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## The pooling of impoverishment from 1980 to 1990 in inner-city neighborhoods: A census-based analysis of upstate New York metropolitan areas

The income disparity between people living in different urban neighborhoods increased dramatically in the United States between 1980 and 1990. This phenomenon has occurred most visibly and consistently in north-central and northeastern cities, despite the characterization of the 1980s as a period of economic maintenance, or little overall change, to one of general economic, albeit slow, growth. Although some people experienced improvement in their living circumstances during this period, a substantial minority did not and in fact became poor. Many among the newly poor were probably "living on the edge" or near-poor before (Gorey & Vena, 1995; Rank, 1994). This trend among individuals has been observed concomitantly with a geographic concentration of new impoverishment in areas of severe deprivation, predominantly in central-city neighborhoods.

Previously, such trends were analyzed in detail in Cleveland (Coulton, Pandey, & Chow, 1990). The proportion of Cleveland's poor population residing in a relatively few high-poverty areas, where 40 percent or more of the residents were poor, increased more than twofold from 1980 to 1988 (11.04 percent versus 28.11 percent, respectively). Coulton et al. (1990) noted the potentially limited external validity of this study and encouraged its systematic replication in other geographic locales. The present study does just that in the upstate New York cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany.

### CONCENTRATION OF POOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

Socioeconomic factors have been found to be associated with a variety of family (child neglect and abuse, teenage pregnancy), social (crime victimization and perpetration, dropping out of high school, substandard housing conditions), mental (depression, anxiety and fear, illicit substance abuse), and physical (infant injury and mortality, AIDS, some cancers, hypertension, frailty among elders) health

outcomes across the life span (Crane, 1991; Durkin, Davidson, Kuhn, O'Connor, & Barlow, 1994; Gorey, 1995; Gorey, Cryns, Choi, & Zwana, 1990; Gorey & Vena, 1994, 1995; Marmot, Kogevinas, & Elston, 1987; Polednak, 1991; Taylor & Covington, 1993). These ecological analyses have found such health problems to be two to five times more prevalent in the poorest neighborhoods as compared with more well-to-do areas. Furthermore, the importance of the socioeconomic environment and the implications of its strong associations with individual as well as social health problems has been underscored by the changing economic climate of the 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, the poorest quintile of the U.S. population lost 20 percent of its wealth while the richest quintile gained 10 percent (Greenstein & Barancik, 1990; Shinn & Gillespie, 1994; Stoesz & Karger, 1993; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1992).

As the gap between the wealthiest and poorest Americans widened during the past decade, so too did the black-white socioeconomic gap. In New York State, the state with the largest African American population, the socioeconomic status (for example, income, employment, and occupation indexes) of black people relative to white people diminished by approximately 20 percent (Gorey, 1994). The relatively increased poverty of black people as well as their increased isolation and segregation in very poor inner-city areas has been well documented for the period from 1970 to 1980 (Eggers & Massey, 1991, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1988; Massey & Eggers, 1990; Najman, 1993) and grossly documented for the 1980s (Jargowsky, 1994; Kasarda, 1993). The present study systematically replicates these analyses for the period 1980 to 1990 by observing the geographic concentration of black and poor people concomitantly in four New York cities.

### METHOD

#### Data Sets for Secondary Analysis

Extant New York State data sets from the 1980 and 1990 censuses of the population provided an opportunity to answer this study's research questions about the geographic concentration of poverty and its association with racial group concentration (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1983d, 1992a, 1992b). To replicate Coulton et al.'s (1990) analytic plan, the census tract was selected as the unit of analysis. The 595 census tracts in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany, including their

surrounding suburban and rural county areas (that is, Erie, Monroe, Onondaga, and Albany Counties, respectively), are the focus of this analysis. Each of these tracts represents a several-block area and an average population of approximately 4,000 people. The New York City metropolitan area was excluded, because the error that could result from population undercounts in this region is at least twice that of the upstate New York region (Fein, 1990; Gorey, 1994; Panel to Evaluate Alternate Census Methods, 1993; Wolter, 1991).

This study measured poverty in the same way Coulton et al.'s (1990) did, that is, with sample estimates provided by the U.S. Bureau of the Census that are based on responses from approximately 17 percent of the population. Self-identified racial group status was also based on census methodology (100 percent, not a sample), which provided the following categorical response choices from which respondents were to choose one: white, black or Negro, Indian (American), Asian or Pacific Islander, or other race. In the study region of upstate New York, black people account for more than 90 percent of the population of color.

### Analysis

This study, an exact replicate of the Cleveland one (see Coulton et al., 1990), analyzed census tracts with resident populations that were 10 percent or more black between 1980 and 1990. Convergent and discriminant validation for the seeming threshold effect on community health of this criterion cut-off (10 percent or more black versus less than 10 percent black) has been reported in the epidemiologic literature (Ernster et al., 1977, 1978; Gorey, 1994, 1995). In 1980, 85 percent of upstate New York black people lived in neighborhoods circumscribed by census tracts categorized as 10 percent or more black, the vast majority of which were adjacent to each other in central inner-city areas. Approximately one in five (21.8 percent) upstate New York census tracts were so categorized in 1980, the majority of their populations being black (median = 55.2 percent); their representation was nearly equivalent among tract tertiles that were 10 percent to 24 percent, 25 percent to 74 percent, and 75 percent or more black. Although a conceptual definition of 50, 75, or even 90 percent black residents would make more intuitive sense for this analysis, the 10 percent definition was chosen over them on theoretical and practical analytic grounds. A threshold effect was observed at the criterion of 10 percent or more black residents; that is, the central trends

observed with it or with the other criteria did not differ substantively.

Critical comparisons were made between prevalent 1980 and 1990 subpopulations, for example, the proportion of poor people living in high-poverty areas (census tracts 40 percent or more poor) and in areas of greater black representation (census tracts 10 percent or more black). The prevalence ratio (PR), a simple ratio of 1990:1980 prevalence estimates, served as this study's comparative metric, and 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) were constructed around it by the test-based method [ $PR^{(1 \pm 1.96/(\chi^2)^{1/2})}$ ] (Miettinen, 1976). None of this study's central findings differed significantly by metropolitan area—Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, or Albany—so the breakdown of its findings by city is not reported. Like the Coulton et al. (1990) study, this study hypothesizes about the increasing concentration of poverty in severely impoverished areas, but it extends the Coulton et al. inquiry by further predicting that this is primarily a phenomenon experienced in areas where populations of color tend to live.

### Methodological Caveats

The U.S. census of the population, on which this study's analyses are based, does not count all of the nation's people. It has been estimated, for example, that the total 1990 census undercount was 1.8 percent. However, this selection bias is also known to have been differential; undercount rates among black and poor people are estimated to be three and four times the overall rate, respectively (Fein, 1990; Panel to Evaluate Alternate Census Methods, 1993; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1992; Wolter, 1991). The potential intrusion of such bias is particularly germane here, given that this study makes inferences about black Americans and poor people. It should be clear that any such selection bias would make this study's estimates of prevalent poverty among those who reside in inner-city neighborhoods, for example, underestimate of the true population parameters. In other words, the magnitude of the inner-city poverty problem identified by this study is likely to be a conservative estimate.

Another potential problem or limitation of this census-based study is its reliance on census tracts, rather than individuals, as the unit of analysis. Such an ecological analysis allows for valid inferences about the aggregate areal units studied (census tracts and their corresponding neighborhoods) but not necessarily about the individuals residing within these areas. This ecological strategy is in keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of this study; it

conceptualizes the problem of the pooling of impoverishment as a primarily social or community problem.

## RESULTS

Similar to the trend previously observed in Cleveland, an increased homogenization of poverty in low-income tracts was also found in upstate New York (Table 1). The proportion of all upstate New York poor people who lived in high-poverty areas, that is, census tracts where more than 40 percent of the population were classified as living in households below the federally established poverty threshold, increased by two-thirds from 1980 to 1990: 13.62

**TABLE 1—Geographic Concentration of Poverty in Upstate New York Metropolitan Areas: 1980 to 1990**

Poverty Concentration	1980	1990
Areas of low poverty (less than 20% poor)		
No. of census tracts	470	456
Population of area	1,972,851	1,916,610
Proportion of total population (%)	84.03	82.91
No. of poor people	130,204	125,150
Proportion of total poor population (%)	51.69	47.34
Areas of moderate poverty (20% to 39% poor)		
No. of census tracts	98	91
Population of area	306,662	271,202
Proportion of total population (%)	13.06	11.73
No. of poor people	87,367	79,204
Proportion of total poor population (%)	34.69	29.96
Areas of high poverty (40% or more poor)		
No. of census tracts	27	48
Population of area	68,288	123,818
Proportion of total population (%)	2.91	5.36
No. of poor people	34,318	60,000
Proportion of total poor population (%)	13.62	22.70
Total population	2,347,801	2,311,630
Total poor population	251,889	264,354
Proportion poor (%)	10.73	11.44

NOTE: Includes Erie, Monroe, Onondaga, and Albany Counties, including the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany, respectively.

percent versus 22.70 percent, respectively (PR = 1.67, 95 percent CI = 1.65, 1.69). At the same time, overall prevalent impoverishment did not change substantially in this region: 10.73 percent versus 11.44 percent, respectively. This finding lends credence to Danziger and Plotnick's (1986) caveat that such gross population parameters may obscure diversity within the impoverished population and possibly mask significant declines among some demographic subpopulations of poor people.

### Neighborhoods with 10 Percent or More Black Residency

The overall upstate New York poverty trends are reported by levels of black residency in Table 2 (census tracts 10 percent or more black versus those less than 10 percent black). Census tracts composed of 10 percent or more black residents realized a net gain of 30,983 poor people during the decade, while 18,518 residents of other tracts left the ranks of the poor. This study's successive 1980–1990 cross sections strongly suggest the pooling or concentration of impoverishment in select geographic locales. The trend for a pooling of impoverishment was most pronounced in high-poverty areas with a population of 10 percent or more black people, where the concentration of upstate New York's poor people nearly doubled: 13.09 percent versus 22.46 percent, respectively (PR = 1.71, 95 percent CI = 1.69, 1.73). Prevalent impoverishment also increased by a third in low-poverty (less than 20 percent poor) black areas (PR = 1.36, CI = 1.33, 1.39). Many new poor people in these lower-poverty neighborhoods may have been near- or marginally impoverished in 1980.

The economic decline that upstate New York experienced during the 1980s seems largely to have been confined to relatively constrained geographic locales, namely those inner-city neighborhoods where black people tended to live. In fact, while the heightened concentration of impoverishment was observed in neighborhoods with 10 percent or more black representation, the opposite trend was observed in all other areas where less than 10 percent of the population was black. In all such predominantly white neighborhoods, be they low-poverty (PR = 0.85), moderate-poverty (PR = 0.76), or high-poverty (PR = 0.44) areas, prevalent impoverishment diminished by 15 percent, 24 percent, and 56 percent, respectively.

### Emerging Poverty Areas

Descriptive characteristics of emerging poverty areas, that is, the 32 upstate New York census tracts

**TABLE 2—Geographic Concentration of Poverty in Upstate New York Metropolitan Areas, by Concentration of Black People: 1980 to 1990**

Population Concentration	1980	1990	1990:1980 Prevalence Ratio
Census tracts less than 10% black			
Areas of low poverty (less than 20% poor)			
No. of census tracts	431	400	
Population of area	1,844,538	1,726,396	
% of total population	78.56	74.68	
No. of poor people	113,365	101,080	0.85
% of poor population	45.01	38.24	
Areas of moderate poverty (20% to 39% poor)			
No. of census tracts	32	26	
Population of area	110,509	76,599	
% of total population	4.71	3.31	
No. of poor people	27,034	21,530	0.76
% of poor population	10.72	8.14	
Areas of high poverty (40% or more poor)			
No. of census tracts	2	3	
Population of area	2,884	1,406	
% of total population	0.12	0.06	
No. of poor people	1,357	628	0.44
% of poor population	0.54	0.24	
Census tracts 10% or more black			
Areas of low poverty (less than 20% poor)			
No. of census tracts	39	56	
Population of area	128,313	190,214	
% of total population	5.46	8.23	
No. of poor people	16,839	24,070	1.36
% of poor population	6.69	9.11	
Areas of moderate poverty (20% to 39% poor)			
No. of census tracts	66	65	
Population of area	196,153	194,603	
% of total population	8.36	8.42	
No. of poor people	60,333	57,674	0.91
% of poor population	23.95	21.82	
Areas of high poverty (40% or more poor)			
No. of census tracts	25	45	
Population of area	65,404	122,412	
% of total population	2.79	5.30	
No. of poor people	32,961	59,372	1.71
% of poor population	13.09	22.46	

NOTES: Includes Erie, Monroe, Onondaga, and Albany Counties, including the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany, respectively. Given the large size of the populations observed in the study areas, all of the displayed prevalence ratio estimates are precise, that is, the 95% confidence intervals around them are narrow (ranging from  $\pm .02$  to  $.04$ ).

characterized as high-poverty areas in 1990 but not in 1980, are displayed in Table 3. In 1990, 30 of these tracts had greater than 10 percent black representation, and nearly all of them were adjacent to one another in central-city areas. Using Bane and

Jargowsky's (1988) algorithm, which Coulton et al. (1990) used to estimate the relative importance of incident impoverishment versus differential migration as explanations for the emergence of these new high-poverty areas, it was estimated that approximately

**TABLE 3—Selected Characteristics of Emerging Poverty Areas**

Poverty Concentration	Percentage Distribution		1990:1980 Prevalence Ratio
	1980	1990	
Black population	54.62	64.30	1.18
Nonwhite population	62.51	74.15	1.19
Poor	31.84	47.26	1.48
Unemployed <sup>a</sup>	16.60	18.38	1.11
Employed in service-related jobs <sup>a</sup>	23.00	27.85	1.21
Employed in precision production or similar jobs <sup>a</sup>	10.42	8.69	0.83
Employed as operators, fabricators, or similar jobs <sup>a</sup>	33.75	22.80	0.68
High school graduates <sup>b</sup>	68.20	52.69	0.77
Housing units vacant	14.29	16.17	1.13

NOTES: For 32 census tracts characterized as high-poverty areas in 1990 that were not characterized as such in 1980. Given the large size of the populations (87,363 in 1980 and 97,264 in 1990) observed in these emerging poverty areas, all of the displayed prevalence ratio estimates are precise, that is, the 95% confidence intervals around them are narrow ( $\pm 0.02$ ).

<sup>a</sup>Proportion of the adult population 16 years of age or older.

<sup>b</sup>Proportion of the adult population 25 years of age or older.

two-thirds (64 percent) of such emergence in upstate New York may be explained by the phenomenon of more people becoming poor, whereas one-third (36 percent) is probably due to the out-migration of nonpoor people.

Not surprisingly, given the findings of the preceding analyses, demographic indexes of racial minority status (black [PR = 1.18] and other nonwhites [PR = 1.19]); the socioeconomic indicators of poverty status (PR = 1.48), unemployment (PR = 1.11), and the prevalence of employment in relatively low-paying service-related jobs (PR = 1.21); and a physical environmental indicator, the proportion of housing units vacant (PR = 1.13), all increased significantly during the 1980s in New York's emerging poverty areas (see Table 3). Employment in precision production jobs (PR = 0.83) and operator-fabricator or similar jobs (PR = 0.68), the types of jobs most closely associated with manufacturing, decreased markedly in these areas. Also, at a time when successive upstate New York cohorts were demonstrating an 11 percent increase in the high school graduation rate, the rate in emerging poverty areas decreased 23 percent (PR = 0.77). These trends are all consistent with the social structural characteristics observed in similar areas of Cleveland.

## DISCUSSION

This analysis suggests that in four northeastern "rust belt" cities—Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany, New York—the geographic concentration of

poverty, that is, the tendency for newly poor people to pool in already highly impoverished areas, increased by two-thirds from 1980 to 1990. This finding is nearly the same as that of the Cleveland analysis (Coulton et al., 1990). It should be noted that such heightened concentration of poverty in predominantly inner-city areas was observed at a time when very little change had been found in the overall economic circumstances of New Yorkers. It has been inferred previously that such global population analyses may tend to obscure within-population diversity and so mask the detection of significant economic decline among some demographic subpopulations (Danziger & Plotnick, 1986). In fact, such a phenomenon is precisely what this study observed. Though the probability of experiencing poverty changed little for the "average" New Yorker during the 1980s, it increased dramatically among some, namely among black residents of New York's highly segregated, already severely impoverished inner-city areas. Prevalent impoverishment in predominantly black high-poverty neighborhoods nearly doubled, while the opposite trend was observed in similarly poor, though predominantly white, neighborhoods, where prevalent impoverishment diminished by more than 50 percent during the decade.

Thirty-two (5.4 percent) of upstate New York's census tracts defined as emerging high-poverty areas—that is, 40 percent or more of their residents were poor in 1990—did not meet this criterion in 1980. Again, such areas are nearly exclusively located

in the most segregated, black, and severely impoverished inner-city areas or the immediately adjacent neighborhoods. As was noted in the Cleveland study, this trend of poverty pooling during the 1980s essentially represents a continuation of a 1970s phenomenon and is more consistent with a social structural explanation (Wilson, 1987) than with a personalized one (Murray, 1984). The characteristic sociodemographic trends of upstate New York's emerging poverty areas—for example, the concomitant loss of relatively higher-paying manufacturing jobs with the gain of low-paying service-related jobs—are most parsimoniously explained by the oft-noted trend of the suburbanization of the manufacturing sector. Also, inner-city poor black people, because of their disadvantaged educational status, are isolated from the more geographically proximal higher-paying professional jobs in the city.

People who live in these severely degraded areas of the inner cities seem to be isolated from others not only in an economic sense, but in a social and geographic sense as well. They are out of the sight of most, and given the recent call for welfare reform, with its personalized and even moralistic tone (that people essentially choose not to work and choose to live in these degraded circumstances), they are out of the minds of many. System reform is one thing, but the punishment of targeted beneficiaries because of a system's lack of complete effectiveness is irrational.

In a relative sense, 8 percent more poor black people than white people left the welfare rolls of upstate New York during the 1980s (Gorey, 1994). It may sound crass to take note of such a finding in light of today's call for color-blind legislation, but the degraded conditions of inner-city areas did not develop in a color-blind society. Also, this study and Coulton et al.'s (1990) study estimated that approximately a third or more of the problem, that is, the concentration of severe impoverishment in these areas, may be due to the out-migration of nonpoor people. Those who have the means to move do so, surely as a result of myriad social as well as individual factors.

Sometimes inner-city problems are discussed as if they were simply understood, essentially bivariate relations—for example, “welfare dependency causes the inner-city problem.” The results of this study and others it cites tend to refute this simplistic notion. First, there is no singular inner-city problem; a multiplicity of essentially public health problems are extant. Next, welfare dependency probably does play a role, albeit a relatively small one, in problem maintenance. Finally, many other social factors are recog-

nized as important and will need to be addressed by policymakers who endeavor to solve problems in the inner city, including encouragement to complete high school and take advantage of continued educational opportunities; job, income, mortgage, transportation, and preventive and palliative health care opportunities; and opportunities to experience a healthy, supportive environment that allows for freedom from the fear of crime victimization and the hope that the future holds an opportunity to enjoy the American dream.

The impacts, both positive and negative, of social interventions that are currently being initiated by most states to tackle their inner-city problems (for example, enterprise zones and welfare reform legislation) need to be rigorously evaluated. Legislative direction ought to be steered by valid data gathered to answer questions concerning the fit between inner-city residents and their surrounding social and physical environment rather than by the ebb and flow of political tides. ■

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