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No Two Ghettos Are Alike

By Mario L. Small

There are times when a theory so well describes a problem that thinking of the problem independent of the theory becomes almost impossible—even when the theory is at odds with the facts. As I try to understand the difficulties of those who live in low-income neighborhoods, I have trouble reconciling today's most prominent theory about American ghettos with much of what I see in the streets. For those of us seeking to make sense of urban poverty, one of the greatest challenges has been to escape the vivid, powerful picture painted by William Julius Wilson.

In his recently reissued 1987 classic, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (University of Chicago Press), Wilson sought to explain the deterioration of predominantly African-American neighborhoods in cities across the country, a decline he witnessed in his own backyard as a faculty member of the University of Chicago living in Hyde Park. Wilson argued that, until the early part of the 1970s, predominantly black neighborhoods had a socially healthy mix of middle-class and low-income residents. However, as well-paying factory jobs left cities, and as the gains of the civil-rights movement generated opportunities for better-off African-Americans, the middle class departed in large numbers, leaving an "inner city" with a high concentration of poverty. The resulting neighborhoods became scarce in the local institutions that sustain community; their residents became socially isolated from mainstream society. Those conditions, in turn, generated the problems we associate with ghettos.

Wilson was persuasive. Inspired by this work, a generation of researchers, many of whom were once graduate students at the University of Chicago, took to Chicago ghetto neighborhoods and found much of what he described. Loïc Wacquant, a student of

Wilson's, spent several years in the early 1990s studying low-income ghettos in Chicago and discovered severe deinstitutionalization and isolation. Sudhir Venkatesh, also a Wilson student, studied gang behavior in one of the city's most notorious housing projects, the now-demolished Robert Taylor Homes, and found, among other things, high levels of organized violence. Eric Klinenberg studied the notorious 1995 Chicago heat wave and found that neighborhoods with the highest rates of heat-related deaths were those experiencing high rates of isolation and a scarcity of commercial establishments. As a recent [article](#) in *The Chronicle Review* described, Wilson's work permanently altered the field.

Wilson had left Chicago by the time he became one of my dissertation advisers. But having lived in Chicago for nearly eight years, I, too, have witnessed much of what he observed. Just south of the campus of the University of Chicago is Woodlawn, one of the high-poverty neighborhoods that inspired Wilson's work. To a newcomer, many of Woodlawn's streets feel eerily depopulated. Block after block, one sees scores of empty lots alongside townhouses in the once-thriving area. Long stretches of 63rd Street, once a hub of commercial activity, sit empty, an occasional bus stop or solitary building surrounded by barren brown fields. Many of these blocks lack a single barbershop, church, grocery store, or other ordinary commercial establishment. Public transportation is decent but precarious. If you miss an evening bus, you must wait for an eternity at an empty bus stop—there are no taxis to be found, since cabdrivers hardly expect to do business here. Even streets with some construction activity can feel desolate, as many of the units have been marked by the city with a large red "X" to signal, for firefighters, a hazardous or uninhabited location.

A quantitative analysis confirms that impression. According to the 2010 U.S. census, the tracts that constitute Woodlawn house about 9,000 persons per square mile, a relatively sparse population for a neighborhood in the middle of America's third-largest city. In fact, in 1970 that same area had 22,000 people per square mile, a robust, lively community capable of sustaining a strong institutional presence. My research team conducted a

careful census of the neighborhood's commercial and nonprofit organizations, its pharmacies, grocery stores, barbershops, and the like, and there were few establishments to count. In the summer of 2013, the neighborhood had only three pharmacies, or about 13 for every 100,000 residents. Grocery stores, gyms or community centers, and barbershops numbered, respectively, 13, eight, and 21 per 100,000. Wilson's twin notions of social isolation and institutional deprivation seem to describe the place perfectly.

But I have also lived in other cities, like New York, and studied poor neighborhoods there, where the ideas of isolation and deinstitutionalization seem so alien as to appear wildly inappropriate. Consider a section of central Harlem that includes Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone. While the set of tracts we are studying has a poverty rate of 34 percent, a figure even higher than Woodlawn's 30 percent, there is scarcely an empty lot in sight. Nearly every block on every street is dense with brownstones, townhouses, and commercial establishments. There are laundries, restaurants, clothing stores, barbershops, hair braiders, nail salons, liquor stores, and child-care centers everywhere. The streets are as busy with foot, car, and bus traffic as those of Woodlawn are empty, buzzing with nearly 24-hour activity around 125th Street, perhaps Harlem's equivalent of Woodlawn's once-thriving 63rd.

And the statistics confirm the impressions. For every 9,000 people in a Woodlawn square mile, there are 86,000 per square mile in our tracts in central Harlem. The numbers of pharmacies, grocery stores, gyms or community centers, and barbershops are 40, 34, 37, and 40, respectively, per 100,000 residents. Harlem has not merely more establishments than Woodlawn; it has more per capita. And these commercial and nonprofit organizations are connected to one another and to the mainstream of New York City by an abundance of subway lines, bus routes, and bike paths.

Lest we conclude that life is easy for low-income residents of Harlem, note that high density increases daily stressors, including traffic, congestion, garbage, and rodents. About a quarter of Harlem's children have been reported to suffer from asthma, the product, many experts believe, of the high concentration of

pollutants and other triggers: dust, roach feces, flakes of skin from rats and other animals, paint chips from thousands of old homes, and exhaust from the hundreds of diesel trucks that supply the local stores daily. If living in Harlem feels difficult to its residents, the reason is not isolation; it is crowding.

Poor neighborhoods are difficult places to live; but not all are difficult in the same way.

Woodlawn and Harlem happen to be well known and, in their own ways, historic areas. Nevertheless, the differences between Woodlawn and Harlem parallel those between Chicago's poor neighborhoods as a whole and those in New York City. In Chicago, the population density of tracts that are at least 30-percent poor is about 14,000 per square mile; in New York City, it is about 57,000. Indeed, had a generation of researchers developed the pre-eminent theories of poverty concentration not in Chicago but in New York City, we might well have come to believe that the quintessential experience of the black urban ghetto is not isolation but overcrowding.

Any two cities will differ in a host of traits, and one might wonder whether New York is exceptional while Chicago is typical, more characteristic of the average American city. After all, New York is as a whole more densely populated than most cities in the country.

We looked. It turns out that Chicago's poor neighborhoods are scarcer in organizations than those in the average city, and even than those in cities with which Chicago is typically compared. Jessica Feldman and I studied the distribution of more than 30 establishments—including child-care centers, banks, supermarkets, and hospitals—in high-poverty ZIP codes in all U.S. cities, using data from the early years of the 21st century. We found that poor neighborhoods in Chicago had consistently fewer establishments per capita of almost every type than did equally poor neighborhoods in the average U.S. city, fewer than those in the average among the nation's 10 largest cities, and fewer even than those in the average Rust Belt city.

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In fact, Feldman and I found that whereas poor neighborhoods in Chicago tend to have fewer establishments per capita than the city's nonpoor neighborhoods do, the reverse is true for most U.S. cities. For every city where owners of laundries and grocery stores avoid low-income neighborhoods for fear of losing business, there is at least another one where a preponderance of owners seeks such neighborhoods' low rents and prospects for redevelopment. Our most prominent picture of what ghettos look like has been built on a special case—an important, historic, and interesting one, to be sure, but a single case nonetheless.

Indeed, the importance of Chicago to how sociologists think of cities is difficult to overstate. The University of Chicago opened the nation's first sociology department in 1892, and many of its early members, such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, have been credited with creating the field of urban research. A long line of researchers followed Park and Burgess in conceiving of Chicago as an urban research "laboratory," one in which universal urban processes can be observed in detail.

A sociological theory is at once a linked set of hypotheses about a social phenomenon and a picture of how that phenomenon manifests itself in real life. Wilson's theory linked a large and intricate set of hypotheses that involved large-scale economic changes, migration patterns, poverty concentration, isolation, and many other conditions, such as births outside of marriage and violence. To his enormous credit, many (by no means all) of these hypotheses turned out to be confirmed.

Along the way, however, the work imprinted in our collective minds a particular and not representative picture of ghettoization, not because that impression was essential to Wilson's aims but because the theory dominated the discourse on urban poverty. That picture, in turn, precluded us from asking important questions about the theory: Does it describe the ghetto one actually sees in New York, or San Francisco, or Albuquerque, or San Diego? If concentrated poverty undermines local

establishments, then why does Harlem have so many laundries, drugstores, child-care centers, beauty shops, and bodegas? If poor neighborhoods are so depopulated, then why do so many mobilize against gentrification?

In fact, a set of transformations that have taken place over the past 25 years suggests that we can no longer afford to ignore such questions—heterogeneity, not homogeneity, might be the defining feature of today's ghettos. Over that period, the nation witnessed a rise in immigration that, recent slowdown notwithstanding, took place at markedly different rates in different cities. For example, low-income black neighborhoods across Chicago's South Side remained predominantly black, while many in upper Manhattan saw a rapid growth of Dominicans and other immigrant groups. Immigrants have historically had high rates of entrepreneurship, and in research with Monica McDermott, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I have found that poor neighborhoods tend to have a greater density of commercial establishments as the proportion of immigrants increases.

The last quarter-century also saw passage of the 1996 welfare-reform act, through which the federal government granted the states greater authority in and responsibility for managing their own welfare rolls, and thus contributed to substantially different welfare regimes in different parts of the country. For example, in July 2011, New York State provided welfare benefits to a single-headed family of three of \$753 per month; Illinois, \$432; Texas (home of Houston, the fourth-largest city in the nation), \$260. A neighborhood of people getting \$260 in assistance and one of folks receiving triple that are likely to be very different neighborhoods.

Finally, recent decades saw the housing boom and its subsequent collapse alter the economic landscape in some regions of the country far more than others, with cities in, say, Florida and Nevada facing more-radical fluctuations than those in Pennsylvania and Ohio did. The cost of owning a home, the threat of gentrification, the fear of depopulation—those conditions depend on how hard a city was hit.

Differences among cities matter. A group of economists recently [found](#) that the prospects of upward mobility in the United States depend significantly on the city. Moving up the income ladder is much harder in some areas than in others. "For example," the paper's authors write, "the probability that a child reaches the top quintile of the national income distribution starting from a family in the bottom quintile is 4.4 percent in Charlotte but 12.9 percent in San Jose." The diverse conditions in urban ghettos will surely help explain why.

While no theory can or should account for every difference, no good theory should resist the facts that arise in other contexts or in new eras. Density matters, and we should seek to understand how isolated ghettos versus overcrowded ghettos structure the opportunities of those who live in them. To ignore heterogeneity for the sake of simplification is to favor convenience over common sense, to risk having the search for a single archetype slip our thinking into stereotype. If all theories must paint a picture of one or another sort, then at least they should ensure that the artist holds a full palette.

Mario L. Small is a professor of sociology and dean of the social-sciences division at the University of Chicago. His recent books include Unanticipated Gains (Oxford University Press, 2009) and Reconsidering the Urban Disadvantaged (Sage, 2013), which was co-edited with Scott Allard.

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