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The perils of assuming that the South Side of Chicago represents poor black neighborhoods

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# Is there such a thing as 'the ghetto'?

## The perils of assuming that the South Side of Chicago represents poor black neighborhoods

Mario Luis Small

### Density

One of the first things you notice when ascending from the A train subway stop at 125th Street in Harlem, where I lived while conducting 5 years of research in New York City, is the density. It is a density of both people and organizations, as just about every lot on either side of the street is occupied by a clothing store, bank, pharmacy, grocery store, electronics outfit, beauty salon or restaurant (such as the legendary Manna's), and every conceivable space on either sidewalk is filled with old and young, mostly African American men, women and children struggling to get past the crowds (see Newman, 1999).<sup>1</sup> It was a marked contrast to many wealthier neighborhoods in the city, where the streets were often desolate and all but a few specialty establishments were difficult to locate. In many ways, Harlem reminded me of Villa Victoria, a predominantly Puerto Rican housing complex in Boston I had studied for 2 years, where the parks and plazas of the neighborhood were often packed with people, and where residents could find, within and around their complex, restaurants, childcare centers, grocery stores, pharmacies, clinics, schools, churches, parks and playgrounds (Small, 2004, ch. 6).

I thought of both neighborhoods when, soon after recently moving to Chicago, I spent

hours walking block upon block of its South Side neighborhood, including 63rd Street, the area a few blocks south of the University of Chicago where Loïc Wacquant conducted much of the research for *Urban Outcasts* (*UO*). What I first noticed, and what took me months to get used to, was the utter lack of density, the surprising preponderance of empty spaces, vacant lots and desolate streets, even as late as 2006. Repeatedly, I asked myself, where *is* everyone?

The contrasts among these three poor urban neighborhoods are instructive, providing a hint as to the notable strengths and important limitations of *UO*. As an ethnographic study of black poor Chicago, especially as contrasted to the French *banlieues*, the book is an admirable and successful mix of ethnographic research and original survey analysis, one that rang true to me when witnessing the neighborhood many years after the author had conducted his research. As a theory of 'the ghetto' in the American city, the book, I suggest, is onto important themes but requires considerable refinement and reevaluation.

### The book

*Urban Outcasts*, the culmination of nearly two decades of research and writing about urban poverty and inequality in the USA and

France, makes several arguments, large and small. The central points are that black poor neighborhoods in the American city have entered the phase of the 'hyperghetto', characterized by extreme marginality; that, despite the attempts of both thinkers and pundits to argue that the French *banlieue* has come to resemble the American ghetto, the two institutions are far more different than similar; and that what we need today is a new perspective on urban marginality that considers not merely the significance of racial and economic factors but also the importance of the state, including the multiple political mechanisms (from the revaluation of the welfare state to the imposition of a police state in many neighborhoods) that have ensured the marginality of urban populations. One of the most important elements of the book is its advancement of the institutional conception of the new ghetto: 'the American hyperghetto is an ethnically and socially homogeneous universe characterized by low organizational density and weak penetration by the state in its social components' (p. 5). To understand urban marginality in both countries, Wacquant conducted extensive field research in the South Side and also West Side of Chicago during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and interviewed French officials, evaluated official documents and conducted a small field study in La Courneuve, a working-class suburb of Paris. Many of the chapters in the book are extensions of earlier work by Wacquant, and several of the arguments have been made before by his former collaborator William J. Wilson. Nevertheless, the book expands on these arguments and attempts a comprehensive theoretical synthesis of what, in previous work, had been independent, piecemeal critiques of research on urban inequality.

The book is conceptually thick, theoretically ambitious and full of food for thought. One of its major strengths is its serious attempt at a comparative study of urban inequality in two different industrialized countries, something most American researchers on urban poverty have neglected to undertake. The

comparative perspective is strengthened further by Wacquant's attempt to draw out a theory of the role of the political economy in what he sees as the difference between the ghetto and the *banlieue* (or *banlieues*, as he appropriately insists—more on this below). A second strength is that the book, while based on fieldwork, explicitly aims to move theoretically beyond what Wacquant observed in the case of the South Side, drawing parallels between Chicago and other cities and developing a theoretical perspective to understand other cities. More urban ethnographers should do this, since, at least in the context of urban inequality, a case study that makes no attempt at conceptual generalizability leaves the reader not knowing what to do with its findings and even drawing unwarranted conclusions. Failing to speak to broader issues also leaves ethnographic work vulnerable to the all-too-common attack by quantitative researchers that the work is site-specific, or, worse, 'anecdotal'. Wacquant's work fundamentally attempts to counter the particularistic tendency (Small, 2004).

The book, finally, scores major points by arguing—following the examples set by Logan and Molotch (1987) and many others—that the state matters to urban conditions in ways too few have considered. I take this to be one of the strongest contributions of the book. For years, much of the discussion on the urban condition had settled on a sort of dichotomy between the significance of race and that of class—heightened by the debates between Massey (Massey and Denton, 1993) and Wilson (1987, 1996) of the 1990s—with the polity as a relatively neglected third wheel. The book contributes to an important new set of works reconsidering the role of the state (e.g. Marwell, 2004).

### Theory and evidence

A theory is only as good as the elements of the empirical world that it reveals, clarifies or helps understand more accurately. As we shall see, the limitations of the book stem from the

fact that the theory often reveals less than it could, and even obscures issues it should reveal, in part because the author has often failed to follow some of his own perceptive critiques. This problem undermines the book's theoretical conception of the American ghetto, and my comments will focus on this question. I recognize that this ignores the book's contributions to our understanding of *banlieues*, but I am not an expert on them, I believe the analysis of them is in some ways more effective, and I suspect other reviewers will have much to say about them.

*The South Side of Chicago vs. black poor ghettos in all other cities*

The book's theory of the American ghetto is based entirely, in empirical terms, on the black poor neighborhoods in the South (and West) Sides of Chicago. This allows the book a rich discussion of what a ghetto looks like, its organizational deprivation and social desolation, but it also leads to both theoretical and empirical problems.

The most important theoretical problem is surprising. While the book has rightly argued that we must take heterogeneity across neighborhoods seriously when looking at French urban marginality, it fails to heed this advice, in the extreme, when discussing the ghetto. Consider the following statement on page 135, footnote 1: 'Let me emphasize ... that, if there is a signal characteristic of the French *banlieues*, it is their extreme heterogeneity as regards their urban texture and economic activities as well as their population and occupational composition.' By contrast, the book emphasizes repeatedly that the ghetto is a homogeneous entity with a common set of characteristics across cities. In many respects, while there are many *banlieues*; there is only one ghetto, which is why the ghetto is conceived as an institution.<sup>2</sup>

The book's justification appears to be theoretical and empirical—its theory of the ghetto assumes that the concentration of poverty was caused by the specific history of

the Black Belt migration and segregation, and its evidence comes from the organizational deprivation and ethnic homogeneity the author observed in Chicago. The problem is that the organizational deprivation observed in Chicago is not characteristic of poor black neighborhoods in other cities, and that non-black poor neighborhoods often face more organizational deprivation than black poor neighborhoods. In other words, there is just as much *heterogeneity* in US urban marginality as there is in the French case.

I will consider the characteristics of the ghetto one at a time. *UO* argues that, in addition to being dangerously violent, the ghetto is characterized by 'low organizational density' and 'weak penetration by the state in its social components' (p. 5). We get a sense of what low organizational density refers to later when the book describes 'abandoned buildings, vacant lots ... boarded up churches' and the like. Along with the idea of organizational deprivation is the notion of institutional abandonment, which has resulted in 'degraded' schools and medical facilities (pp. 83–88). Thus, the four principal characteristics of the ghetto appear to be (a) *low safety* due to violence and police repression, (b) *low quality* schools and medical facilities, (c) *low density* of day-to-day organizations such as churches, and (d) *low involvement* by the state (coupled with high repressive involvement through the police force). I will have little to say about violence and feelings of safety, since the argument is neither new nor controversial, and in fact it seems to be supported by recent experimental evidence, which finds that neighborhood poverty decreases feelings of safety (Goering and Feins, 2003). The second of these characteristics is also largely uncontroversial: that public schools in Chicago and other cities are of deplorably low quality is a proposition few will disagree with—and one many have stated many times before. On the first two characteristics, I suspect the theory is right, though only explicitly comparative research can tell for sure. I take up the third characteristic below and the fourth later in the paper.

Surprisingly, the book offers no evidence from other cities to document that black urban ghettos elsewhere are as organizationally deprived as those of Chicago. Based on publicly available data on organizational density, I compiled Table 1, which presents the number of day-to-day organizations (per 1000) that, according to *UO*, have withered away from the black urban ghetto. The table compares organizational density in black poor ghettos in Chicago to that in black poor ghettos in all other cities. To make the problem tractable, I defined poor black ghettos as zip codes in which the population was at least 50 percent (non-Hispanic) black and 30 percent poor in 2000.<sup>5</sup> (This is not a perfect solution, and below I assess whether this matters.) In the country's 331 metropolitan areas, 252 zip codes met these criteria. In Chicago, the eight zip codes that did capture those of the poor black South Side neighborhood that Wacquant studied.<sup>4</sup> The table shows results separately for small and large establishments. It shows, for example, that the average black poor neighborhood in all

cities other than Chicago had 1.2 small restaurants per 1000 residents.

I should make clear from the outset that the brief presentation in these few pages does not purport to be an extensive analysis of this question. (For a more extensive analysis of related questions, see Small and McDermott, 2006.) However, the figures will illustrate several of the pitfalls of generating a theory of urban marginality in the USA based on black poor ghettos in the single city of Chicago. There are several things to note in the table. First, notice that black poor ghettos in Chicago are *consistently* less organizationally dense than those in other cities, with the exception of the number of small laundries per 1000 residents. In some cases, the difference is stark. For example, the top panel shows that the average black poor ghetto of Chicago has 82 percent fewer small restaurants, 95 percent fewer small banks and 72 percent fewer small convenience stores than a black poor ghetto in the average city.

Second, size matters, but does not change the story. For some types of establishments,

Table 1. Organizational density in black poor ghettos of Chicago and of all other cities, 2000

	In black poor ghettos, number of establishments per 1,000 residents		Differential	Pct
	In all other cities	In Chicago		
<i>Small establishments</i>				
Hardware stores	0.06	0.03	-0.03	-48%
Grocery stores	0.40	0.35	-0.05	-13%
Convenience stores	0.19	0.05	-0.14	-72%
Pharmacies	0.20	0.11	-0.09	-45%
Banks	0.06	0.00	-0.06	-97%
Credit unions	0.46	0.02	-0.44	-95%
Childcare centers	0.32	0.18	-0.14	-44%
Restaurants	1.20	0.22	-0.98	-82%
Laundries	0.04	0.08	0.04	90%
Churches	0.98	0.37	-0.61	-62%
<i>Large establishments</i>				
Large hardware stores	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
Large grocery stores	0.02	0.01	-0.01	-58%

Source: Zip Business Patterns, 2000. U.S. Census. Zip data matched to 331 metropolitan areas. Black poor ghettos defined as zip codes at 50% black or more and 30% poor or more. There are 8 zip codes fitting this categorization in Chicago; 244 in all other cities combined. Small establishments have fewer than 20 employees; large establishments have 100 or more.

the absence of small stores may be due to the presence of large ones. For example, one Home Depot serves more people than three tiny hardware stores. The same may be said when comparing large supermarkets to corner store groceries. As the bottom panel shows, there is certainly a scarcity of large hardware stores and supermarkets in black poor ghettos, something Wacquant and others have noted. Again, however, with respect to large grocery stores, the scarcity is much greater in Chicago than elsewhere.

Table 1, however, does not provide a sufficiently adequate gauge with respect to organizational density. An important issue is that organizational deprivation may be relative. Even if Chicago (black poor) ghettos are significantly more deprived than those in other cities, they may still accurately reflect the differences between ghetto and non-ghetto neighborhoods in any given city. To assess this possibility, Table 2 shows the same figures as Table 1, except only for all neighborhoods that are *not* black poor ghettos. The figures reinforce the critique even further. The first two columns show that non-ghettos

in other cities and non-ghettos in Chicago tend to have similar organizational densities (with the notable exception that Chicago non-ghettos have an especially large 2.24 small restaurants per 1000 residents, living up to its reputation, buffered by its annual Taste of Chicago festival, as one of the country's restaurant capitals). The third and fourth columns present the difference in organizational densities between ghettos and non-ghettos for both Chicago and all other cities. As the columns make clear, in Chicago, black poor ghettos are much more organizationally deprived than non-ghettos than is the case in other cities. In other cities, organizational density is actually *not* lower (and sometimes slightly higher) in ghettos, which is consistent with what I observed in both Harlem, New York, and Villa Victoria, Boston. Stated differently, a study of the ghetto based only on Chicago would conclude that black poor ghettos have lower 'organizational density' than other neighborhoods; one based on the average American city would not.

Why does this matter? Clearly, organizational density is only one of many indicators

Table 2. Organizational density in neighborhoods that are not poor black ghettos, Chicago and all other cities

	In non-ghettos, number of establishments per 1,000 residents		Number in ghettos minus number in non-ghettos	
	In all other cities	In Chicago	In all other cities	In Chicago
<i>Small establishments</i>				
Hardware stores	0.05	0.05	0.01	-0.02
Grocery stores	0.17	0.22	0.23	0.13
Convenience stores	0.12	0.28	0.07	-0.22
Pharmacies	0.10	0.30	0.10	-0.19
Banks	0.06	0.17	0.00	-0.16
Credit unions	0.08	0.19	0.38	-0.17
Childcare centers	0.20	0.26	0.12	-0.08
Restaurants	0.51	2.24	0.69	-2.02
Laundries	0.04	0.14	0.00	-0.06
Churches	0.63	0.98	0.35	-0.61
<i>Large establishments</i>				
Large hardware stores	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Large grocery stores	0.02	0.03	0.00	-0.02

Source: See Table 1.

of conditions in poor black neighborhoods, but the figures demonstrate the dangers of developing theories about all black poor neighborhoods based on the city of Chicago. *The average black poor neighborhood in the USA does not look at all like the South Side of Chicago.* In fact, as an ethnographer, one of the first things I noticed about Chicago's poorer South Side neighborhoods was their low *population* density. A quick tabulation from 2000 US census data confirmed and clarified my suspicions: the nine poor black zip codes in New York City meeting the poor black ghetto criteria have an average of 52,167 persons per square mile; the eight zip codes in Chicago, 12,420—less than one-quarter the population density. Depopulation, like organizational deprivation, is not characteristic of all poor black ghettos.<sup>5</sup> At a minimum, the tables suggest that urban poverty researchers should examine what accounts for *differences* across poor black neighborhoods, instead of insisting on the much-repeated but little supported idea that black poor neighborhoods can be understood as a single and homogenous institution perfectly represented by Chicago's South Side.

There are three potential objections to my critique. One, the figures I have presented are for the year 2000, not 1980, the year from which much of *UO*'s demographic analysis of Chicago's South and West Sides is derived. If so, then are we to read *UO* as a theory of the 1980s, not the new millennium? The final two chapters of the book strongly suggest the author believes the theory is just as relevant today as it was then, in which case, the theory must confront the current data. Two, the cutoffs I have employed (50 percent black and 30 percent poor) are, in some respects, arbitrary. This is partly true, as would be the case regardless of the actual cutoff employed. In spite of their many problems—as the author has rightly noted in this and other publications—cutoffs are necessary if we are to assess theories empirically, as *UO* recognizes on page 104 while employing them for its own analysis. In addition, the cutoff represents the concept of interest, high poverty,

predominantly black urban neighborhoods, and, as we saw, it identified the right neighborhoods for the city of Chicago.

A third potential objection is that while the neighborhoods in the tables are poor black neighborhoods, they are not the *ghettos* that *UO* is referring to, since not all poor black neighborhoods are ghettos. This is a potentially important issue. If there is, indeed, a finer distinction, the distinction must be much clearer, and it must state specifically which poor black neighborhoods are actually ghettos, how many people live in them and how important to the overall story of urban inequality they are. For example, if the idea of the ghetto were to refer operationally only to urban zip codes that are both 30 percent or higher poor and not merely majority black but at least 90 percent black, then it should recognize that only 59 zip codes in the entire country fit this category, that only 1.2 million African Americans live in them, and that this number (while not inconsiderable) is only 4 percent of the *entire* black *urban* population.<sup>6</sup> My reading of *UO* assumed it to be a comprehensive statement on the condition of urban blacks (or poor urban blacks), not on that of a tiny minority of them.

In the end, however, it is possible that the idea of 'the ghetto'—like the idea of 'the underclass', which the author appropriately decries—has outlived its usefulness.

### *Other poor ghettos*

During the 1990s, no major demographic group increased its urban population to a greater extent than the Latino population. From 1990 to 2000, the Latino population in the USA increased by 50 percent to 35.3 million.<sup>7</sup> Latinos in 2000, in fact, outnumbered non-Latino blacks in metropolitan areas, by more than 3 million (32 million to 29 million). These facts should have prompted the author to consider more seriously how groups other than African Americans were affecting urban marginality. In fact, however, the book adopts a certain

black–white duality (p. 231) that appears outdated given the ethnic heterogeneity of the American city today. In truth, it is not just the *banlieues* that are ethnically heterogeneous.

Certainly, as *UO* and writers such as Massey and Denton (1993) have documented, no population is more likely to live in concentrated poverty today than African Americans. African Americans are also more likely than any other group to experience residential segregation. But as a theory of marginality, the book must take into account that a major population (Latinos) rose to occupy urban neighborhoods during the 1980s and 1990s in a way that increased the neighborhoods' ethnic heterogeneity. Had the book done so, it might have found reason to revise its theory of marginality when comparing black poor ghettos and Latino poor ghettos. While some have argued, based on Chicago research, that Latino poor ghettos experience much greater organizational density than the former (Klinenberg, 2002), this is not the case in the country as a whole. Consider Table 3.

The table compares black and Latino poor ghettos by the organizational density measures employed earlier. (Large establishments are excluded given that, as we have seen, they are very scarce in most poor ghettos, regardless of ethnic characteristics or location.) Latino poor ghettos are zip codes

in which at least 50 percent of the population is Latino and at least 30 percent is poor. With two exceptions (pharmacies and laundries), Latino poor ghettos are consistently *less* organizationally dense than black poor ghettos. Are these not, therefore, more marginal neighborhoods? Should they not play a role in a comprehensive theory of urban marginality? If they do, then what does this say about *UO*'s argument that the specific history of black American neighborhoods is the most important cause behind the loss of organizational density in urban neighborhoods? At a minimum, a comprehensive theory of urban marginality in American cities cannot continue to assume that we live in a black–white world.

#### *The state*

The book's discussion about the importance of the state is both welcome and refreshing, clearly one of its strengths. However, the flaw here is not of commission but of omission. That is, the *local* polity is missing at junctures where it would make a difference. The state, in *UO*, too often refers to the federal government, and when it refers to local government, little account is taken of the fact that local governments differ

Table 3. Organizational density in black poor ghettos and Latino poor ghettos, all cities, 2000

	Number of small establishments per 1,000 residents		Differential
	In black ghettos	In Latino ghettos	
Hardware stores	0.06	0.04	-0.02
Grocery stores	0.40	0.32	-0.08
Convenience stores	0.19	0.12	-0.07
Pharmacies	0.20	0.23	0.03
Banks	0.06	0.04	-0.02
Credit unions	0.45	0.08	-0.36
Childcare centers	0.31	0.24	-0.07
Restaurants	1.17	0.49	-0.68
Laundries	0.04	0.06	0.01
Churches	0.96	0.39	-0.57

Source: See Table 1.

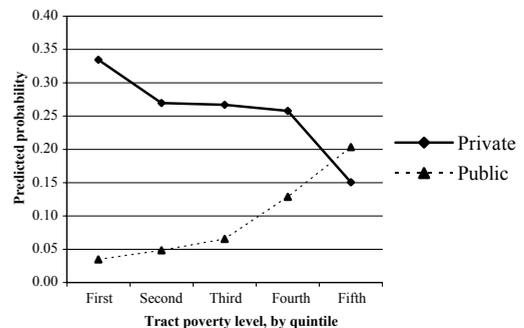
dramatically from city to city in their level of involvement with urban conditions. This is the case whether the state acts as a repressive force, through the use of the police, or as an enabling force, through the support of public institutions. In its contrast of the ghetto and the *banlieues*, the book suggests that ‘the isolation America’s urban outcasts is the product of an active process of institutional detachment’ (p. 224) in which governments fail to support local services and institutions in poor neighborhoods. And elsewhere: ‘the black American ghetto has undergone an accelerating process of organizational desertification which ... was directly induced by the abdication of the state’ (p. 214).

The problem is that while federal retrenchment has certainly occurred (Salamon, 1995), local governments, both state and city, which are elected by local residents, often interfere to counteract the detrimental consequences of federal neglect. In fact, if governments truly matter, the logical conclusion is that differences among local governments in their level of institutional involvement (or detachment) should produce remarkably different ghettos from city to city. The issue is not whether federal retrenchment occurred (it certainly did); the issue is whether different localities responded to it differently, and whether different responses resulted in heterogeneity across poor urban ghettos. Again, empirical data from cities other than Chicago would have made an important difference in the sophistication of the theory.

Comparative data on the influence of the local state on urban conditions are hard to come by, and this is not the place for an extended exegesis. As before, however, some illustrative data should provide an indication of why local polities, from a comparative perspective, should have played a bigger role in the theory advanced in *UO*. In a co-authored study (Small and Stark, 2005) based on New York City, I examined the role of the local state in the provision of one service, childcare centers. This is arguably the most important urban organization for mothers of young children. Many have argued that, in

Chicago, poor neighborhoods lack the childcare centers to meet supply, in part because the federal government has (with the exception of Head Start) left childcare to the markets. In New York City, however, local governments (with some federal funds) have intervened to buffer the supply of childcare centers in poor neighborhoods. While this supply does *not* come close to meeting demand, it does make availability of childcare centers in poor neighborhoods comparable to that in *non-poor* neighborhoods. Figure 1, reproduced from Small and Stark (2005, p. 1028) presents the predicted probability that a census tract will have a childcare center after adjusting for indicators associated with demand. It lists the adjusted probabilities by tract poverty level. Because of the influence of the state, the loss of privately funded childcare centers in poor areas has been counteracted by the availability of publicly funded ones.

This is a story in which not merely the federal but also the local government matters, an important issue missing in the broad strokes of *UO*. To be sure, no book can cover both macro issues and their ground-level manifestations. But the book’s determination to develop an institutional conception of the ghetto and its failure to apply in the USA the eye for heterogeneity it employed in France have allowed it to miss an important mechanism—the local government—mediating the relationship between federal governments and cities.



**Figure 1** Predicted probability of a childcare center in tract, by tract poverty level, New York City. Source: Small and Stark (2005).

## Conclusion

*UO* provides a provocative set of propositions that offer much food for thought but do not quite sum up to a compelling enough theory of urban poverty and marginality, in large part because of its over-reliance on the single if powerful case of black poor ghettos in Chicago and its reluctance to take seriously the heterogeneity that the country's 331 metropolitan areas certainly exhibit. In the end, however, I believe this problem calls for a revaluation, not an abandonment of the theory. While the idea of *the* ghetto is as flawed to this reader as that of *the banlieue* was to Wacquant, the comparative perspective on the city and the more serious attention to the state that *UO* calls for constitute important advice that more researchers in urban inequality should heed.

## Notes

- 1 Today, much of Harlem has experienced gentrification. Nevertheless, the street and sidewalk life remain mostly African American, even as the households have seen a notable increase in the number of whites and other groups.
- 2 In fact, the book consistently refers to *banlieues* in the plural and the ghetto in the singular. For example: 'These theories are consistent with the radical makeover of both the black American ghetto and the working-class *banlieues* of France' (p. 241). And: 'the methodical comparison of the implosion of the black American ghetto with the decomposition of the working-class territories of France and Western Europe ... reveals ...' (p. 286).
- 3 Data are available only at the zip, not the tract level. I employed a slightly lower poverty threshold than is customary when using tract data (30 percent instead of 40 percent), because very few zip codes are 40 or more percent poor.
- 4 They are 60472, 60612, 60621, 60624, 60636, 60637, 60644 and 60653.
- 5 Incidentally, it is worth noting, New York City is an outlier as well, more dense than most poor black neighborhoods. Chicago is on the bottom end of the distribution. No single city may be an appropriate site for a theory of 'the ghetto' in all cities.
- 6 In 2000, 1,185,399 non-Latino blacks lived in those 59 zip codes; 28,775,234 lived in zip codes within the 331 metropolitan areas. The latter number is slightly different from the 29,003,818 recorded in metropolitan areas data due to the GIS process by which zip codes were matched to metropolitan areas. For more on the process, see Small and McDermott (2006).
- 7 US Census Bureau, 'The Hispanic Population: Census 2000 Brief' (2001). Url: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-3.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2007).

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