)

Similar to having a Black friend as evidence for not being a racist, focus group participants did not think of mostly homogeneous white neighborhoods as segregated. The presence of some racial and ethnic diversity was evidence of not being segregated.

At times participants used language that many would find offensive, particularly people of color. As mentioned earlier, race was mostly talked about indirectly, in coded and color-blind ways. This is not simply a white working-class phenomenon, but a white one. For example, we heard comments such as

We don't really see race as a thing here. (Tacoma FG)

They're just like us. (Dayton FG)

I don't really see the race. (Phoenix FG)

My kids don't see color. (Birmingham FG)

In part, these comments illustrate how the study participants were grappling with the changing make-up of their communities. They were looking for commonalities, ways to connect and reduce distance between themselves and others who look

different; but they did not understand how such comments increased distance by denying racism and racial differences.

Denial of racism

Those involved in trying to bring people of different backgrounds together sometimes did not see that racism acted out through, for example, police-community relations, had a detrimental impact on black and minority communities.

The denial of racism or its severity came up in a discussion about Black Lives Matter. Several Bay Ridge focus groups debated the legitimacy of the movement. Some saw the protests as undermining police power. They argued that, if African Americans just showed more respect to police officers, they could avoid the problem of police brutality. One person commented, “All lives matter.” Another could not understand how a police officer could be the “bad guy” when the police were the ones stopping criminals. In a different focus group in Bay Ridge, white working-class participants supported Black Lives Matter. They believed that African Americans were “treated like crap.” This same person also stated that everyone should be treated as equals.

It was not uncommon for a set of focus group participants to see racism as less serious than in the past, or less overt than before. For example, they would point to making racial jokes as not being racist. Some thought people of color were too sensitive. Others tired of political correctness. Another focus group in the same community would see things entirely differently. One young woman who works with mostly white men in the trades, identified some of her co-workers as more outwardly racist. They used “the n-word,” discredited the work of African American tradesmen, and blasted Trump speeches in the workplace. This participant had spoken out against this explicit racism in her work: “I’ve literally told someone to shut the f__ up during lunch break.” (Dayton FG)

Those who understand institutional racism and white privilege could move beyond the interpersonal interactions and see the systemic nature of racial inequality. One participant from Bay Ridge shared

a personal story of his friend from Tobago, who was excluded from work functions while white employees were not. This member fought against his friend's exclusion, and felt he understood prejudice because of this relationship. We heard similar stories in our other sites.

I never thought about it, but my background was employment--helping people find work. And having worked at various locations throughout the Phoenix area, I notice the difference in how white people get hired easily ... A lot of the minorities I dealt with, they were willing to take just about anything. Whereas the white people they're more specific. (Phoenix FG)

Here this participant describes seeing how race influenced who gets hired for which jobs. Additionally, he saw that white job seekers could be pickier because they had more jobs to choose from, compared with people of color.

The challenges to cross-racial coalition building

Given this landscape of white working-class people living among diverse people, living separate lives, lacking awareness of white privilege, and using color-blind thinking, how do people of different races and ethnicities come together? How are white working-class people building a future with working-class communities of color? When we asked focus group participants to describe instances where they came together with people of different races and ethnic backgrounds, most paused. This question stumped participants. It was hard to come up with examples of cross-racial coalition building. We met a handful of white working-class community leaders who were actively trying to bridge divides between communities. In most cases, these interventions were more at the idea stage and required investment and time to have an opportunity of succeeding. The focus groups discussions usually centered around potential rather than actual instances. Ideas centered around the need for community spaces and events, as well as how to get the conversation started.

The few examples of coalition building were at an embryonic stage of just learning how to communicate and resolve immediate and small neighborhood-level challenges. In Phoenix, we learned about a neighborhood conflict around parking cars on the front lawn. The neighborhood leaders, who were white working class, spent time talking with the new residents, mostly Mexican immigrants, who were parking in ways that the white residents could not comprehend. Taking a friendly approach—that is, not confrontational or involving the police—worked, and the neighborhood no longer has cars parked on the lawns.

It's like, oh, yeah, "you can't do that here." "Oh okay. Well we want to fit in" ... and then it was diplomatic to resolve. Rather than hostile, "you dirty so and so. Why don't you park on the street like everybody else?" ... so, we certainly had our culture conflicts. And the language barrier ... the fear of police ... So, we've had to make some adaptations and acknowledgments that these people didn't have the life we grew up with, they didn't live here and the truth is they're here now and we need them as much as anybody else to be a part of our community and participate. And they're going to come a little bit our way, we've got to go a little bit their way, to make that work and anything less than that actually is unacceptable; the community is what it is and you've got to make it work, failure is not an option. (Phoenix FG)

While a seemingly simple example, this recounting shows the challenges residents face in getting to know their neighbors and resolving neighborhood norms around parking. These neighborhood leaders wanted folks to get along, so they chose to engage their new neighbors in ways that allowed for future interactions. The neighborhood leaders, thinking long term, knew they needed to be inclusive in order to address more significant neighborhood-level problems down the line.

While not explicitly stated in the Phoenix example above, showing "respect" and "tolerance" came up as key ingredients for bringing people together in our other sites. As one person succinctly put it, "when you're tolerant to somebody, they have to be tolerant

of you.” (Bay Ridge FG)

In Tacoma, we learned about the process of getting neighborhood residents engaged around a site for a potential playground. Neighborhood leaders organized activities to create new neighborhood traditions. Once the county government saw the enthusiasm and participation of residents, they installed the equipment.

With the construction of our playground I think that's how we got, we became successful because even before the playground we were having events at that plot, you know like every season we have an Easter egg hunt and it went from zero people to 150 people from the community to show it was pretty amazing and that's when the county recognized, hey, we need to give them a park. But we basically not only built a park, we built a community, we built a tradition that every season we can have something here. (Tacoma FG)

In Dayton, we learned of small, street-level interactions to improve the neighborhood. Though they seem small, the neighborhood leaders are clearly laying the groundwork for more ambitious efforts. One neighborhood group organized a clean-up event for a local park. The neighborhood leaders, two white working-class men, approached the park users to help, in this case Spanish-speaking immigrants, who play soccer at the park.

We went up there because we were going to a parks project, we just wanted to address it to them and see if they would help. I just asked for their time and if they had it, a financial contribution doing a fundraiser. Over two weekends, 50 of them showed up. 31 one weekend, 20 the other and we did four hours of work, intensive, manual labor over both weekends. I asked myself “why are they here?” Well, they feel a sense of community and ownership, pride all in that one space. (Dayton FG)

On reflecting on the initial interaction, one of the neighborhood leaders said he was nervous to approach the men playing soccer because he didn't

speak Spanish and wasn't sure how the men would react. He expected some hostility or disinterest. The positive interaction motivated him to reach out more. Now the soccer games are drawing in others from the neighborhood.

It was generally agreed that cross-racial coalition building is not happening, except for a few organizations who are dealing with neighborhood improvement, crime, and poverty in diverse neighborhoods. It is still a struggle for those groups as well. Getting people to occupy the same space and then to work together for a common cause is fraught with challenges.

Everyday and organized interactions

People did come together in everyday activities and for special events—parades, festivals, shops—and it is important to restate this fact. Some participants viewed local festivals and activities as a positive preliminary measure to forming community cohesion. Food, soccer, and music all came up as activities that attract a diverse group of people.

People don't come together on their own yet. But they come together when there's any kind of a gathering event. (Dayton FG)

For example, participants rattled off names of local events where a diverse range of people already come together—“Adventure Night” (Dayton FG), “First Friday” (Phoenix FG), “70s Soul Revival” (Tacoma FG), “Arts Walk” (Birmingham FG), and “Summer Stroll” (Bay Ridge FG). Other examples included sporting events, church related activities, the arts, and volunteering.

Building on what we already saw happening in practice, focus group participants suggested more localized neighborhood events and spaces for coming together, such as block parties, community gardens, and play groups.

I think in the long term more localized events need to happen because it will allow you to create that neighbor to neighbor, but the thing is most neighborhoods aren't organized well enough to do it. (Dayton FG)

Maybe if there's was some like unified community event, then we could all come together for. (Birmingham FG)

...the block party, what I like about it is, I go out and I give out the flyers. I say, "Oh you just moved in. This one across the street has 3 kids your age, really." I said, "Yes, yes, you will meet them at the block party." I think it's important. (Bay Ridge FG)

Another member of this group explained that, because her neighborhood did not have a block party, they used the marathon that comes down their street as a way to get together. She explained that new and old neighbors come

and schools represent spaces for diverse people to come together.

However, a few people, and definitely not the consensus across our sites, felt that coalition building should be more explicitly political. The focus for these participants was about community organizing for social change: getting people to attend marches in addition to "breaking bread together" (Bay Ridge FG). The point here was really to get people talking, sharing their lives and learning about the complexities of living in a racist society.

My idea was we need to have a bunch of people in the community, marching through the community to show that, yes ... we do support our Muslim neighbors. (Bay Ridge FG)



together to provide food for the runners and clean up after the event.

Striving to build common space, such as a community center, was one idea that galvanized some that we spoke with during our work. In Birmingham, they suggested locations that were "in-between" to bridge the divide between white and black neighborhoods. Community centers, parks,

Diverse community representations needed

Additionally, to really see cross-racial coalition happening, more diverse community representation was required in, for example, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and community boards. For that to happen, translation services would also need to be offered. With more engagement, then perhaps

community togetherness could inspire coalition building.

White working-class people are unable to communicate with working-class people of color beyond the friendly hello, and in some cases, that is challenged by physical separation. Of course, there are the close family connections and friendships, but in terms of spurring cross-racial coalition building, focus group participants came up with a variety of explanations for the lack of cross-racial dialogue, including lack of interest, language barriers, and racial tension.

One woman from Bay Ridge described her experience trying to get to know different people in her building:

The trouble is, they don't want to interact. ... even though I say where I live ... I'm friendly with everybody in my building ... But there's some that close the door right in my face ... They don't want to be friends. You try so hard ... Talk, hello, good luck, they'll close the door right in my face and have. And do I get upset? No, I go. What am I going to do? But I feel bad ... It's just that they don't want to. (Bay Ridge FG)

Some talked about really not knowing how to bring people together and speculated that even well-intentioned efforts could be viewed as intrusive. One focus group participant recognized the need to do outreach, but also wondered if some burden should be placed on African Americans for not showing up.

...there's very, very few African Americans participate. And I haven't seen a lot of outreach, but then on the other side is where are you, where are you? (Tacoma FG)

Others talked about hosting neighborhood socials with outreach to all the residents in the neighborhood. But few immigrants or African Americans ever attend. In one case, it was possibly because the events take place at a local Christian church, a place that might not be a comfortable meeting place (Dayton FG). Interestingly, this same focus group also noted the white working class

hardly talk to the non-whites who attend.

The Hispanic groups ... they will engage with a lot of people. But the other minorities are actually, they've started to just not accept invitations to different things because they get invited but no one talks to them. (Dayton FG)

In some cases, there were practical reasons why it was hard to bring people together, namely language barriers. Some found it difficult to converse through translators, often children (Dayton FG). However, in one focus group, a participant expressed interest in learning Spanish so she could better communicate with neighbors.

About a month ago I discussed buying one of those voice recorders that translates ... And start carrying it around. We have to change, so let's change for the better. There's ways to figure it out. They are just like us. (Dayton FG)

Overcoming barriers and expectations

Some expressed embarrassment at perceived cultural misunderstandings. Some conservative participants felt that they should not have to learn the language of newcomers, rather, that immigrants should learn English.

Finally, segregation, racial tension, and distrust casts a big shadow over these communities. We spoke with many truly engaging people who seemed genuinely interested in bringing people together, but the larger community context was rife with unresolved racial conflict and considerable wariness about people's true intentions. The presidential campaign and election of Trump only worsen existing challenges.

Instances where people could come together and build bridges have been quickly squelched:

A woman was stabbed and hospitalized who was Mexican in our neighborhood. I spoke up on our neighborhood board and I got shot down. (Phoenix FG)

Another participant put it more bluntly about immigrants and white working-class residents: "They

don't trust us, we don't trust them" (Dayton FG). We heard similar types of assertions made elsewhere:

It's just so deeply rooted, because of our history here, Birmingham. Just mistrust, like Black people just do not trust White people here. Even thinking about like, some of my millennial friends like they don't even trust Black people. (Birmingham FG)

Here focus group participants suggest that the police would need to be present to have an event that brought people together. People wouldn't be willing to risk their lives without security.

Cross-racial coalition building: Perspectives from key informants

The prospects for cross-racial coalition building are not on the immediate agenda of most of the key informants we interviewed, either. Similar to what we heard in the resident focus groups, key informants also pointed out the importance of food- and culture-based festivals as a way to get people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds interacting. But after that, key informants struggled to come up with ways that institutions and organizations were intentionally bringing working-class people of different backgrounds together beyond entertainment.

Key informants involved in community organizing were able to give some examples of diverse people coming together around immigration rights and racial justice, but it was unclear whether white working-class people were the ones participating. Most of the examples of cross-racial coalition building were informal and small scale. Key informants believed this was the way to break down prejudice.

Across the sites, key informants emphasized youth as being more open to diversity. Public schools were pointed to as the place where the mixing and working together naturally happens.

I think young people are very much more open to that, that's the impression I've gotten, actually. (Phoenix KI)

One key informant from Dayton spoke about a

program where immigrants are invited to share their stories. This informant witnessed firsthand how dialogue can reduce prejudice. Furthermore, the high school brings small groups of native-born and immigrant students together to take trips to museums, performances, and sports events. The program had built strong relationships among the students and families. The director of the program has witnessed these native-born white working-class kids standing up against prejudice in the school (Dayton KI).

Overall, key informants found bringing people together to be fraught with difficulties and expressed a fair bit of skepticism about cross-racial coalition building.

Unfortunately, I don't think it's happening enough outside of the educational context and I think when it does it's more rhetoric than anything. (Birmingham KI)

Many pointed to the problem of segregated neighborhoods and segregated lives, even in diverse New York City.

There's an imagination that in New York City, because of the diversity, everyone is just friends with each other but there's not. There's usually communities who are living next to each other but they don't interact with each other. (Bay Ridge KI)

Once getting people together, figuring out how to have honest conversations about neighborhood issues—let alone about racism, privilege, and inequality—proved difficult.

My hope would be yes, and that like we talk about that. We are very honest with folks, but ... people in this program are going to be coming from a variety of different backgrounds and that's going to be hard. We're basically setting ourselves up for conflict and setting ourselves up for difficult conversations because that's not something that we often will kind of locate ourselves within. (Phoenix KI)

Because conversations can get heated, white folks are hesitant to move beyond the superficial, unable to see other perspectives; and even those trained in racial awareness and white privilege felt unprepared.

I think that we fail. We still fail to figure out what ... where our common ground is ... with poor and working-class communities of color. We still have not figured out the clear concise way to just beat it over people's heads that there are intersections of interest that the same forces that are holding down, you know, poor and white, poor and working class. ... I know I'm not capable of doing that. (Bay Ridge KI)

In conclusion, conversations with key informants are consistent with what we heard from white working-class residents. Few organizations, governmental or nonprofit are working at bringing diverse working-class people together. Most of those efforts to do so do not engage white working-class people. The few initiatives that exist are small and informal. Those working on such coalition building lack capacity and need support.

*I think I have
one friend,
two friends
[who] I talk
to that I am
close to that
are white.
Everybody
else has
some kind
of different
ethnicity, race,
some kind
of different
background to
myself.*

Implications for policy and practice

Redefining white working class

One of the challenges of conducting research on white working-class communities is the shakiness of the definition. The study revealed the limitations of current definitions for white working-class communities that emphasize income, occupation, or education. This is very narrow and does not reflect reality. People from white working-class communities did not understand the importance of a college degree as confirming that they had moved into the middle class, the validity of “blue collar” jobs at a time of austerity to legitimize working-class credentials, or agree upon a salary that denotes a working-class existence. There was a gap between policy framing and grassroots lived experience.

Rather than continuing with a narrow, outmoded definition, this study seeks to put forward an expanded version of *white working class* that emphasizes the importance of common values, economic insecurity, and stratification within this group. In this way, stereotypical assumptions about the white working class that presents it as a flat population that behaves in a stereotypical way with conservative views on race and immigration, or defaults to voting for a certain political candidate, may be challenged. In short, the white working class needs to be recognized a group as diverse as any other in society. It differs in terms of age, gender, and sexual orientation; spatial location in terms of small or large city; and ethnic diversity within families and social networks. An expansive definition will increase opportunities to engage with people and organizations from a group that has been seen as parochial, closed, and defensive.

Bringing people together

The 2016 presidential campaign was one of the most divisive in US history. In this study, which took place in 2016/17, we witnessed the way in which national politics was played out locally

in cities and neighborhoods. In our focus groups, friends and families were pitted against each other as historical divisions in American society emerged. People did not care for the way that communities were set against each other and assumed positions that were taken about different groups. The febrile atmosphere contributed to deepening the wells of suspicion and distrust.

Foundations such as Open Society work tirelessly to bridge these gaps by promoting greater levels of understanding between people and institutions, and between different communities in society. In this process, the voices of white working-class people need to be heard by institutions and other communities. This study has demonstrated that they feel politically marginalized, culturally isolated, and economically vulnerable. As a consequence of their material reality, talking about white privilege to working class white people who are working two or three jobs to keep their families fed and a roof over their heads will be a difficult task. They point to other groups in society who have advocacy organizations, political patronage, and celebrity support and see them speeding past them on the road to social mobility.

At the same time, and a further challenge, is the use of racialized language, denial of white privilege, and claims of reverse racism, all of which offend communities of color. The consequences of not doing anything could further deepen the crisis as the country moves to being even more diverse in the decades ahead. To build cross-racial coalition requires trust and acknowledging who holds power.

Yet the local, rather than the national or global, could provide the basis for community coalition building between working class whites and communities of color. Given the reality of reduced federal spending on community development, together with a challenging political environment on issues of immigration and race, policy makers need to document and showcase good practice being implemented at the local and community level. In our study, the examples are embryonic, but in each place, local people and organizations are attempting to find common ground between groups. In this way, an alternative prospectus may be generated on how white working-class communities are engaging in a positive way with

communities of color rather than simply being viewed as their implacable adversaries.

Increasing organizational capacity

Many of the community activists, and organizations, who took part in the study were willing to build, consolidate, or create new coalitions of interest. However, they were limited in terms of their knowledge, and thus capability, to realize their ambitions. There is a need to increase organizational capacity and know-how, with special emphasis being placed on organizations and individuals who operate across boundaries—that is, those who have credibility and reach with white working-class communities but can work with communities of color for common and mutual advantage. In each case study site, we identified community activists who could become bridge builders and open up the prospect of new types of interventions on common areas of interest. In this way, the next generation of community leaders could be generated that reach across as well as reaching in, providing a blueprint to successfully negotiate the country of the future, rather than the past.

I think that they are the most fantastic residents that we have had because they take such great pride in everything they own. I've seen them transform house after house in the community that have been vacant, abandoned in this neighborhood.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Focus Group Demographics						
	Bay Ridge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma	Total
Gender						
Men	15	10	12	5	24	45.8%
Women	13	22	15	22	6	54.2%
Age						
Young adults (18-44)	7	16	19	16	16	51.4%
Middle-aged (45-65)	6	15	7	7	6	28.5%
Mature adults (65+)	15	1	1	4	8	20.1%
Total	28	32	27	27	30	144

Appendix B

2016 Presidential Election Results by County and State for Study Sites					
	Bay Ridge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
County	King	Jefferson	Montgomery	Maricopa	Pierce
Trump	17.8%	52.2%	48.4%	49.1%	42.1%
Clinton	79.3%	45.0%	47.1%	45.7%	49.5%
State	NY	AL	OH	AZ	WA
Trump	37.5%	62.9%	52.1%	49.5%	38.1%
Clinton	58.8%	34.6%	43.5%	45.4%	54.3%

Source: CNN Election Results 2016 - <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results>

Appendix C

Regional Perspective: Race & Ethnic Profile (2011-2015 American Community Survey)					
	BayRidge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
	<i>Brooklyn-King County</i>	<i>Birmingham-Hoover MSA</i>	<i>Dayton MSA</i>	<i>Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale MSA</i>	<i>Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue MSA</i>
Total Population	2,595,259	1,138,476	801,472	4,407,915	3,614,361
White	36%	64%	77%	57%	66%
Latino	20%	4%	2%	30%	9%
Asian	11%	1%	2%	4%	13%
Black	31%	28%	15%	5%	5%
Other	2%	2%	3%	4%	6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Appendix D

Local Perspective: Race & Ethnic Profile (2011-2015 American Community Survey)					
	BayRidge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
Total Population	81,906	212,211	141,368	1,514,208	203,481
White	64%	22%	52%	45%	60%
Latino	18%	4%	4%	41%	11%
Asian	15%	1%	1%	4%	10%
Black	2%	72%	40%	7%	10%
Other	2%	1%	3%	4%	9%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Bay Ridge: 27 Census Tracts in Kings County: 30, 34, 36, 38, 44, 46, 50, 52.01, 52.02, 54, 56.01, 56.02, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 126, 130, 134, 136, 138, 142, 160, 162

Appendix E

Regional Perspective: Foreign-Born Population (2011-2015 American Community Survey)					
	BayRidge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
	<i>Brooklyn-King County</i>	<i>Birmingham-Hoover MSA</i>	<i>Dayton MSA</i>	<i>Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale MSA</i>	<i>Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue MSA</i>
Total Foreign-Born (% of total population)	972,294 (38%)	45,191 (4%)	31,684 (4%)	634,777 (14%)	623,751 (17%)
% Naturalized	57%	32%	48%	37%	50%
% Not a U.S. Citizen	43%	68%	52%	63%	50%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Appendix F

Local Perspective: Foreign-Born Population (2011-2015 American Community Survey)					
	BayRidge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
Total Foreign-Born (% of total population)	28,897 (35%)	7,604 (4%)	6,184 (4.4%)	303,364 (20%)	27,513 (14%)
% Naturalized	63%	26%	37%	30%	53%
% Not a U.S. Citizen	37%	74%	63%	70%	47%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Appendix G

Regional Perspective: Demographics Profile of White, Non-Hispanic Population (2011-2015 American Community Survey)					
	Bay Ridge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
	<i>Brooklyn-King County</i>	<i>Birmingham-Hoover MSA</i>	<i>Dayton MSA</i>	<i>Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale MSA</i>	<i>Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue MSA</i>
Total Population	2,595,259	1,138,476	801,472	4,407,915	3,614,361
White	36%	64%	77%	57%	66%
Poverty	23%	11%	13%	10%	8%
Unemployed (16 yrs or older in labor force)	7%	78%	7%	7%	6%
Owner occupied housing unit (with White householder)	36%	7%	69%	69%	65%
HS diploma or less (25 yrs or older)	31%	39%	39%	28%	25%

Appendix H

Local Perspective: Demographics Profile of White, Non-Hispanic Population (2011-2015 American Community Survey)					
	Bay Ridge	Birmingham	Dayton	Phoenix	Tacoma
Total Population	81,906	212,211	141,368	1,514,208	203,481
White	64%	22%	52%	45%	60%
Poverty	14%	20%	26%	12%	14%
Unemployed (16 yrs or older in labor force)	9%	7%	11%	7%	8%
Owner occupied housing unit (with White householder)	39%	52%	55%	63%	55%
HS diploma or less (25 yrs or older)	30%	27%	46%	28%	35%

