



## Another Look at The Truly Disadvantaged

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# Another Look at *The Truly Disadvantaged*

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON

In the aftermath of the controversy generated in 1965 by the Moynihan report on the black family, empirical research on inner-city poverty and other social dislocations ground to a halt. In the past few years, however, such research activity has revived as media reports and debates among academics have captured public interest in the growing problems of urban ghettos. Like the 1960s discussions of the causes and consequences of urban poverty that focused on the Moynihan report and on Oscar Lewis's work on the culture of poverty, much of the new discourse is contentious and acrimonious. My book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, has become a point of reference in this controversy and, as is too often true of controversies, a good deal of the discussion is based on inaccurate interpretations of the arguments set forth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Department of Labor, 1965); Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961); Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966); Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty" in Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ed., *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago:

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A worthy goal of any author is to write so as not to be misunderstood. But even the most carefully phrased statements on the underclass are unlikely to escape misinterpretation because, as Jennifer Hochschild has pointed out, the issues in this instance are "so complicated and politically sensitive that analysts have an apparently almost irresistible tendency to focus on that part of the problem that fits their own preconceptions and to deny or ignore those parts that violate their preconceptions."<sup>2</sup> Because the comments of my critics feature systematic empirical research and thoughtful formulations of concepts, however, my arguments tend to be carefully and accurately discussed. The few misinterpretations are probably caused by the lack of clarity with which my ideas were originally stated. Indeed, these misinterpretations could have been avoided if I had presented a more explicit statement of my theory, the hypotheses embedded in the theory, and the conditions that must be present before they can be tested. Accordingly, to put the rest of my discussion here in proper focus, I will first recapitulate the major arguments advanced in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and present the formal structure of the theoretical framework. I will then assess the empirical, conceptual, and policy arguments that directly or indirectly address the major hypotheses in my book.

#### A SUMMARY OF *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED*

I argue in *The Truly Disadvantaged* that historical discrimination and a migration to large metropolises that kept the urban minority population relatively young created a problem of weak labor force attachment among urban blacks and, especially since 1970, made them particularly vulnerable to the industrial and geographic changes in the economy. The shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, the increasing polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, innovations in technology, the relocation of manufacturing industries out of central cities, and periodic recessions have forced up the rate of black joblessness (unemployment and nonparticipation in the labor market), despite the passage of antidiscrimination legislation and the creation of affirmative action programs. The rise in joblessness has in turn helped trigger an increase in the concentrations of poor people, a growing number of poor single-parent families, and an increase in welfare dependency. These problems have been especially evident in the ghetto neighborhoods of large cities, not only because the most impoverished minority populations live there but also because

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University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a comparative discussion of these two controversies, see William Julius Wilson, "The American Underclass: Inner-City Ghettos and the Norms of Citizenship (Godkin lecture, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1988); and Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancy, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild, "The Politics of the Estranged Poor," *Ethics* 101 (April 1991): 572.

the neighborhoods have become less diversified in a way that has severely worsened the impact of the continuing economic changes.

Especially since 1970, inner-city neighborhoods have experienced an outmigration of working- and middle-class families previously confined to them by the restrictive covenants of higher-status city neighborhoods and suburbs. Combined with the increase in the number of poor caused by rising joblessness, this outmigration has sharply concentrated the poverty in inner-city neighborhoods. The number with poverty rates that exceed 40 percent—a threshold definition of “extreme poverty” neighborhoods—has risen precipitously. And the dwindling presence of middle- and working-class households has also removed an important social buffer that once deflected the full impact of the kind of prolonged high levels of joblessness in these neighborhoods that has stemmed from uneven economic growth and periodic recessions.

In earlier decades, not only were most of the adults in ghetto neighborhoods employed, but black working and middle classes brought stability. They invested economic and social resources in the neighborhoods, patronized the churches, stores, banks, and community organizations, sent their children to the local schools, reinforced societal norms and values, and made it meaningful for lower-class blacks in these segregated enclaves to envision the possibility of some upward mobility.

However, today the ghetto features a population, the underclass, whose primary predicament is joblessness reinforced by growing social isolation. Outmigration has decreased the contact between groups of different class and racial backgrounds and thereby concentrated the adverse effects of living in impoverished neighborhoods. These concentration effects, reflected, for example, in the residents’ self-limiting social dispositions, are created by inadequate access to jobs and job networks, the lack of involvement in quality schools, the unavailability of suitable marriage partners, and the lack of exposure to informal mainstream social networks and conventional role models.

Accordingly, *The Truly Disadvantaged* argued that the factors associated with the recent increases in social dislocation in the ghetto are complex. They cannot be reduced to the easy explanations of a “culture of poverty” that have been advanced by those on the right, or of racism, posited by those on the left. Although the ghetto is a product of historical discrimination and although present-day discrimination has undoubtedly contributed to the deepening social and economic woes of its residents, to understand the sharp increase in these problems requires the specification of a complex web of other factors, including shifts in the American economy.

#### THE FORMAL STRUCTURE OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This summary of *The Truly Disadvantaged* does not make explicit the fact that social-structural, social-psychological, and cultural variables are integrated into

my theoretical framework.<sup>3</sup> A more formal statement of this framework is that a structure of inequality has evolved which is linked to contemporary behavior in the inner city by a combination of constraints, opportunities, and social psychology.

The exogenous factors, representing the sources of the racial concentration of urban poverty, include racial discrimination, changes in the economy that have relocated industries and restructured occupations, and political processes (anti-bias legislation and affirmative action programs) that have had the unanticipated consequence of widening class divisions among urban blacks. The endogenous determinants created by these exogenous factors include such demographic variables as urban migration, age structures, and the pool of marriageable men, and economic factors such as the distribution of employment and income. These variables are important for understanding the experiences of all low-income urban groups, not just the ghetto underclass.

The endogenous determinants further include social isolation, which is unique to the social environment of the underclass. Social isolation deprives residents of inner-city neighborhoods not only of resources and conventional role models, whose former presence buffered the effects of neighborhood joblessness, but also of the kind of cultural learning from mainstream social networks that facilitates social and economic advancement in modern industrial society. The lack of neighborhood material resources, the relative absence of conventional role models, and the circumscribed cultural learning produce outcomes, or concentration effects, that restrict social mobility. Some of these outcomes are structural (lack of labor force attachment and access to informal job networks), and some are social-psychological (negative social dispositions, limited aspirations, and casual work habits).

From the point of view of the accumulation of scientific knowledge, it is important to keep these theoretical issues in mind to establish clearly the empirical, conceptual, and theoretical contributions of the authors who further understanding of the underclass phenomenon.

#### THE ECONOMY AND WEAK LABOR FORCE ATTACHMENT IN THE INNER CITY

In my attempt in *The Truly Disadvantaged* to examine empirically the problem of the growing concentration of poverty, I used census tracts as proxies for nonpoverty and inner-city areas. The latter was divided into poverty, high-poverty, and extreme poverty neighborhoods. Most of my analysis of concentrated poverty focused on areas of extreme poverty, that is, those in which at least 40 percent of the people are poor. More recent studies have followed this

<sup>3</sup> In the ensuing discussion in this section, I benefited from the formal explication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* in Morris Zelditch, Jr., "Levels in the Logic of Macro-Historical Explanation" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1989).

lead by defining ghettos as those areas with poverty rates of at least 40 percent. The ghetto poor are therefore identified as those among the poor in the inner city who reside in these neighborhoods of extreme poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Paul Jargowsky and Mary Jo Bane have shown that the proportion of the poor who reside in ghetto neighborhoods varies dramatically by race. Whereas only 2 percent of the non-Hispanic white poor lived in ghettos in 1980, some 21 percent of black poor and 16 percent of Hispanic poor resided there. And almost a third of all metropolitan blacks lived in a ghetto in 1980. Sixty-five percent of the 2.4 million ghetto poor in the United States are black, 22 percent Hispanic, and 13 percent non-Hispanic and other races. Thus to speak of the ghetto poor in the United States is to refer primarily to blacks and Hispanics. This has both descriptive and theoretical significance.

What is not revealed in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and what is clearly spelled out by Jargowsky and Bane is that the increase of ghetto poverty occurred mainly in only two regions of the country: the Midwest and the Northeast. Moreover, ten cities accounted for three-fourths of the total rise of ghetto poverty during the 1970s. One-third of the increase was accounted for solely by New York City, and one-half by New York and Chicago together. By adding Philadelphia, Newark, and Detroit, two-thirds of the total increase is accounted for. The others in the top ten were Columbus, Ohio; Atlanta; Baltimore; Buffalo; and Paterson, New Jersey. Of the 195 standard metropolitan areas in 1970 that recorded some ghetto poverty, 88 experienced decreases in the number of ghetto poor by 1980. Those with the largest decreases were Texas cities with significant declines in Hispanic ghetto poverty and southern cities with sharp drops in black ghetto poverty.

<sup>4</sup> See Loïc J. D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, "Poverty, Joblessness and the Social Transformation of the Inner City" in Phoebe H. Cottingham and David T. Ellwood, eds., *Welfare Policy for the 1990s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Paul A. Jargowsky and Mary Jo Bane, "Ghetto Poverty in the United States, 1970–1980" in Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1991). In discussing the correspondence between ghetto neighborhoods and extreme poverty census tracts in Chicago, Wacquant and Wilson state, "Extreme-poverty neighborhoods comprise tracts with at least 40 percent of their residents in poverty in 1980. These tracts make up the historic heart of Chicago's black ghetto: over 82 percent of the respondents in this category inhabit the west and south sides of the city, in areas most of which have been all black for half a century and more, and an additional 13 percent live in immediately adjacent tracts. Thus when we counterpose extreme-poverty areas with low-poverty areas, we are in effect comparing ghetto neighborhoods with other black areas, most of which are moderately poor, that are not part of Chicago's traditional black belt" (p. 16). Jargowsky and Bane use the same rationale on a national level: "Visits to several cities confirmed that the 40 percent criterion came very close to identifying areas that looked like ghettos in terms of their housing conditions. Moreover, the areas selected by the 40 percent criterion corresponded rather closely with the neighborhoods that city officials and local Census Bureau officials considered ghettos." Of course, not all the people who reside in ghettos are poor. In the ten largest American cities as of 1970, the number of Hispanic residents (poor and nonpoor) residing in ghettos areas tripled between 1970 and 1980; the number of blacks doubled.

The focus of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, however, was on the increase in ghetto poverty. The questions are why did this increase occur and why was most of it confined to the large industrial metropolises of the Northeast and Midwest? Because these two regions experienced massive industrial restructuring and loss of blue-collar jobs. Cities of the frostbelt suffered overall employment decline because “growth in their predominantly information-processing industries could not numerically compensate for substantial losses in their more traditional industrial sectors, especially manufacturing.”<sup>5</sup> Cities in the sunbelt experienced job growth in all major sectors of the economy (manufacturing, retail and wholesale, white-collar services, and blue-collar services) between 1970 and 1986.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged* I maintained that one result of these changes for many urban blacks has been a growing mismatch between the location of employment and residence in the inner city. Although studies based on data collected before 1970 did not show consistent or convincing effects on black employment as the result of this spatial mismatch, the employment of inner-city blacks relative to suburban ones has clearly deteriorated since then.<sup>6</sup> Recent research conducted mainly by urban and labor economists strongly shows that the decentralization of employment is continuing and that employment in manufacturing, most of which is already suburbanized, has decreased in central cities, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest. Blacks living in central cities have less access to employment, as measured by the ratio of jobs to people and the average travel time to and from work, than do central-city whites. Unlike most other groups of workers, less educated central-city blacks receive lower wages in the central city than less educated suburban blacks. And the decline in earnings of central-city blacks is positively associated with the extent of metropolitan job decentralization.<sup>7</sup>

But are the differences in employment between city and suburban blacks mainly the result of changes in the location of jobs? It is possible that in recent years the migration of blacks to the suburbs has become much more selective than in earlier years, so much so that the changes attributed to job location are really caused by this selective migration.<sup>8</sup> The pattern of black migration to the suburbs in the 1970s was similar to that of whites during the 1950s and 1960s in the sense that it was concentrated among the more educated and younger city residents.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John D. Kasarda, “Structural Factors Affecting the Location and Timing of Urban Underclass Growth,” *Urban Geography* 11 (May–June 1990): 241.

<sup>6</sup> Harry J. Holzer, “The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: What Has the Evidence Shown?” (Paper presented at a conference on *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Northwestern University, October 1990). For a study based on earlier data, see David T. Ellwood, “The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: Are there Teenage Jobs Missing in the Ghetto?” in Richard B. Freeman and Harry J. Holzer, eds., *The Black Youth Employment Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Holzer, “Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis.”

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Jencks and Susan E. Mayer, “Residential Segregation, Job Proximity, and Black Job Opportunities: The Empirical Status of the Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis” (Working paper for Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> William Frey, “Mover Destination Selectivity and the Changing Suburbanization of Whites and

However, in the 1970s this was even more true for blacks, creating a situation in which the education and income gaps between city and suburban blacks seemed to expand and that between city and suburban whites seemed to contract.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, if one were to control for personal and family characteristics, how much of the employment gap between city and suburbs would remain?

This question was addressed in the study by James E. Rosenbaum and Susan J. Popkin of the Gautreaux program in Chicago.<sup>11</sup> The design of the program permitted them to contrast systematically the employment experiences of a group of low-income blacks who had been assigned private apartments in the suburbs with the experiences of a control group with similar demographic characteristics and employment histories who had been assigned private apartments in the city. The authors' findings support the spatial mismatch hypothesis. After controlling for personal characteristics (including family background, family circumstances, human capital, motivation, and length of time since the respondent first moved to the Gautreaux program—all before the move—and education after moving), they found that those who moved to apartments in the suburbs were significantly more likely than those moving to apartments in the city to have a job after the move. When asked what makes it easier to obtain employment in the suburbs, nearly all the respondents mentioned the availability of jobs.

The occupational advancement of the more disadvantaged urban minority members has also been severely curtailed by industrial restructuring. John Kasarda's research demonstrates that "the bottom fell out in urban industrial demand for poorly educated blacks," particularly in the goods-producing industries, in northeastern and midwestern cities.<sup>12</sup> And data collected from the Chicago Urban Poverty and Family Life Survey show that efforts by out-of-school inner-city black men to obtain blue-collar jobs in the industries in which their fathers had been employed have been hampered by industrial restructuring. "The most common occupation reported by the cohort of respondents at ages 19 to 28 changed from operative and assembler jobs among the oldest cohorts to service jobs (waiters and janitors) among the youngest cohort."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, a recent study shows that although black employment in New York City declined by 84,000 in durable and nondurable goods manufacturing—industries whose workers have lower levels of education—from 1970 to 1987, black employment increased by 104,000 in public administration and professional ser-

Blacks," *Demography* 22 (May 1985): 223–243; Eunice S. Grier and George Grier, "Minorities in Suburbia: A Mid-1980s Update" (Report prepared for the Urban Institute Symposium on Residential Mobility and Minority Incomes, April 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Holzer, "Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis."

<sup>11</sup> James E. Rosenbaum and Susan J. Popkin, "Employment and Earnings of Low-Income Blacks Who Move to Middle-Class Suburbs" in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

<sup>12</sup> John D. Kasarda, "Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501 (January 1989): 35

<sup>13</sup> Mark Testa and Marilyn Krogh, "The Effect of Employment on Marriage among Black Males in Inner-City Chicago" (Unpublished ms., University of Chicago, 1989).

vices—industries whose workers are more highly educated.<sup>14</sup> Thus, if industrial restructuring has reduced opportunities for the least educated blacks, it may have improved opportunities for those more highly educated.

As I pointed out in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, manufacturing industries have been a major source of black employment in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, these industries are particularly sensitive to a slack economy, and blacks lost a considerable number of jobs during the recession-plagued decade of the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> A unique test of my argument that many of the employment problems among disadvantaged inner-city youths are the direct result of job losses in local labor markets was provided by Richard Freeman.<sup>16</sup> Examining the employment situation of disadvantaged black youths from 1983 to 1987 in metropolitan areas that had achieved the tightest labor markets by 1987, Freeman found that despite the social problems that beset these youths and “despite the 1980s twist in the American labor market against the less skilled, tight labor markets substantially improved the economic position of these workers.” Although jobless rates remain high among disadvantaged minority youths, dramatic progress occurred during the economic recovery of the late 1980s in the metropolitan areas with the tightest labor markets.

If a tight labor market reduces joblessness among the disadvantaged, it also effectively reduces poverty, as Paul Osterman clearly shows.<sup>17</sup> When Boston experienced full employment in the 1980s, not only was there a significant drop in poverty, but a high percentage of the poor had jobs. However, the strong economy did not significantly affect the prevalence of single-parent families. Was the period that Osterman observed (1980 to 1988) of sufficient length to allow for changes in family formation as a response to changes in the economy to emerge? Changes in employment and poverty are likely to appear much sooner following changes in the economy than changes in family formation, because the latter not only represents a more indirect relationship to the economy but a more complex and subtle process of human experience as well.

The relationship between employment and marriage received more detailed attention from Robert Mare and Christopher Winship.<sup>18</sup> They found only modest support for the hypothesis, emphasized in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, that associates the sharp rise in poor single-parent families with the declining employment status of young black men. “Changes in the employment of young black men,”

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Bailey, “Black Employment Opportunities” in Charles Brecher and Raymond D. Horton, eds., *Setting Municipal Priorities, 1990* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> For a good discussion of this problem, see Frank Levy, *Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Freeman, “Employment and Earnings of Disadvantaged Men in a Labor Shortage Economy” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Osterman, “Gains from Growth? The Impact of Full Employment on Poverty in Boston” in *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship, “Socioeconomic Change and the Decline of Marriage for Blacks and Whites” in *ibid.*

they concluded, “explain approximately 20 percent of the decline in their marriage rates since 1960.” Their results are based on national surveys. But unlike *The Truly Disadvantaged*, their writing makes no effort to examine regional differences that may reflect the impact of changes in the industrial economies in the Northeast and Midwest.

The data that would be most relevant for understanding the relationship between employment and marriage among the underclass are those collected from inner cities. Since the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, this relationship has been examined more closely with data from the inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago as a part of the Urban Poverty and Family Life Study. A recent paper by Mark Testa based on these data shows that black men in inner-city Chicago who have stable work are twice as likely to marry as black men who are jobless and are not in school or in the military.<sup>19</sup>

However, Testa’s study also shows that the decline in marriage among inner-city blacks is not simply a function of the proportion of jobless men. Because the disparity in marriage rates between employed and jobless black men was smaller for older cohorts, it is reasonable to consider the effects of weaker social strictures against out-of-wedlock births. “In earlier years,” he comments, “the social stigma of illegitimacy counterbalanced economic considerations in the decision to marry. As the norms of legitimacy weakened, marriage rates dropped precipitously among chronically jobless men as couples no longer felt obliged to legitimate the birth of a child for social reasons.”<sup>20</sup>

In *The Truly Disadvantaged* I related the increasing jobless rate among black men to geographic, industrial, and other shifts in the economy. This hypothesis has drawn criticism because some observers believed that the focus on impersonal economic forces overlooked willful acts of employment discrimination against racial minorities.<sup>21</sup> Although empirical research on such discrimination is scarce, data from the Chicago Urban Poverty and Family Life Study’s survey of employers, as reported by Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn Neckerman, suggest that inner-city blacks, particularly black men, do indeed face negative attitudes from employers. They report that many employers consider inner-city workers, especially young black men, to be uneducated, uncooperative, and unstable. Accordingly, employers may practice what economists call statistical discrimination, making judgments about an applicant’s productivity, which are often too difficult or too expensive to measure, on the basis of his or her race, ethnic, or class background.<sup>22</sup> Although only a few employers explicitly expressed racist

<sup>19</sup> Mark Testa, “Joblessness and Absent Fatherhood in the Inner City” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Bailey, “Black Employment Opportunities”; and Hochschild, “Politics of Estranged Poor.”

<sup>22</sup> See also Kathryn M. Neckerman and Joleen Kirschenman, “Statistical Discrimination and Inner-City Workers: An Investigation of Employers’ Hiring Decisions” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1990).

attitudes or a categorical loathing of blacks, many did in fact practice statistical discrimination by screening out black job applicants because of their social class, public school education, and inner-city residence. These factors also served as proxies for judgments about productivity.

As the research of Richard Freeman suggests, however, the practice of statistical discrimination will vary according to the tightness of the labor market.<sup>23</sup> It therefore ought not be analyzed without reference to the overall state of the local or national economy. In a tight labor market, job vacancies are more prevalent, unemployment is of shorter duration, and wages are higher. The pool of potential workers expands because an increase in job opportunities not only lowers unemployment but also draws into the labor force those workers who respond to fading job prospects in slack markets by dropping out of the labor force altogether. Accordingly, the status of disadvantaged minorities improves in a tight labor market because unemployment is reduced, better jobs are available, and wages are higher. In contrast, in a slack labor market employers are—indeed, can afford to be—more selective in recruiting and in granting promotions. They inflate job prerequisites and the importance of experience. In such an economic climate, the level of employer discrimination rises and disadvantaged minorities suffer disproportionately.<sup>24</sup>

Although basic economic transformations and changes in labor markets are important for understanding the life experiences of the urban minority poor, *The Truly Disadvantaged* also argued that the out-migration of higher-income residents from certain parts of the inner city resulted in a higher concentration of residents in ghetto neighborhoods. This contention has been controversial. Douglas Massey and Mitchell Eggers, for instance, have found that the increase of segregation among black social classes during the 1970s was not sufficient to account for the rise in concentrated urban black poverty. They argue that because of persisting segregation, higher-income blacks have been less able than the privileged of other groups to separate themselves from the poor.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, an increase in the poverty rate of a highly segregated group will be automatically accompanied by an increase in the concentration of poverty. Reynolds Farley reaches the same conclusion. “Wilson’s conclusion that poor blacks in Chicago lived in proportionally more impoverished neighborhoods in 1980 than in 1970 . . . is accurate . . . but the situation occurred because of overall increases in black poverty rather than because of higher levels of social class residential segregation or a new outmigration of prosperous blacks.<sup>26</sup> However, Paul Jargowsky and

<sup>23</sup> Freeman, “Employment and Earnings of Disadvantaged Men” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

<sup>24</sup> James Tobin, “On Improving the Economic Status of the Negro,” *Daedalus* 94 (1965): 878–898.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Mitchell L. Eggers, “The Ecology of Inequality: Minorities and the Concentration of Poverty, 1970–1980,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (March 1990): 1153–88.

<sup>26</sup> Reynolds Farley, “Residential Segregation of Social and Economic Groups among Blacks, 1970–1980” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

Mary Jo Bane turn down the argument that changes in poverty rates alone explain changes in ghetto poverty.<sup>27</sup>

The conflicting findings and conclusions correspond with different measures of concentrated poverty. Massey and Eggers and Farley use an index of segregation to calculate the probability of intraclass contact among groups in metropolitan areas.<sup>28</sup> Although this measure provides a unique description of the overall level of concentrated poverty in standard metropolitan statistical areas [SMSAs], it does not identify particular neighborhoods that are ghettos and others that are not. Focusing on Philadelphia, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Memphis, they designate ghetto and nonghetto neighborhoods and report a significant geographic spreading of ghetto neighborhoods from 1970 to 1980. Areas that had become ghettos by 1980 had been mixed-income tracts in 1970, although they were contiguous to areas identified as ghettos. These results support the hypothesis that a major factor in the growth of ghetto poverty has been the exodus of the nonpoor from mixed income areas: “the poor were leaving as well, but the nonpoor left faster, leaving behind a group of people in 1980 that was poorer than in 1970.”<sup>29</sup>

These results also contradict Paul Peterson’s argument that “very little, if any [of the increase in the number of poor people living in extremely poor neighborhoods] can be attributed to increasing class segregation within the black community.”<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the data suggest that the increase of segregation among black social classes was one of several major factors that accounted for the growth of ghetto poverty. As Jargowsky and Bane point out, “In none [of the four cities] was the process a simple matter of the poor moving into ghetto areas or the nonpoor moving out. Nor can the situation in any city be described as one in which people basically stayed put but that changes in the poverty rate caused more areas to be pushed over the 40 percent line. Instead there was a general pattern of dispersion—probably part of a longer historical trend—interacting with changes in the poverty rate and continuing high levels of racial segregation.” As the population spread out from areas of mixed income, Jargowsky and Bane go on to state, the next ring, mostly areas that were white and nonpoor, became the home of a “larger proportion of the black and poor population. The white nonpoor left these areas, which also lost population overall.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the black middle-class out-migration was not followed by a significant rise of black interclass segregation in neighborhoods where the middle class relocated.

Unfortunately, the geographic spread of ghetto poverty cannot be captured in

<sup>27</sup> Jargowsky and Bane, “Ghetto Poverty in the United States, 1970–1980” in *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Massey and Eggers, “Ecology of Inequality”; Farley, “Residential Segregation” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

<sup>29</sup> Jargowsky and Bane, “Ghetto Poverty” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

<sup>30</sup> Paul E. Peterson, “The Urban Underclass and the Poverty Paradox” in *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Jargowsky and Bane, “Ghetto Poverty” in *ibid.* For a comprehensive study that presents similar findings, see Claudia J. Coulton, Julian Chow, and Shanta Pandey, *An Analysis of Poverty and Related Conditions in Cleveland Area Neighborhoods* (Cleveland: Center for Urban Poverty and Social Change, Case Western Reserve University, 1990).

studies that focus on the concentration of poverty in SMSAs based on a segregation index. Although the studies by Farley and Massey and Eggers are important for understanding the significance of racial segregation in accounting for changes in the concentration of metropolitan poverty, they do not provide an appropriate test of the hypothesis that associates the increase of ghetto poverty with the out-migration of higher-income blacks from certain inner-city neighborhoods.

#### SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND LABOR FORCE ATTACHMENT IN THE INNER CITY

The exodus of higher-income blacks was not only a factor in the growth of ghetto poverty. It also deprived these neighborhoods of structural resources, such as social buffers to minimize the effects of growing joblessness, and cultural resources, such as conventional role models for neighborhood children, therefore further contributing to the economic marginality of the underclass.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged* I argued that the central problem of the underclass is joblessness reinforced by increasing social isolation in impoverished neighborhoods, as reflected, for example, in the residents' declining access to job information network systems. Martha Van Haitsma, in important conceptual writing, has more sharply delineated the relationship between the social environment and experiences in the labor market by distinguishing those persons with weak attachment to the labor force whose social context "tends to maintain or further weaken this attachment."<sup>32</sup> I would like to include this more explicit notion in my framework by equating the social context with the neighborhood.

Unlike the usage of Marta Tienda and Haya Stier, the term weak labor force attachment as used here does not imply a willingness or desire to work.<sup>33</sup> Rather, I view weak labor force attachment as a structural concept set in a theoretical framework that explains the vulnerability of certain groups to joblessness. In other words, the concept signifies the marginal position of some people in the labor force because of limited job opportunities or limited access to the informal job network systems. From a theoretical standpoint there are two major sources of weak labor force attachment: macrostructural processes in the larger society, particularly the economy, and the individual's social environment. The former has been discussed; let me now briefly focus on the latter.

To understand the unique position of the underclass, it is important to understand the association between attachment to the labor force and the neighborhood

<sup>32</sup> Martha Van Haitsma, "A Contextual Definition of the Underclass," *Focus* 12 (Spring-Summer 1989): 28.

<sup>33</sup> Marta Tienda and Haya Stier, "Joblessness and Shiftlessness: Labor Force Activity in Chicago's Inner City" in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*. The concept of weak labor force attachment initially received systematic attention in the work of Sara McLanahan and Irwin Garfinkle, "Single Mothers, the Underclass, and Social Policy," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501 (January 1989): 92-104.

context. As Martha Van Haitsma points out, “environments with few opportunities for stable and legitimate employment and many opportunities for other types of income-generating activities, particularly those which are incompatible with regular employment,” perpetuate weak labor force attachment.<sup>34</sup> Poor people who reside in neighborhoods that foster or support strong labor force attachment are in a much different social context than those with similar educations and occupational skills living in neighborhoods that promote or reinforce weak labor force attachment. Thus neighborhoods that have few legitimate employment opportunities, inadequate job information networks, and poor schools not only give rise to weak labor force attachment but also raise the likelihood that people will turn to illegal or deviant activities for income, thereby further weakening their attachment to the legitimate labor market. A jobless family in such a neighborhood is influenced by the behavior, beliefs, orientations, and social perceptions of other disadvantaged families disproportionately concentrated in the neighborhood. To capture this process I used the term “concentration effects,” that is, the effects of living in an overwhelmingly impoverished environment.

Four recent papers address the hypothesis on concentration effects. Elijah Anderson’s research in a ghetto neighborhood of Philadelphia provides ethnographic support by showing how a young woman’s proximity to and degree of integration with certain neighborhood peer groups can significantly increase her chances of becoming pregnant.<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Crane, relying on evidence from a unique data set (the neighborhood characteristics file from the 1970 Public Use Microdata Sample), provides quantitative support for the hypothesis by showing that neighborhood influence on teenage childbearing and dropping out among both blacks and whites was substantial in inner cities.<sup>36</sup> Consistent with the arguments developed in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Crane found that “neighborhood effects are much larger at the bottom of the neighborhood distribution than elsewhere.” And Susan Mayer supports the hypothesis with data from the High School and Beyond Survey. She finds that teenagers attending schools of low socioeconomic status are more likely to give birth out of wedlock than those with the same socioeconomic background who attend schools of higher socioeconomic status.<sup>37</sup>

In their paper on the political behavior of poor people, Jeffrey Berry, Kent Portney, and Ken Thomson present evidence that does not support the concentration-effects hypothesis.<sup>38</sup> It is important to note, however, that the cities they

<sup>34</sup> Van Haitsma, “Contextual Definition of Underclass,” 29.

<sup>35</sup> Elijah Anderson, “Neighborhood Effects on Teenage Pregnancy” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Crane, “Effects of Neighborhoods on Dropping Out of School and Teenage Childbearing” in *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Susan E. Mayer, “How Much Does a High School’s Racial and Socioeconomic Mix Affect Graduation and Teenage Fertility Rates?” in *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson, “The Political Behavior of Poor People” in *ibid.*

selected for analysis included virtually no neighborhoods with a poverty level of 40 percent or more. Although their study used a poverty line below that of the official poverty line, the absence of extreme poverty or ghetto neighborhoods qualifies their conclusion that the concentration of poor blacks does not lead to distinctive patterns of political behavior.

It would also be interesting and important to replicate the study by Greg Duncan and Saul Hoffman in areas of extreme poverty.<sup>39</sup> On the basis of national data from the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics, they found that raising welfare benefit levels increased slightly the chances that a teenager would have a child out of wedlock and would receive AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). Nonwelfare opportunities decreased the chances, and the effect was much stronger. The teenagers most likely to bear a child, they find, are those with the least to lose. This view is supported in Anderson's study: "Those who cannot go on to college, who lack an outlook, who fail to find a husband with whom they can pursue the dream and become upwardly mobile, appear to adapt to the situation of closed mobility they see before them." And as Crane's research demonstrates, this is far more likely to happen in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood than in one that is less poor. That is one of many reasons why the neighborhood environment is crucial to my definition of the underclass.<sup>40</sup>

#### SOCIAL THEORY AND THE CONCEPT OF THE UNDERCLASS

In my formulation the concept of underclass derives its meaning from a theoretical framework that links structural, social-psychological, and cultural arguments. David Greenstone has thus misinterpreted the theoretical discussion in *The Truly Disadvantaged* when he argues that my analysis settles on one fundamental opposition: underclass behavior must be attributed either to responses to an economic predicament or to the cultural commitments to dysfunctional and irrational values.<sup>41</sup> Simplistic either-or notions of culture and social structure impede the development of a broader theoretical context in which to examine questions recently raised by the ongoing debate on the underclass.

In early studies of the inner city, some observers argued that ghetto-specific behaviors were unique adaptations to the restricted opportunities of the disadvantaged in American society, not a different system of values.<sup>42</sup> Although they

<sup>39</sup> Greg J. Duncan and Saul D. Hoffman, "Teenage Underclass Behavior and Subsequent Poverty: Have the Rules Changed?" in *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Crane, "Effects of Neighborhoods on Dropping Out" in *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> J. David Greenstone, "Culture, Rationality, and the Underclass" in *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Lee Rainwater, "Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower-Class Family," *Daedalus* 95 (Winter 1966): 176-216; Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1967); Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

discussed the influence of culture — that is, the extent to which people follow their inclinations as they have been developed by learning from other members of the community — they did not argue that the influence takes on a life of its own or is autonomous in the ghetto. In other words, these authors demonstrated the possibility of seeing the importance of macrostructural constraints (that is, of avoiding the extreme assumption of a culture of poverty) while still recognizing the value of a more subtle cultural analysis of life in poverty. The question Ulf Hannerz raised twenty years ago remains an important research hypothesis today. Is there a fundamental difference between “a person who is alone in being exposed to certain macrostructural constraints” and a person “who is influenced both by these constraints and by the behavior of others who are affected by them.”<sup>43</sup>

What distinguishes members of the underclass from those of other economically disadvantaged groups is that their marginal economic position or weak attachment to the labor force is uniquely reinforced by the neighborhood or social milieu. For this reason Christopher Jencks’s discussion of the concept of the underclass is not relevant.<sup>44</sup> Although he has elegantly and impressively laid out the various ways that one can view the underclass, his typology has no underlying theoretical significance. He argues that what we now call the underclass bears a striking resemblance to what sociologists used to call the lower class. This is not true for the formulation developed in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and further elaborated here. Indeed, I know of no previous studies that attempted to define lower class in terms of the dual problem of marginal economic position and social isolation in highly concentrated poverty areas, an important distinction that cannot be captured by using the standard designation “lower class.” In America the problems this definition of the underclass connotes are more likely to be found in the inner-city ghettos.

Jencks argues that my definition of the underclass also turns out to mean a largely nonwhite population because I emphasize location. However, in my usage, the concept can be theoretically applied not only to all racial and ethnic groups, but also to different societies. In the United States the concept will more often refer to minorities because the white poor seldom live in extreme poverty or ghetto areas. However, there is nothing in the definition that restricts its application to nonwhites. Moreover, in other societies the combination of weak labor force attachment and social isolation may exist in certain urban environments without the same level of concentrated poverty inherent in American ghettos. For example, there is evidence that the long-term jobless in inner cities in the Netherlands have experienced sharply decreasing contact with conventional groups and institutions in the larger society despite levels of class and ethnic segregation far lower than those of American inner cities. This development has prompted some Dutch social scientists to discuss the formation of an underclass

<sup>43</sup> Hannerz, *Soulside*, 184.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Jencks, “Is the American Underclass Growing?” in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*.

in the Netherlands in precisely the theoretical terms I outlined in *The Truly Disadvantaged*.<sup>45</sup>

Unless the concept of underclass is defined as a part of a theoretical framework, as I have done, its meaning will become hopelessly polluted and, as Herbert Gans has warned, will be used increasingly to discredit the urban minority poor.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, one of my concerns is that because of the atheoretical way that the concept is often defined by scholars and nonscholars alike, its use has become exceedingly controversial, so much so that the debate has often obscured the important theoretical and empirical issues outlined here.<sup>47</sup> The crucial question is whether a theoretically defined concept of underclass, which is by its very nature complex, will be overshadowed in the long run by nonsystematic, arbitrary, and atheoretical usages that often end up as code words or ideological slogans, particularly in journalistic descriptions of inner-city behavior. If this proves true, research scholars ought to give serious consideration to dropping the term and carefully selecting another that also allows one to describe and highlight the important theoretical linkage between a disadvantaged group's position in the labor market and its social environment.

#### THE UNDERCLASS AND PUBLIC POLICY

The growing concentration of poverty and social isolation of the inner cities has implications not only for the quality of life and patterns of social interaction in impoverished urban neighborhoods, but for the larger urban environment as well. None of these cities can escape the deleterious consequences of the social transformation of the inner city and the growth of an underclass.

The problem is not simply the fiscal burden created by the sharp deterioration of aggregate family income or the erosion of the municipal tax base caused by the growth in the number of "high-cost" citizens at the very time that large and increasing numbers of higher-income families have abandoned the cities. The deterioration of ghetto neighborhoods has also sapped the vitality of local busi-

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Kees Schuyt, "The New Emerging Underclass in Europe: The Experience of Long-Term Unemployment in Dutch Inner Cities" (Paper presented at the Leiden Workshop on Modern Poverty, Unemployment, and the Emergence of a Dutch Underclass, University of Leiden, Netherlands, August 1990); Robert C. Kloosterman, "The Making of the Dutch Underclass? A Labour Market View" (Paper presented at *ibid.*); Godfried Engbersen, "Modern Poverty in the Netherlands" (Paper presented at *ibid.*); also see Godfried Engbersen, Kees Schuyt, and Jaap Timmer, "Cultures of Unemployment: Long-Term Unemployment in Dutch Inner Cities" (Paper presented at *ibid.*).

<sup>46</sup> Herbert J. Gans, "Deconstructing the Underclass: The Term's Danger as a Planning Concept," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 56 (Summer 1990): 271-349.

<sup>47</sup> See also William Julius Wilson, "Social Theory and Public-Agenda Research: The Challenge of Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations" (Presidential address, annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1990).

nesses and other institutions, and it has led to fewer and shabbier movie theaters, bowling alleys, restaurants, public parks and playgrounds, and other recreational facilities. Residents of inner-city neighborhoods are therefore often compelled to seek leisure activity in other areas of the city, where they come into brief contact with citizens of different racial, ethnic, or class backgrounds. Sharp differences in cultural style and patterns of interaction that reflect the social isolation of neighborhood networks often lead to clashes. Both the white and minority classes have complained bitterly about how certain conveniently located areas of the central city have deteriorated following the influx of inner-city residents. The complaints have inevitably come to be directed at the underclass itself.

Meanwhile, racial tensions between poor blacks and working-class whites reflect an even more serious consequence of the social transformation of the inner city. Working-class whites, like inner-city minorities, have felt the full impact of the urban fiscal crisis in the United States. Unlike middle-class whites, they have been forced by financial exigencies to remain in the poorer parts of the cities and suffer the strains of crime, poorer services, and higher taxes. Unlike the more affluent whites who choose to remain in the wealthier sections of the cities, they cannot easily escape the problems of deteriorating public schools by sending their children to private schools, a problem made worse by the sharp decrease in the numbers of urban parochial schools. Thus, in recent years, the racial struggle for power and privilege in the cities has been essentially a struggle between the have-nots over access to and control of decent housing and decent neighborhoods.

Working-class whites are more likely than middle-class whites to express their hostility in blatantly racist terms and behavior, sometimes manifested in acts of violence such as the recent killing of a young black man in the white ethnic neighborhood of Bensonhurst in New York City, and they are less likely to distinguish between the middle-class and disadvantaged minorities. Middle-class whites are more subtle in their expressions of hostility and are more likely to direct their racial antagonisms specifically toward poor minorities.

The increasing antagonism has been further aggravated by a conservative political atmosphere, particularly during the Reagan presidency, that has not only reinforced the dominant American belief system that poverty is a reflection of individual inadequacy but has discouraged efforts for new and stronger social programs to address the growing problems of urban inequality.

These changes in the racial and political climate in America have profound implications for the way to address the problems of race and class in the inner cities. I am therefore reminded of the words of the late black economist, Vivian Henderson, who wrote, "The economic future of blacks in the United States is bound up with that of the rest of the nation. Policies, programs, and politics designed in the future to cope with the problems of the poor and victimized will also yield benefits to blacks. In contrast, any efforts to treat blacks separately from the rest of the nation are likely to lead to frustration, heightened racial

animosities, and a waste of the country's resources and the precious resources of black people."<sup>48</sup>

I agree with Henderson. In the coming years the best political strategy for those committed to racial justice is to place more emphasis on race-neutral programs that would not only address the plight of the disadvantaged among minorities but would apply to all groups in America. After all, Americans across racial and class lines continue to be concerned about increased unemployment, decreased job security, deteriorating real wages, poorer public education, escalating medical and hospital costs, the lack of good child care, and more crime and drug trafficking in their neighborhoods. Because these problems are more highly concentrated in the inner cities as a result of cumulative effects of decades of racial subjugation, programs that aggressively address them will disproportionately benefit the underclass.

Theda Skocpol and Robert Greenstein ought to be considered in this context.<sup>49</sup> The issue is not simply the degree to which universal or targeted programs can sustain political support. The important question is whether costly programs perceived to be targeted to minorities can be generated and adequately supported in the present climate of budgetary constraint and racial antagonism. Although many social programs did indeed survive the Reagan budget cuts, they are hardly sufficient to address the manifold problems gripping the ghetto. We must generate new initiatives if we are indeed to move significant numbers of American citizens out of the underclass. Whether we follow Skocpol's program of targeting within universalism or Greenstein's argument that a mixture of universal and targeted approaches will likely be necessary to achieve a significant impact, the real challenge is to develop programs that not only meaningfully address the problems of the underclass but that draw broad support.

This was my concern when I wrote *The Truly Disadvantaged* and argued for improving the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds can positively relate. I now believe that this is best achieved not simply through a combination of targeted and universal initiatives, but through targeted and universal initiatives that are clearly race neutral.\*

<sup>48</sup> Vivian Henderson, "Race, Economics, and Public Policy," *Crisis* 82 (Fall 1975): 50-55.

<sup>49</sup> Theda Skocpol, "Targeting within Universalism: Politically Viable Policies to Combat Poverty in the United States" in Jencks and Peterson, *The Urban Underclass*; Robert Greenstein, "Universal and Targeted Approaches to Relieving Poverty: An Alternative View" in *ibid.*

\* This article is adapted and updated from Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991).