The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

The Great Divide October 26, 2013, 2:30 pm

Division Street, U.S.A.

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The Great Divide is a series about inequality.

Tags:

Income Inequality, Poverty, Race and Ethnicity, Real Estate and Housing (Residential), Segregation and Desegregation

We don't talk much about "the wrong side of the tracks" in public anymore, but the distinction between one place and another is implicitly understood and often explicitly specified. That location matters greatly for housing values, for example, is taken for granted. Less appreciated is the persistence of neighborhood inequality and its extensive reach into multiple aspects of everyday life. An increasing separation at the top has intensified the effect of spatial divisions on everyone else.

Our understanding of the neighborhood as a consolidating feature of American inequality has roots in a classic tradition of scholarly research. The eminent sociologist William Julius Wilson brought the geographic isolation of poor urban blacks to public attention in 1987 in a book he

famously called “The Truly Disadvantaged.” A few years later, the sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton underscored the profound separation of blacks and whites by neighborhood.

Although much has improved in the inner city since then, it is still common in American cities to find neighborhoods struggling with poverty rates well above the national average, sometimes just streets away from neighborhoods brimming with affluence. While racial segregation has modestly declined in recent decades, the latest data reveal that approximately 60 percent of blacks or whites in metropolitan areas across the United States would have to relocate to achieve racial integration. In New York City, an eye-popping 81 percent of whites or blacks would have to move.

Fifty years after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed to African-Americans on a “lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” racial and economic disparities by place not only remain but are closely connected. Nationwide, close to a third of African-American children born between 1985 and 2000 were raised in high-poverty neighborhoods compared with just 1 percent of whites. Crucially, income does not erase place-based racial inequality — affluent blacks typically live in poorer neighborhoods than the average lower-income white resident.

The great neighborhood divide extends to many of the fundamentals of well-being. Violence, poor physical health, teenage pregnancy, obesity, fear and dropping out of school are all unequally distributed. Getting ahead economically is also shaped by where you live, even more than you might think. Despite the effects of globalization and the rise of technologies that allow us to work or interact virtually anywhere, the economist Raj Chetty and colleagues found that upward mobility — the odds of a child raised in the bottom fifth of income rising to the top fifth as an adult — is lower for those who grew up in cities characterized by

racially and economic segregated neighborhoods.

What many have come to call “mass incarceration” has a local face as well — only a small proportion of communities have experienced America’s prisoner boom whereas others are relatively untouched. I was taken aback to learn that the highest incarceration rate among African-American communities in Chicago was over 40 times higher than the highest ranked white community. This is a staggering difference of kind, not degree. And it does not go unnoticed, even by children. In one neighborhood I came across a wall behind a school with sketches of the grim faces of black men behind prison bars. An open book and diploma were drawn underneath — hope to be sure, but against a backdrop of despair.

The stigmatization and widespread social exclusion of poor neighborhoods is corrosive. Cynicism toward institutions is high despite the commitment of residents to conventional values. In Chicago, for example, lower income and minority residents are more likely to condemn smoking, drinking and fighting among teenagers than upper class or white residents. Yet concentrated poverty lowered perceived trust and social cohesion among fellow residents, reinforcing a negative feedback loop.

Even the simple act of mailing a lost letter you find lying in the street varies greatly. As part of our larger project, a team at the Institute of Social Research conducted a field experiment to determine the rate at which strangers mailed back over 3,000 stamped letters randomly dropped in the streets of Chicago. The rate of return by neighborhood ranged from zero to over 75 percent. After adjusting for things like weather conditions, land use and housing patterns, concentrated poverty predicted lower rates of return.

Less visible are the long-term consequences of growing up in concentrated poverty for human capital development. In Chicago we found that early exposure to severely disadvantaged communities was

associated with diminished verbal skills later in childhood. We estimated that living in concentrated disadvantage depressed the rate of future verbal learning by about four I.Q. points, akin to missing a year of school.

An experiment begun in the mid-1990s by the Department of Housing and Urban Development looked at a similar issue in a different way. Housing vouchers were randomly assigned to poor families that could be redeemed only by moving to a lower poverty neighborhood. Even though final destinations were just marginally better, poor children whose families moved out of the most severely disadvantaged neighborhoods in Baltimore and Chicago showed the largest improvements in cognitive skills. These cities have concentrated poverty, racial segregation and violent crime rates higher than those of Boston, New York or Los Angeles, the other project sites. In other words, in cities with more desperate pockets of isolation, the move was more advantageous.

Neighborhood disadvantage can extend across surprisingly long periods of time in the lives of children and families. My colleagues and I just completed a long-term follow-up of over 1,000 children from the study in Chicago that we began in 1995. We tracked a birth cohort, 9-, 12-, and 15-year-olds, no matter where they moved in the United States. Among the near-majority of black infants born in high poverty neighborhoods in 1995, more than half remained there in 2012; 13 percent had “moved up” to low poverty.

What about downward mobility? Over a third of black infants born in low poverty ended up in high poverty neighborhoods, compared with 2 percent of white children.

The results for adolescents show even greater inequality by race: almost 70 percent of black adolescents raised in concentrated poverty areas remain there as young adults; 55 percent of the small group raised in low poverty nonetheless ended up in high poverty. Again the contrasts are

striking: almost no adolescent whites experience concentrated poverty in the first place, and for the majority who were raised in low poverty, only 9 percent were downwardly mobile 17 years later.

The extent of intergenerational transmission of neighborhood disadvantage is also notable. A study by Patrick Sharkey of N.Y.U. found that approximately half of black families in the United States had lived in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods in consecutive generations since the 1970s, compared with only 7 percent of white families.

Inequality may persist in the lives of individuals, but what about neighborhoods themselves? Do the same neighborhoods remain poor decade after decade, or is poverty "reshuffled"? And what about gentrification?

Although there is always population turnover of individual residents and fluctuations in the poverty rate over time, it turns out that if we know where a neighborhood starts out statistically, we can do rather well predicting where it will end up relative to other neighborhoods. Many poor neighborhoods get stuck for decades.

The "stickiness" of inequality by place is also notable at the high end. The Gold Coast of Chicago is as golden as ever, and elite neighborhoods from the Upper East Side of New York to Bel-Air in Los Angeles are in no danger of even relative decline.

These durable inequalities seem paradoxical when we consider the changing American landscape. Poverty is increasing most rapidly in the suburbs, crime has decreased just about everywhere, and gentrification is reshaping many working-class and poor areas of central cities. New York is the poster child these days for crime reduction and a new type of urban renewal. The media has focused attention on Brooklyn, for example, highlighting neighborhoods undergoing gentrification that were in despair not long ago.

The phenomenon is real but the fact that it makes the news is precisely the point — “rags to riches” is no more common among neighborhoods than it is among people. For every poor neighborhood on the move, more struggle out of the media glare. And while large cities like Detroit have been much in the news for spectacular failure, smaller cities and towns like Flint, Mich., and Port Clinton, Ohio, contain some of America’s poorest and hardest-hit neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, many social policies tend to accentuate these trends rather than mitigate them. The persistent geography of inequality is reinforced by exclusionary zoning, persistent red lining, selective withdrawal of public services, the segregation of low-income public housing, “stop and frisk” policing concentrated in minority areas, school funding tied to property values and the political fragmentation of metropolitan areas. The city line is more than just geography, it typically means a sharp social boundary.

The good news is that we are experimenting with a number of policies, some place-based and others person-based. Both are needed, but in either case the durability of poverty calls for profound long-term investments. Although funding levels are still too low relative to the magnitude of the challenge, sustained investment in disadvantaged communities is at the core of the Obama administration’s “Promise Zones” initiative, modeled in part after Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone. There are also some encouraging results from a long-term effort to develop mixed-income housing in suburban Mount Laurel, N.J. In addition to promoting quality early childhood education and affordable housing, reducing violence must be central to any community intervention.

There is no magic bullet, however, and historical trends caution against quick solutions. In a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, neighborhoods have an effect on people’s lives in part because people and institutions act as if neighborhoods matter, further reinforcing the

reproduction of inequality by place. Crime, perceived safety and the quality of local schools lead to reputations that have real consequences. Neighborhood reputations may well be sturdier than those of individuals, a point not lost on real estate agents.

The tendency of humans to segregate by place has also persisted across long time spans and eras despite the transformation of specific boundaries, political regimes and the layout of cities. Research by archaeologists indicates that spatial divisions like ours were found in ancient cities, too.

The greatest divisions of place today are at the very top, creating what we might call the new 1 percent neighborhoods. In recent decades, cities have been pulling apart; income inequality by neighborhood has increased. As a consequence, the kinds of mixed-income neighborhoods many of us remember from growing up have grown rarer, while exclusively affluent and exclusively poor neighborhoods have grown much more common.

The Great Recession has exacerbated this divergence. Just as they have been among individuals, economic hardships have been unequally shared by neighborhoods: poverty, vacancy rates and particularly unemployment rates increased at a greater clip in disadvantaged and minority neighborhoods from 2005 to 2011 than elsewhere.

We live in a free society, of course, but the high-end spatial concentration of income and its associated resources, like well-endowed schools, security, abundant services and political connections, in effect pulls up the drawbridge from our neighbors. The hypersegregation of “the truly advantaged” speaks volumes about the continuing significance of place and raises important questions about what kind of society we want to be.

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A version of this article appears in print on 10/27/2013, on page SR12 of the NewYork edition with the headline: Division Street, U.S.A..