

The Urban Poor Shall Inherit Poverty

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Sociologist Patrick Sharkey proves a mother's insecure upbringing harms her child as surely as a neighbor's broken window.

An apparent conundrum bedevils our understanding of African American students' inadequate school performance: Blacks from low-income families have worse academic outcomes—test scores and graduation rates, for example—than similarly low-income whites. To some, this suggests that socioeconomic disadvantage cannot cause black student failure; instead, poorly motivated and trained teachers must be to blame for failing to elicit achievement from blacks as they do from whites. This was the theory motivating the George W. Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law and the Obama administration's Race to the Top program.

That flawed conclusion overlooks the fact that low-income blacks differ considerably from low-income whites in their social-class backgrounds. Conventional analyses consider students similarly disadvantaged when their families have incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line, making them eligible for lunch subsidies. Yet zero to 185 percent of poverty is a big span; it includes the destitute as well as stable, though lower-income, working-class households. Black lunch-eligible students are more concentrated at the bottom end of that span than whites, and their families have likely been poor for longer. Lunch-eligible black students are also more likely than lunch-eligible whites to have unemployed, irregularly employed, teen, or single parents and to be affected by lead poisoning, inadequate housing, untreated asthma, and other conditions that demonstrably restrain academic achievement.

These characteristics handicap students *individually*. In 1987, however, William Julius Wilson transformed urban sociology with a now-classic book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, showing that these social and economic handicaps are exacerbated when low-income black students are concentrated in urban ghettos. Wilson observed that when central cities deindustrialized, male unemployment soared.

Simultaneously, civil-rights victories enabled middle-class African Americans to abandon distressed urban areas, leaving behind neighborhoods of concentrated poverty where women could find few marriageable males to support their families, and where there were few employed, stable, and academically successful adults to whom youths could look for inspiration.

Now Patrick Sharkey, a Wilson student and an associate professor of sociology at New York University, has performed an analysis potentially as important as his mentor's. Wilson showed that we cannot explain young people's behavior simply by understanding their individual disadvantage but must account for their neighborhood influences as well. Sharkey's book *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality* shows that these neighborhood influences are even more destructive when exposure takes place over multiple generations. Mothers' child-rearing practices are affected by their neighborhood environments—and by the environments in which the mothers themselves were raised.

Sharkey defines poor neighborhoods as those where at least 20 percent of families have incomes below the poverty line. African American neighborhoods fitting this definition are likely to house many families, even a majority, that are not poor but still qualify as low-income, with lunch-eligible children.

For academic performance, Sharkey uses a scale like the familiar IQ measure, where 100 is the mean and roughly 70 percent of children score about average, between 85 and 115. Using a survey that traces individuals and their offspring since 1968, Sharkey shows that children who come from middle-class (non-poor) neighborhoods and whose mothers grew up in middle-class neighborhoods score an average of 104 on problem-solving tests. Children from poor neighborhoods whose mothers also grew up in poor neighborhoods score lower, an average of 96. Thus, “living in poor neighborhoods over two consecutive generations reduces children’s cognitive skills by roughly eight or nine points ... roughly equivalent to missing two to four years of schooling.”

Sharkey’s startling finding, however, is this: Children in poor neighborhoods whose mothers grew up in middle-class neighborhoods score an average of 102, only slightly below the average scores of children whose families lived in middle-class neighborhoods for two generations. But children who live in middle-class neighborhoods yet whose mothers grew up in poor neighborhoods score an average of only 98. Sharkey concludes that “the parent’s environment during [her own] childhood may be more important than the child’s own environment.”

Young African Americans (from 13 to 28 years old) are now ten times as likely to live in poor neighborhoods as young whites—66 percent of African Americans, compared to 6 percent of whites. Proceeding to describe neighborhood mobility from the previous generation to this one, Sharkey ranks all neighborhoods from richest to poorest based on average household income, then divides the list into quarters. He finds that 67 percent of African American families hailing from the poorest quarter of neighborhoods a generation ago continue to live in such neighborhoods today. But only 40 percent of white families who lived in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods a generation ago still do so.

Considering all black families, 48 percent have lived in poor neighborhoods over at least two generations, compared to 7 percent of white families. If a child grows up in a poor neighborhood, moving up and out to a middle-class area is typical for whites but an aberration for blacks. Black neighborhood poverty is thus more multigenerational, while white neighborhood poverty is more episodic.

Sharkey describes the consequences of multigenerational exposure to poverty not only for academic performance but for family income, labor-force participation, adult occupational status, and wealth. He has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of how being “stuck in place” adds to persistent racial inequality.

Note that Sharkey has described not the consequences of multigenerational poverty but rather the consequences of multi-generational exposure to concentrated poverty in neighborhoods of considerable violence, unemployment, single parenthood, environmental degradation, and hopelessness, whether or not the exposed individuals themselves are poor.

Once Wilson had observed that concentrated neighborhood poverty compounded the harm of an individual’s own poverty, it seemed obvious. But it took *The Truly Disadvantaged* to awaken us. Likewise, Sharkey’s observation that multigenerational exposure to concentrated poverty is more dangerous than current exposure will also become a truism. Sharkey has made it suddenly intuitive to recognize that women raised in stressful, violent, and insecure environments will find it more difficult to develop in their own children the confidence and trust to explore the knowledge and experience necessary for healthy development. Indeed, the argument of this book forces us to acknowledge that the results of efforts to improve the environments of today’s children may not be fully understood or evaluated until we can observe the performance of these children’s children.

Sharkey’s book is magnificent scholarship. Yet he tries to do too much. After *Stuck in Place* plows exciting new ground in descriptive sociology, it examines policy proposals: What should be done about hyper-segregated neighborhoods where African Americans languish, generation upon generation? Sharkey’s proposals reflect contemporary policy fads, are less original, and will be less enduring than his empirical work.

For 50 years, proposals to reduce racial inequality have veered between urging the integration of ghetto residents into white middle-class communities and attempting to improve the quality of life in disadvantaged neighborhoods without dispersing their residents. Advocates usually acknowledge that we should do both but reveal a preference for one. Sharkey is no exception: He says we should do both but dismisses integration's feasibility and endorses improve-the-ghetto programs as examples of what he calls "durable urban policy."

Dismissing integration as an ambition is understandable; every large-scale effort to pursue it has been defeated. Yet every large-scale effort to revitalize distressed urban neighborhoods has also been defeated, and it's puzzling that Sharkey is more discouraged by one failure than the other.

When integrationists have retreated in the face of racist resistance, the consequences have sometimes been unintended and perverse. Black multigenerational exposure to poverty stems, at least in part, from the compromises made following such retreats. The history of public housing, almost synonymous with truly disadvantaged neighborhoods, is an instructive example. When Congress first considered President Harry Truman's public-housing program in 1949, conservative Republicans attached "poison pill" amendments to the bill that would prohibit racial discrimination in the location of projects or in the placement of tenants. The Republicans proposed these amendments knowing that Southern Democrats who otherwise supported public housing (because they needed it in their own cities) would rather defeat the program altogether than accept its integration amendments.

Liberals had to choose between segregated projects—public housing for blacks that would be sited in black neighborhoods—or none at all. A leading liberal and proponent of public housing, Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, said, "I should like to point out to my Negro friends what a large amount of housing they will get under this act. ... I am ready to appeal to history and to time that it is in the best interests of the Negro race that we carry through the housing program as planned, rather than put in the bill an amendment which will inevitably defeat it." Both Houses then voted down the integration amendments.

Whether what followed was in the best interests of the Negro race is questionable. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, public housing purposely concentrated African Americans in inner cities. What Douglas had called the “housing program as planned” became the core of many of the “truly disadvantaged” communities that William Julius Wilson and Patrick Sharkey properly bemoan.

In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson proposed the Model Cities plan, offering funds to a few metropolitan areas for ghetto revitalization, provided that funding recipients also pursued desegregation—for example, by adopting anti-discrimination ordinances, repealing suburban zoning rules that banned apartment construction, and accepting low-income housing in white communities. But Congress again removed the desegregation language. Johnson’s appointees then promised they would refrain from leveraging revitalization grants to force metropolitan integration. Sharkey notes that Model Cities accomplished little, mostly because political realities converted intensive revitalization in a few cities into minimal grants to many, with none getting enough to make a serious difference.

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But Model Cities also had principled opponents. Johnson adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for example, complained that while amelioration of ghetto conditions was necessary (nonetheless, he and his allies mocked it as “gilding the ghetto”), “efforts to improve the conditions of life in the present caste-created slums must never take precedence over efforts to enable the slum population to disperse throughout the metropolitan areas.”

As Mark Santow recounts in his forthcoming *Saul Alinsky and the Dilemma of Race in the Postwar City*, other liberals, most prominently Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, rebuffed Moynihan. Piven and Cloward had been best known for their advocacy of a guaranteed annual income to abolish poverty and for their recommendation that activists could force the enactment of such a guarantee with a campaign to recruit millions of poor families to overload the welfare system by applying for benefits they were entitled to but not receiving. Piven and Cloward now insisted that “strategies must be found to improve ghetto housing without arousing the ire of powerful segments of the white community.” This argument was supported by segregationist Democrats and conservative Republicans and by black-power activists who, disillusioned with failed integration efforts, wanted to revive African American communities from within.

Moynihan thought he might do better with Johnson’s successor and joined the Nixon administration, finding an ally in Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) George Romney, who made a serious attempt to combat black ghettoization. Relying on language in the 1968 Fair Housing Act requiring communities that receive federal funds to “affirmatively further fair housing,” Romney began to withhold water, sewer, and parkland grants from suburbs that maintained exclusionary zoning ordinances or rejected housing projects with black residents. But pressed by political advisers who were sensitive to the white suburban backlash aroused by integration, Nixon reined him in, announcing that “forced integration of the suburbs is not in the national interest.”

Since then, we’ve had only poorly funded and scattershot urban compensatory programs. In education, schools serving poor children get some extra federal funds but not enough to overcome disadvantages that hobble the ability to learn. The George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations promoted “enterprise zones” that, as Sharkey observes, failed to bring significant employment to urban African Americans.

But Sharkey still believes that something along these lines could succeed. He favors three small urban-investment prototypes and would like to see them expanded, or at least more widely tested. One is Jobs-Plus, a Clinton-era effort to saturate housing projects with job training, child care, and income supplements for workforce entrants. Another is Milwaukee's New Hope program with similar work incentives, covering unmarried and childless males as well as welfare mothers. Sharkey acknowledges, however, that the benefits of these programs would likely disappear in a weak economy when African American males in poor neighborhoods would be first fired and last rehired in a subsequent recovery.

The third program is the Harlem Children's Zone, which unites a charter school, health services, and early-childhood and parent education in efforts to send children from ghetto to college. The parent-education services could be particularly important in light of Sharkey's multigenerational analysis, if support for mothers reduces the stress and insecurity of those damaged by having themselves been raised in truly disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The Zone has benefited participants. But founder Geoffrey Canada aims not only to benefit the few children who participate but to influence the entire neighborhood so it no longer produces multigenerational disadvantage. Sharkey acknowledges there is no evidence that the Zone has such a "contamination" effect (which is not the same as saying there is evidence that it has no such effect).

The Obama administration has given small Promise Neighborhoods grants to a few school districts to imitate the Zone, and its Choice Neighborhoods initiative provides better services to displaced former residents of a few torn-down public-housing projects. Both are, at best, token efforts with unproven benefits, but Sharkey says they have "the potential, in theory, to transform some of the nation's most disadvantaged neighborhoods."

He may be right.

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are as urban revitalization has been, sustained attempts to integrate low-income African Americans into middle-class communities have been rarer. One, documented by Princeton sociologist Douglas Massey and his colleagues in *Climbing Mount Laurel*, has shown at least as much promise as the ghetto-based efforts about which Sharkey enthuses.

Eight miles from the impoverished urban environments of Camden, Mount Laurel is an affluent, predominantly white New Jersey township. In 1971, civil-rights groups filed suit over zoning there that prohibited low-income development, and four years later the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that every community statewide, not Mount Laurel alone, had to permit its “fair share” of such housing. Although the ruling spurred an increase in scattered low-income units in many New Jersey suburbs, affluent white towns across the state have schemed to evade or dilute the requirement. Governor Chris Christie wants to dilute it further.

In 2000, a low-income development was finally constructed in Mount Laurel, despite white residents’ predictions of increased crime, deteriorating school quality, and falling property values. The 140 units were 59 percent black and 29 percent Latino; Massey documents that the tenants improved their earnings, mental health, employment status, and children’s educational experiences while white neighbors’ fears were entirely unrealized. Crime and property value trends in Mount Laurel after 2001 were no different from those in nearby white suburbs that had not constructed low-income housing developments at a similar time. The project seems to work.

We’ve now had a half-century of failed urban policy. Low-income African Americans are as isolated, probably more so, as when the Johnson and Nixon administrations feinted toward untying what they understood to be a “white noose” around African American neighborhoods. In 1960, typical African Americans lived in neighborhoods that were 34 percent white. Today, despite the suburbanization of many middle-class African Americans, the average exposure of blacks to whites is virtually unchanged at 35 percent.

Sharkey says urban policy to revitalize ghettos hasn't worked because it hasn't really been tried—it's been too inconsistent, too diffident, too unambitious. This is true. But our persistent unwillingness to spend big sums on improving life in urban ghettos suggests that political obstacles to durable urban policy might be just as great as those faced by integration.

In 1966, Piven and Cloward wrote in *The New Republic* that the reason we don't invest more in ghetto revitalization is suburban whites' fear that attention to urban African Americans' problems will be an invitation to black "invasion." If liberals unequivocally forswear integration, they argued, more urban investments might be forthcoming. In retrospect, this seems quite an implausible explanation of why we've allowed truly disadvantaged neighborhoods to fester.

Now in his second term and five years into his presidency, Barack Obama has, without much fanfare, revived George Romney's politically explosive effort to promote integration. Relying upon the same, mostly ignored language in the 1968 Fair Housing Act that requires communities receiving federal funds to "affirmatively further fair housing," HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan has initiated rulemaking that could again deny money for water projects, sewers, transportation, and parkland to lily-white suburbs that fail to accept subsidized or low-income housing and that maintain zoning ordinances that effectively ban apartment construction. As of this writing, the final rule has not yet been issued, but without having laid a political foundation for such a significant policy, the administration will likely fail if it attempts to take aggressive and controversial actions to integrate the suburbs.

Patrick Sharkey, like Piven and Cloward (and Paul Douglas) before him, is all too aware of the impossible political odds of Donovan's (and Moynihan's and Romney's) plans to integrate the truly disadvantaged into our broader community. "It is time," Sharkey says, "to discard the idea that moving large numbers of families out of the ghetto can be a primary solution to concentrated poverty." But Sharkey fails to confront that it is as daunting to find the enormous investments needed to sufficiently gild the ghetto so its children are no longer raised in environments with such violence, stress, and lack of opportunity that they too frequently bequeath desperation to the next generation.

Stuck in Place is important, but an important book need not feel compelled to end on an upbeat note, with good news about how we can move forward. Trends in inequality are discouraging: For family incomes, within-race inequality has grown and between-race inequality is about where it was 45 years ago as jobs fled urban neighborhoods. Patrick Sharkey would have been safer to be more agnostic about how we can find a way out of the mess he so capably describes.

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