Point of Contention: Poverty Deconcentration

For this issue's Point of Contention, we asked four observers with substantial knowledge of the topic to answer this question—"Should the deconcentration of poverty become one of the core objectives of federal housing policy?" Please contact alastair.w.mcfarlane@hud.gov to suggest other thought-provoking areas of controversy.

Getting Children Out of Harm's Way

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Society has long thought about poverty, at least since Charles Dickens indelibly pictured Oliver Twist's searing experiences. Focused thinking about "concentrated poverty," however, did not really begin until the 1987 publication of William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which "revolutionized stratification research" (Clampet-Lundquist and Massey, 2008).[1] In the ensuing years, we have learned much about the effects of concentrated poverty, especially on young children. That learning should inform our response to the present point of contention.

Two recent books capture important parts of that learning: *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Toward Racial Equality,* by Patrick Sharkey (2013a), and *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, by Robert J. Sampson (2012). Taken together, the two books, which have been highly praised,[2] support the following propositions (among others).

1. Independent of personal characteristics, living in severely distressed neighborhoods has serious negative effects on residents'—especially children's—well-being.

2. The effects of neighborhood disadvantage in childhood continue to have strong impacts as children move into adulthood.

The "great neighborhood divide," as Sampson (2012) calls it, extends to many aspects of life that are "shaped by where you live" (Sampson, 2013), such as verbal skill development, exposure to violence, health, teenage pregnancy, and economic success.[3]

[1] *Concentrated-poverty or high-poverty* areas are generally said to be those areas where poverty rates are 40 percent or more (Jargowsky, 2013). Because the effects of concentrated poverty begin to appear at the 20-percent rate, however, some scholars use 30 percent as the concentrated poverty threshold (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). According to U.S. census data, the number of high-poverty neighborhoods (40 percent poverty or more) has increased in recent decades. From 2005 to 2009, there were nearly 2.5 times the number of high-poverty neighborhoods as there were in 1970 (Jargowsky, 1997; Kneebone, Nadeau, and Berube, 2011), and both the number and the population of such neighborhoods have increased by 50 percent since 2000 (Jargowsky, 2013).

[2] William Julius Wilson says of *Stuck in Place* that it will become "a standard reference for students and scholars of inequality" (Sharkey, 2013a: book jacket) and of *Great American City* that it is "one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated empirical studies ever conducted by a social scientist" (Sampson, 2012: vii).

[3] Sharkey makes the additional point that the effects of living within a severely distressed neighborhood accumulate over generations, and that over multiple generations they are more severe than the effects of living in such a neighborhood at a single point in time, or even for a single generation.

These Sharkey and Sampson views are supported, directly or indirectly, by a large body of research. The well-known Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Felitti et al., 1998) and the considerable literature it has spawned have disclosed the baleful effects of adverse childhood experiences on adult well-being.[4] Medical research on brain development in the very early years of life has discovered causal links between stress and trauma in early years and their lifelong effects.[5] The linkages between childhood stress and trauma and growing up in concentrated-poverty neighborhoods have been better documented.[6]

A familiar aspect of concentrated poverty is its racial overlay. For example, seven times as many African-American children live in high-poverty neighborhoods as do White children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013).[7] It is also familiar that the overlay is not accidental but results to a considerable degree from deliberate governmental actions and inaction, including in the realm of housing policy. This oft-told story is recounted in several classic studies.[8]

Among responses to the question of what to do about racially suffused, concentrated urban poverty for which governments are so largely responsible, two loom large in policy discussions. One ("neighborhood transformation" or "revitalizing") is to improve concentrated-poverty neighborhoods; the other ("mobility") is to enable residents to escape to better neighborhoods. Sharkey (2013a) urges that the former should be the primary approach. (Sampson [2012], although not making a formal recommendation, devotes most of his remedial discussion to revitalizing.)

There are at least two reasons to be unenthusiastic about Sharkey's advice. First, the report card on revitalizing initiatives is disappointing. As many studies have shown, the fact is that, after countless tries, we have failed to demonstrate that we know how to revitalize severely distressed neighborhoods.[9]

[4] The data show, for example, that a person with an ACE score of 4 is 4.6 times more likely to suffer depression as an adult than a person with a score of 0. A male child with an ACE score of 6 is *46 times* more likely to use intravenous drugs in adulthood than one who scores 0 (Wylie, 2010). "ACERS," as they are called, with a score of 6 or more die, on average, two decades earlier than those with a score of 0 (Wylie, 2010). Numerous peer-reviewed articles about the ACE study conclude that it demonstrates an astounding correlation between childhood adversity and many mental, physical, and social disorders that plague adults. See, for example, Corso et al. (2008) and Felitti (2002).

[5] See Garner and Shonkoff (2012), Shonkoff and Garner (2012), and Tough (2011). Many studies focus on particular effects. For example, on cognitive functioning see Badger (2013) and Johnson and Schoeni (2011), and on prospects for economic mobility see Florida (2013) and Leonhardt (2013).

[6] For example, in *The Hidden War*, a study of the Chicago Housing Authority's effort to eradicate drug dealing in its projects, Urban Institute researchers say that resident children suffered the psychological trauma that comes from "living in guerrilla war zones like Cambodia or Mozambique" (Popkin et al., 2000: 27). William Julius Wilson's (1987: 46) conclusion respecting "hundreds of studies on the effects of being raised in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and deprivation" is that "concentrated poverty adversely affects one's chances in life, beginning in early childhood and adolescence" (Barton and Coley, 2010: 30).

[7] The percentages are 28 and 4, respectively. Sharkey (2009: 10) finds that "thirty percent of black children experience a level of neighborhood poverty—a rate of 30 percent or more—unknown among white children."

[8] See, for example, Hirsch (2000); Jackson (1985), especially chapters 11 and 12; and Massey and Denton (1993).

[9] See, for example, DeLuca and Rosenblatt (2013), Greenberg et al. (2010), and Kubisch et al. (2010). "There is no equivalent evidence [to that respecting mobility programs]... that a sustained effort to reduce concentrated poverty by investing in neighborhoods, rather than moving residents out, will have a positive impact on the residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods" (Sharkey, 2013a: 139).

Second, revitalizing is not a stand-alone policy. Sharkey (2013a) acknowledges that revitalizing efforts are unlikely to be effective on their own, citing numerous attempts that have been overwhelmed by broader economic, political, and demographic forces. They require, he says, an array of supporting investments in health, government jobs, transportation, criminal justice, policing, regional government, immigration policy, and research and development; revitalizing efforts that lack these investments are "doomed for failure." The likelihood of assembling this array of costly, challenging public policy initiatives is a matter on which Sharkey does not opine because, he says, he lacks political expertise.

On the other hand, studies of the Gautreaux mobility program showed strikingly favorable outcomes for families who, with housing vouchers, were enabled to escape concentrated-poverty neighborhoods in Chicago.[10] Given such results, why does Sharkey relegate residential mobility to secondary status as a way to confront the challenges of concentrated-poverty neighborhoods?[11]

One reason is Sharkey's concern that moving families might cluster together in receiving communities to form new pockets of concentrated poverty. Sharkey (2013a), however, acknowledges that there is an "ideal scenario" that would avoid this result—nothing more complicated than seeing to it, as was done in the Gautreaux program, that families move in patterns that do not form new pockets of poverty. Sharkey does not explain his implicit rejection of the ideal scenario.

A second reason is Sharkey's "tentative" conclusion that residential mobility programs work well with families moving only from the very worst neighborhoods, not from a wider range of poor neighborhoods. Even if this were true, it would not explain why mobility programs should not be widely employed in the very worst neighborhoods, of which there is no shortage.[12]

Finally, Sharkey (2013a) expresses concern about the amount of political will it might take to mount a large-scale residential mobility program. Surely, however, at least as much political will would be required to assemble the array of investments Sharkey considers essential to revitalizing.

[10] The outcomes were especially robust for children. For example, children of families who had moved to suburbs were four times more likely than those of families who had moved within the city to finish high school and twice as likely to attend college (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum, 2000).

[11] The question is made more acute by Sharkey's (2013a) acknowledgment that revitalizing may lead to economic but not necessarily to schooling benefits, and that it is with mobility, not revitalizing, that children's academic and cognitive scores have been shown to rise. This result is unsurprising, because "revitalizing children" generally continue to attend the same schools, whereas "mobility children" generally enter better ones.

[12] See footnote 1 about the growing number of high-poverty neighborhoods. In both Gautreaux and the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing (MTO) demonstration, families who experienced positive outcomes came from a wide range of poor neighborhoods (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum, 2000; Turner et al., 2012). Because MTO families failed to show the economic and educational gains registered by Gautreaux families, "MTO publications and presentations appear to have cast doubt on the general thesis that neighborhoods matter in the lives of poor individuals" (Sampson, 2008: 191), the "thesis" that is of course the very predicate for mobility. The doubt is unjustified, for most MTO families did not move to and remain in true opportunity areas. "I ... conclude that while neighborhood poverty differs, as intended [between MTO treatment and control families], in the end MTO experimental differences are marginal overall and unfolded within similar structural contexts of concentrated disadvantage" (Sampson, 2008: 205) See also Clampet-Lundquist and Massey (2008). A study of MTO families who did spend substantial time in neighborhoods with low poverty and higher education levels showed that these families experienced positive economic and educational outcomes that were not only statistically significant but meaningful in size, outcomes said to be "roughly consistent" with Gautreaux findings (Turner et al., 2012).

(Indeed, ideal scenario, Gautreaux-type programs might well be more politically feasible than mounting simultaneous programs encompassing transportation, criminal justice, regional government, and all the other initiatives said to be requisite for successful revitalizing.)

Thus, although *Stuck in Place* concludes that revitalizing should be the primary way to confront concentrated urban poverty, the book's own analysis would seem to compel a different conclusion. Sharkey himself says that mobility programs that target families in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods and provide them with sustained supports "fit" his agenda.[13]

The notion of confronting the challenges of concentrated urban poverty with a large-scale mobility program may smack of indulgent fantasy. Doesn't the American polity lack the political stomach for facilitating the movement of large numbers of African-American families from severely distressed neighborhoods to low-poverty, predominantly White communities? Maybe. Still, history is full of surprises. Truman beat Dewey. The Civil Rights Movement ended generations of seemingly impregnable Jim Crow in one decade. Nixon went to China. History teaches that surprises emerge from what, in retrospect, is seen as exactly the right combination of particulars assembled at exactly the right moment.

Today, an African American occupies the White House. Interracial marriages grow apace. The racial and ethnic makeup of the nation is changing rapidly. Adverse childhood experiences are frequently cited as America's number one public health issue (Wylie, 2010). Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman explains over and over that investment in early childhood pays big dividends (Heckman et al., 2010; Knudsen et al., 2006).[14] Enabling young children to move from toxic environments with poor schools to safe neighborhoods with good ones is an obvious way of "investing" in early childhood. Are these and other particulars assembling for yet another surprise?

Perhaps not, but a story from England seems relevant. For many years, a small group of scientists carried out research on health inequalities. The research was called "pure" because the scientists were not policymakers, and the conservative Thatcher Administration, then in office, could not have been more disinterested. When Tony Blair came to power in 1997, however, the research was retrieved from the dusty shelf to which it had been consigned, and a number of its recommendations soon became national policy (Marmot, 2004).

[13] In an interview, Sharkey (2013b) described the Gautreaux program as an example of a "durable" urban policy, his highest accolade. *Stuck in Place* (2013a: 172) says that any comprehensive policy "must combine elements from each approach" and adds that there is "substantial overlap in policies that might be considered 'mobility' approaches with those that might be classified as 'investment' approaches." Honorable antecedents to "combining" include both Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Kerner Report. (See Sharkey, 2013a.) Mobility of course has the great advantage of immediacy. Moving families gain instantaneous access to better schools and safer neighborhoods whereas, at best, revitalizing takes a very long time. While families await its far-from-certain benefits, children are accumulating ACE scores likely to blight their adult lives.

[14] Heckman's work provides a definitive response to arguments that enriched mobility counseling—enough to make it truly effective—would be too costly. (As if revitalizing were a cheaper alternative.) The costs to society of the blighted adult lives that are the ongoing consequence of concentrated poverty are incalculably high. The persisting African American-White education gap illustrates but one of those costs; numerous studies point to the dire economic consequences in our information and technological age of a poorly educated work force (PISA, 2010). "Yet without integrated education," says Richard Rothstein, an acute observer of the educational scene, and his coauthor, "we have little hope of remedying the educational struggles of the 'truly disadvantaged,' [and without] integrating residential neighborhoods, we have little hope of integrating education" (Rothstein and Santow, 2012: 2).

In like vein, while supporting and expanding current mobility programs, we should also be conducting "pure" research on mobility. Apart from Gautreaux and the Moving to Opportunity demonstration, there have been sizable mobility programs in Baltimore and Dallas, smaller ones elsewhere. We should be learning from these experiences how to do mobility really well: how to deploy the ideal scenario to avoid creating new pockets of poverty and negatively affecting property values; how to administer programs so that moving families are not perceived as threatening; how to obtain enough homes and apartments in good neighborhoods; how to identify precisely what we mean by "good neighborhoods"; how to ameliorate the isolation of African-American parents and supply the assistance needed to enable them to remain and thrive in new places; how to maximize the chances of success for children entering higher standard schools; and so on. Like the research on health inequalities, the research on mobility should, when completed, be carefully preserved, ready to be retrieved when the politically propitious moment arrives.

Given that concentrated urban poverty has devastating, long-lasting effects on those who live within it, especially on young children; given that these effects are seriously harmful to the nation as a whole; given that they are suffered disproportionately by minorities, especially African Americans; and given that decades of deliberate government actions, including in government housing programs, significantly contributed to that disproportion—should not the point of contention have been, "Why on earth should the deconcentration of poverty not be a leading objective of federal housing policy?"

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