

POVERTY CONCENTRATION AND DE-CONCENTRATION: *A Literature Review*

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POVERTY CONCENTRATION has long been viewed as a leading problem associated with urban areas in the United States. Adverse effects span a variety of social, economic, and political outcomes for residents trapped in high-poverty neighborhoods. Agents of social policy reform have been concerned with the proliferation of these neighborhoods throughout past decades, particularly since the phenomenon has spread to inner-ring suburbs, and can no longer be viewed as a city problem alone. Various solutions to the problem have been proposed and implemented, but a panacea seems to be amiss.

A large body of literature reflects different perspectives on the causes and effects of poverty concentration, as well as various deconcentration strategies as proposed solutions. The literature described in this article suggests that both, problem and solutions, rest on certain assumptions about and perceptions of concentrated poverty. These assumptions have contributed to the prevalent paradigm that a) concentrated poverty is the problem and that b) breaking up concentrated poverty is the solution. However, it is not clear whether policies targeted at breaking up concentrated poverty have borne the hoped for fruits. For example, housing mobility studies have shown ambivalent results, and the neighborhood effects literature is similarly ambivalent.

These uncertainties give rise to questions about the underlying assumptions of these policies, and the need for further research to ascertain if housing mobility benefits poor people in the long run without compromising their identities and social/community capitals. I argue that the popular social paradigm—breaking up concentrated poverty through deconcentration—is too simplistic. As such, the central tenet that poor people should not live together is conceptually flawed, disregarding the social/community capital that does exist in poor neighborhoods.

WHAT IS POVERTY CONCENTRATION?

High-poverty neighborhoods are commonly classified as neighborhoods where at least 40% of the population lives below the federal poverty line. In his 1997 book *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City* Paul Jargowsky presents findings of a nationwide study of poverty at the neighborhood level, and provides a comprehensive account of neighborhood poverty in the U.S. According to the 1990 census, there were nearly 3,000 high-poverty neighborhoods in the U.S. with about 8.5 million residents. Most common are ghettos (neighborhoods both segregated and poor), accounting for almost half of all high-poverty neighborhoods.

Jargowsky suggests that between 1970 and 1990 poor people became increasingly concentrated in high-poverty neighborhoods, which more than doubled in number during that time.¹ According to his analysis, while the concentration of poverty rose substantially, most poor people do not reside in high-poverty neighborhoods. Age is an important factor: children are more likely to live in ghettos and barrios than adults, leaving them at a double disadvantage. Most poverty concentration that took place between 1970 and 1990 was in central cities, but some occurred in inner-ring suburbs.

Based on analyses of 2000 census data, John Iceland (2005) claims that concentrated poverty fell sharply in the United States between 1990 and 2000.² The reasons he gives for this trend have to do with general economic processes and an overall decline in the U.S. poverty rate, increasing suburbanization among minorities of all income levels, and an increase in economic diversity in the suburbs

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since 1980. Based on these demographic trends, the author predicts the potential increase of poverty in some suburbs, and declining of concentrated poverty in inner cities. To some extent these predictions have already become realities, and pockets of concentrated poverty have emerged in some, primarily older suburbs while some of the former poor urban neighborhoods have gentrified. This, by conse-

quence, has resulted in shifting the “problem” to another ZIP code, rather than solving it. Poverty remains a prevalent problem in the United States, and is often addressed without adequate consideration of social and community networks.

CAUSES OF POVERTY CONCENTRATION

Prior to the 1960s, discourse on poverty concentration centered on individual-level and behavioral explanations, asserting that the poor are a distinctive social group or subculture. During the 1960s, the emphasis was on structural, societal-level explanations, contending that structural forces in society contribute to poverty concentration.³ In the 1970s individual-level explanations were once again common, and the work of Jencks and Mayer (1990), Wilson (1987), and others

considered the poor as a socially isolated and pathological “underclass” which increasingly populated inner cities.⁴ Subsequent research by these and other scholars, however, has advanced both individual and structural explanations of concentrated poverty since the 1970s.⁵

Small and Newman (2001) provide a critical review of the urban poverty literature that followed Wilson’s landmark 1987 study.⁶ Focusing on the family, the neighborhood, and culture, their research discusses differences in the ways in which sociologists think about change in urban poverty and the increase in poverty concentration over the 1970s and 1980s.

Central to inquiries into urban inequality is the effect of neighborhood poverty on life chances of the poor. Prevalent (academic) arguments explaining neighborhood poverty are: a) structural economic changes⁷ and b) racial and economic segregation.⁸ Wilson’s main arguments for high-poverty neighborhood expansion are deindustrialization, employment de-concentration (spatial mismatch theory), and occupational bifurcation. On the other hand, Massey and Denton attribute this expansion to the growing racial and economic divide. Both of these perspectives have currency throughout the poverty literature.

In addition to these two main perspectives, there are other noteworthy explanations. Jargowsky (1997), for example, asserts that regional and metropolitan economies cause the spatial concentration of low-income residents in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods.⁹ His findings indicate that increases in neighborhood poverty between 1970 and 1990 are attributable to economic rather than racial segregation, which contributed to the rise of high-poverty neighborhoods. Generally, however, race is still understood to be an important factor,¹⁰ and “metropolitan areas with more racial segregation have more concentrated poverty.”¹¹

Massey and Denton (1995), Dreier, et al. (2004), Turner (1998), etc., posit that politics and government policies have contributed to the spatial confinement of poor minorities in cities rather than abstract, “neutral” economic forces.¹² For example, after WWII, low-income blacks were steered into public housing in cities, whereas low-income whites were steered into public housing in white, working-class suburbs. In addition to rapid suburbanization and racialized housing policies, there are other causes for the expansion of high-poverty neighborhoods such as middle-class flight, commercial abandonment within cities, and patterns of migration and immigration.¹³

Overall, much of the spatial concentration of poor people undoubtedly relates to the uneven distribution of resources. This suggests that racism, classism, elitism, and discrimination are forces that have played a major role in urban decline, and the spatial concentration of low-income residents and minorities.

EFFECTS OF POVERTY CONCENTRATION

A large body of literature discusses the effects of poverty concentration in urban areas. Much of the research suggests that the geographic concentration of low-income residents in central cities has adverse effects on a variety of social, economic, and political outcomes. These arguments, in my opinion, focus too

narrowly on the individual and behavioral problems and outcomes of individuals that are poor and are living in poor neighborhoods while both de-emphasizing larger structural problems in society, such as disinvestment, uneven resource distribution, and racism, as well as disregarding the importance of community and social networks. For example, Lewis (1998), Wilson (1987), and others contend that poor people living in environments with high-poverty concentration develop a “culture of poverty,” and “ghetto-specific behaviors,” such as drug dealing and welfare dependency.¹⁴ These behaviors or “social pathologies” are said to prevent residents from successfully entering the American economy, and lead to a “cycle of poverty.” However, if resources were more evenly distributed, and all residents had equal educational and employment opportunities, regardless of where they reside, there would not be a need to participate in the underground economy or rely on public assistance.

This, however, is a difficult truth to face, confronting a collective responsibility to share resources. It is not surprising then that viewing poverty as a primarily individual/behavioral problem is easier than a societal/structural one. Therefore, a lot of the literature has focused on adverse outcomes of living in concentrated poverty, and a host of studies over-emphasize negative statistics, while largely disregarding the effects of positive community/social networks. Many correlational studies, for example, have focused on adverse effects of living in high-poverty neighborhoods, i.e. dependency on public assistance and having a low sense of efficacy, as well as higher rates of teenage pregnancies, obesity and other health related problems, dropping out of school, and engaging in criminal behavior.¹⁵

Some research appropriately points to the effects of racism, a larger issue in U.S. society, in relation to poverty concentration. However, these arguments might focus too much on race as a property which is divisive rather than binding, and contributing to social isolation rather than contributing to social capital bolstering. For example, Massey and Denton (1998), Wilson (1987), O'Connor (2001), and others argue that poor minorities who live in high-poverty neighborhoods are too isolated from mainstream America, which often views them as “other” or foreign, bearing different or “un-American” values and ethics.¹⁶ This isolation and perceived difference, so the argument goes, may contribute to stereotyping, including, for example, the notions that poor people are poor because they are lazy, and that they are “draining the system.” This isolation, it is argued, has deepened the economic and racial divide in the country and contributed to separate societies.¹⁷

I concur with scholars who argue that high-poverty neighborhoods are relatively heterogeneous, and that it is difficult to prove neighborhood effects. As such, it is hard to prove that a particular negative culture is engendered by poverty concentration. Jargowsky (1997), for example, refutes the simplistic notion that there are neighborhood characteristics that create a neighborhood “culture,” but rather that there are certain characteristics attributable to poor people or minority groups regardless of geographic location.¹⁸ He suggests that neighborhood effects (i.e. “social pathologies”) can’t be demonstrated by looking at people’s

behavior, and that further research (such as a longitudinal study that controls for selection bias) is necessary to prove that geographic location has an effect on residents' behavior.

Jargowsky (1997) also rejects the notion that residents of high poverty neighborhoods have a higher risk of becoming welfare-dependent given that these payments contribute little to the total income in these neighborhoods.¹⁹ In terms of educational effects, he claims that "youths in poor neighborhoods are almost as likely to be in school as those in mid-poverty neighborhoods."²⁰ This research aligns with my argument that general social and economic trends affect poor people the most, regardless of the neighborhoods they live in.

As such, I agree with scholars who assert that neighborhood effects are indeed difficult to prove, particularly given methodological problems.²¹ The contention is that most of these studies lack causal links, and that the use of census tracts as proxies for neighborhoods is potentially inadequate. In terms of culture, a few recent approaches applied in urban poverty research, include the "boundary work" approach (attending to the relationship among race, culture, urban poverty, etc.). Some argue that many recent studies in urban poverty are based on outmoded ideas of the 1960s and 1970s or that they are empirically weak or under-conceptualized, yet many also appear provocative and promising.²²

Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) make a compelling argument that little existing research measures causes of key social processes (i.e. collective efficacy and institutional capacity) or whether they are responsive to neighborhood interventions.²³ They argue that problems with studies that measure neighborhood effects include the definition of neighborhood in terms of geographic boundaries, the dearth of longitudinal studies of neighborhood temporal dynamics, and the individual selection bias of participants.

To reiterate, I believe that any studies of poverty concentration and/or neighborhood effects must weigh in the effects of larger macroeconomic and socio-political forces. These forces include but are not limited to the uneven distribution of resources, particularly relating to educational and employment opportunities, a long history of urban disinvestment, and racial discrimination. The prominent solution to poverty concentration—de-concentration—as discussed in the following section is a result of much research that emphasizes the negative statistics of disenfranchised areas while de-emphasizing the positive social and community capital inherent in poor urban neighborhoods.

Racism, classism, elitism, and discrimination are forces that have played a major role in urban decline, and the spatial concentration of low-income residents and minorities.

POVERTY DE-CONCENTRATION

A prevalent approach in housing policy to de-concentrate the poor has been through housing vouchers such as the Section 8 program, housing mobility programs like the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program, and urban revitalization towards income integration such as the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere program (Hope VI). These strategies seek to provide low-income families with socio-economically and/or racially mixed environments. Examples of mobility programs are the Gautreaux program, the Yonkers scattered-site public housing initiative, and the Moving to Opportunity demonstration program (MTO). These programs have in common that they allow participating low-income residents (experimental group) to locate in racially and/or economically integrated neighborhoods,

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which are expected to provide a more opportunity-rich environment than the concentrated poverty neighborhoods they lived in before.

While many researchers and policy-makers subscribe to such de-concentration efforts, I am not completely convinced of the effectiveness of these strategies. I concur with Jeff Crump and others who believe that moving the poor around might

just be a “Band-aid” solution to larger societal inequalities and related problems. Crump (2002), for example, criticizes the popular notion that the spatial concentration of poverty is the fundamental problem facing U.S. cities.²⁴ He asserts that demolishing inner-city public housing projects and relocating its residents—de-concentrating the poor—is a conceptually flawed solution that emphasizes the role of space while obscuring the social and political processes that drive poverty. He argues that this broader neo-liberal policy paradigm—de-concentrating the poor by restructuring public housing into mixed-income units—rests on stereotypical individual-level images of “undeserving” poor people.

Neo-liberals and conservatives, according to Crump (2002), subscribe to simplistic spatial metaphors (poverty concentration) rather than complex socio-spatial forces that give rise to poverty.²⁵ He suggests that poverty de-concentration is a politically supported, attractive strategy to enhance the image of cities, to valorize land, to combat “moral panic” among the public over crime and drugs, and to provide suburban employers with a pool of low-wage workers. Crump contends that important social and political processes such as institutional racism and the commodification of the urban landscape receive little attention in the policy literature and popular media compared to the emphasis on “social pathologies” of the poor.²⁶

Mayer and Jencks (1989) are also critical of such de-concentration efforts. They have reviewed research on how much the life chances of children are affected by the socioeconomic and racial mix of their schools and neighborhoods.²⁷ To frame their research, they scrutinize four popular schools of thought as to how neighborhoods affect behavior. First, disadvantaged neighborhoods are a disad-

vantage, and according to the “contagion” model, being raised in low socio-economic status (SES) neighborhoods has a negative impact on children’s behavior.²⁸ Second, advantaged neighbors are a disadvantage, and according to the “relative deprivation” model, high SES neighbors have negative impacts on the self-esteem and behavior of low SES children. Third, disadvantaged neighbors are irrelevant, and strong individualists believe that one’s own circumstances and long-term interests determine one’s behavior, regardless of environment. Fourth, neighbors do not matter but neighborhoods do, whereby neighborhood institutions and resources impact individual outcomes.

Most studies that measure the effect of neighborhoods, according to Mayer and Jencks’(1999) review, are subject to bias—for example failing to control for exogenous bias—and measures of neighborhood composition used by such studies are often ambiguous.²⁹ They further contend that many studies on desegregation—for example studies measuring desegregation’s effect on cognitive skills, crime, and so on—have often inconsistent findings, showing varying, sometimes minimal effects. These inconsistencies make it difficult to ascertain the extent to which SES and racial composition affect life chances of children.

It is also unclear whether residential mobility programs to facilitate positive neighborhood effects such as the Gautreaux program engender net social benefits for all residents. Galster (2002), for example, points out that evaluations of this program fail to investigate possible external effects upon neighbors in both receiving and original neighborhoods.³⁰ Results from logistic regression indicate that income and behavioral problems are related to neighborhood poverty rates. His analysis of the limited empirical evidence implies that net social benefits will be larger if neighborhoods with greater than 15 percent poverty rates are replaced by neighborhoods having less than 15 percent poverty rates, while net social benefits will be smaller if neighborhoods with 40 percent poverty rates are replaced with neighborhoods having between 15-40 percent poverty rates. He correctly asserts that, “unless very low-poverty neighborhoods can be opened up for occupation by the poor, de-concentration efforts should halt, because merely transferring the poor from high- to moderate-poverty neighborhoods is likely to be socially inefficient”.³¹

If, however, residential mobility is a solution to poverty concentration the general assumption is that lower poverty is better than higher poverty. However, little knowledge exists about neighborhoods with poverty rates in the range of 10 to 30 percent. Khadduri (2001), for example, argues that the breakdown of income within a housing unit for successful mixed-income housing is also ambiguous, and it is unknown what fractions of poor families with children make sense within housing developments.³² So perhaps the effectiveness of residential mobility is a matter of scope, whereby helping a few select individuals is at the forefront, rather than improving society at large. To this effect, Galster and Zobel (1998) suggest that housing dispersal programs are limited in curing aggregate social problems, which is amplified by the lack of data on impacts on neighbors in origin or destination neighborhoods.³³

But, even if the scope of residential mobility is limited to helping a few individuals, the issue of poverty re-concentration in suburbs remains. Another consideration, confirmed by Hartung and Henig's (1997) research suggests that the increasing accessibility of suburbs to minorities and poor has not led to racial or economic integration in suburbs.³⁴ They predict that as long as individual suburban jurisdictions are gatekeepers of affordable housing, without deliberate and proactive support from public authorities the re-concentration of low income residents in low income neighborhoods will likely continue.

In terms of housing policy, the evidence of the residential mobility programs has been mixed. For instance, the Gautreaux Program indicates that open housing opportunities worked well for those residents who decided to move to the suburbs.³⁵ Their move into racially integrated communities and exposure to less segregated neighborhoods over a period of seven to ten years resulted in improved educational performance.³⁶ These findings support the argument that there is a "geography of opportunity," and that where individuals live does indeed affect their opportunities and life outcomes.³⁷

On the other hand, the Yonkers scattered-site public housing initiative, has shown little evidence that movers had significant interaction with their new neighbors, gained access to social capital, or experienced socioeconomic benefits.³⁸ This is most likely due to the proximity within which movers and stayers are located. Most movers continued to attend the same schools and churches as their counterparts, suggesting that a lack of geographic distance between groups factors into the results of this study.³⁹

Another housing policy to de-concentrate the poor, the Hope VI program, is believed to have been successful in replacing the worst housing projects with new, mixed-income, mixed-use communities, and fostering a sense of community/place that is conducive to the development of social capital.⁴⁰ On the other hand, some scholars doubt that HOPE VI has been successful in creating positive change over time.⁴¹ Nor is it certain that lower-income families experience true benefits from residing in mixed-income communities in the long run.⁴² In addition, it is not clear that the HOPE VI benefits of revitalizing select communities trickle down to surrounding neighborhoods.⁴³

Finally, many scholars believe that the MTO demonstration is the most promising study that measures neighborhood effects, and the effectiveness of poverty de-concentration with regard to individual-level outcomes.⁴⁴ A prevalent reason for this belief is the uniqueness of its research design (i.e. large-scale implementation, genuine random assignment). Although results of an interim impacts evaluation have been mixed, the MTO data promise an exciting opportunity for further analyses, and profound scholarly contributions to the housing mobility/neighborhood effects literature.⁴⁵

The debate on poverty (de) concentration and the critiques offered on housing mobility and neighborhood effects as discussed in this literature review indicate that more research is needed to determine factors that make policies targeted at breaking up concentrated poverty successful and unsuccessful. This will

lead to new insights into social policies that can help poor people gain new opportunities while building on existing human capital.

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