



The racial divide among American children in poverty: Reassessing the importance of neighborhood

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ABSTRACT

Census data have long indicated that black and Hispanic children in the United States are approximately two to three times more likely than white children to fall below the official poverty line. Yet this well established statistic masks a much higher differential in the incidence of ecological poverty between white and nonwhite children. This paper examines the extent of this racial/ethnic divide through an alternative and new metric of childhood neighborhood poverty. Data from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census are used to estimate the percentage of white, black, and Hispanic children residing in high childhood poverty neighborhoods. Our results indicate that black children are up to 14 times more likely to live in a high childhood poverty neighborhood when compared to their white counterparts. In addition, for black children living below the poverty line, the majority will experience the double disadvantage of residing in a poor minority childhood neighborhood as well. Findings for Hispanic children are similar to those for black children, albeit slightly less pronounced.

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1. Introduction

The United States leads the developed world in both the extent and depth of its poverty (Smeeding, 2005). More specifically, the rates of childhood poverty in America far surpass those for children in virtually all other Western industrialized countries (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003; UNICEF, 2005; Weinshenker & Heuveline, 2008). This is particularly troubling because poverty during the childhood years is associated with a host of health, economic, and social problems later in life. These include a greater likelihood of impaired physical and mental growth, lower academic achievement, and a greater propensity towards psychological and social maladjustment (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Rank, 2004). One study estimated that the cost of U.S. childhood poverty stood at approximately 500 billion dollars a year, resulting from increased health care costs, loss of economic productivity, and an increase in crime associated with poverty (Holzer, Schanzenbach, Duncan, & Ludwig, 2007).

Yet what is particularly striking about America's rates of poverty among children is the substantial variation in risk across racial and ethnic groups (Lindsey, 2009). Although white children are at a significant risk of poverty (especially in comparison with children in other developed countries), black and Latino children

have rates of poverty that are between two to three times higher than that of white children in any given year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Consequently, such children are at an extremely high risk of the harmful social and economic consequences resulting from poverty.

In this paper we present data demonstrating that the risk of poverty for children of color is, in certain respects, much higher and more severe than that indicated by the official rates of poverty. In order to do so, we analyze poverty through a new spatial measure that estimates the percent of children falling into high childhood poverty census tract regions. Our results indicate that black and Hispanic children are many times more likely than white children to experience the detrimental factor of childhood neighborhood poverty. In addition, for black and Hispanic children who are currently living below the poverty line, they are much more likely than white children to experience the double disadvantage of residing in poor childhood neighborhoods. Finally, not only are black and Hispanic children more likely to be living in poor childhood neighborhoods, but they are significantly more likely to be living in poor minority childhood neighborhoods as well.

2. Background

2.1. Previous literature

Poverty in the United States (as well as in most other countries) has typically been measured at the individual or household level.

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Since the mid 1960s, U.S. poverty has officially been calculated through the metric of household income. Individuals residing in households that fall below certain income levels are considered to be poor. For example, in 2007, a family of four would be counted in poverty if their yearly household income fell below \$21,386 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Although considerable debate has occurred regarding the adequacy of this measure (Blank, 2008; Iceland, 2005), it has remained the approach most often used in both governmental reporting and academic studies of poverty. In 2007, the overall rate of poverty in the United States stood at 12.5%, while the poverty rate for children under the age of 18 was 18.0% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Yet poverty can also be conceptualized in terms of a neighborhood's economic viability. Consequently, over the past 20 years researchers have focused on the economic well-being of the neighborhoods that individuals reside in as another way in which to describe and understand the nature of American poverty. The argument here is that neighborhoods mired in poverty detrimentally affect all who reside in such communities, and are particularly harmful to children. For example, Jargowsky poses the question, "Why should we be concerned with the spatial organization of poverty?" His answer is the following,

The concentration of poor families and children in high poverty ghettos, barrios, and slums magnifies the problems faced by the poor. Concentrations of poor people lead to a concentration of the social ills that cause or are caused by poverty. Poor children in these neighborhoods not only lack basic necessities in their own homes, but also they must contend with a hostile environment that holds many temptations and few positive role models. Equally important, school districts and attendance zones are generally organized geographically, so that the residential concentration of the poor frequently results in low-performing schools (Jargowsky, 2003: 2).

Research has indicated that even after controlling for individual income and race, children's well-being in high poverty neighborhoods suffer in many ways (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Evans, 2004, 2006; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). For example, Turner and Kaye (2006) found that independent of individual characteristics, "as a neighborhood's poverty rate rises, so too does the likelihood of negative behavior among young children, of being expelled from school, of negative school engagement, of lack of involvement in activities, of not being read to or taken on outings, of living in a family with no full-time workers, and of having a caretaker who is aggravated or in poor mental health" (Turner and Kaye, 2006: 20).

This neighborhood context of poverty has been particularly significant in the seminal work of William Julius Wilson (Wilson, 1987, 1996, 2009), Douglas Massey (Massey & Denton, 1993; Massey, 2007), and Robert Sampson (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson & Morenoff, 2006). Their research has shown that children growing up in high poverty neighborhoods suffer from many disadvantages as a result of geographical residence. In addition, the children impacted by these negative effects are often children of color due to the long established patterns of residential racial segregation in American cities (Charles, 2003; Farley, 2008; Fischer, 2003).

Yet despite this growing body of research, relatively little is known about the actual percentage of American children who are living in high poverty neighborhoods, and in particular, high childhood poverty neighborhoods, and how these percentages vary on the basis of race. Rather, the focus has been on estimating the percentage of the overall population as well as the poverty population that fall into high poverty neighborhoods (Bishaw,

2005; Jargowsky, 1997, 2003; Kingsley & Pettit, 2003, 2007). This body of work has often defined high poverty neighborhoods as census tracts in which 40% or more of its residents fall below the poverty line (Jargowsky, 2003). Using this metric, Kingsley and Pettit (2003) report that 3% of the U.S. metropolitan population lived within such neighborhoods in 1980, 5% in 1990, and 3% in 2000. The percentage of the poor living in high poverty neighborhoods was 13% in 1980, 17% in 1990, and 12% in 2000 (Kingsley & Pettit, 2003). Other research has also shown that while concentrated neighborhood poverty increased from the 1970s through the 1980s, it fell during the 1990s (Jargowsky, 2003). With respect to children, Timberlake (2007) estimates that in 2000, 1.3% of white children, 7.3% of Hispanic children, and 10.8% of black children were living in metropolitan census tracts with 40% or more overall poverty.

2.2. An alternative neighborhood measure of children's poverty

In this paper we analyze for the first time the likelihood that children will reside in neighborhoods marked by high childhood poverty. Consequently, rather than looking at children residing in neighborhoods with high overall population levels of poverty, we are introducing a measure that looks at children residing in neighborhoods that have high levels of poverty specifically among the children within those neighborhoods. We would argue that this is a particularly appropriate way of measuring the impact of neighborhood poverty upon children. Substantial research has shown that childhood peers in poor communities exert a strong impact upon various indicators of well-being, and in particular, childhood peers that are in poverty have been shown to have an overall negative effect upon children's well-being and development (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Case & Katz, 1991; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Consequently, rather than focus on the overall extent of poverty in a neighborhood, a more targeted measure for understanding children's well-being is the extent of poverty among children within a neighborhood.

We also examine the likelihood of a child residing in a high poverty neighborhood among children of a similar race/ethnicity. For example, to what extent are black children likely to reside in neighborhoods that also have high levels of black childhood poverty? Prior research has indicated that childhood peers within one's own racial/ethnic group are particularly important in influencing behavior. For example, Turley (2002) has demonstrated that for black children, the poverty status of their fellow black children within a neighborhood (as opposed to children of other races) was critical in predicting various behavioral outcomes.

Our approach to measuring childhood poverty is consistent with what has been referred to as the memberships theory of poverty (Durlauf, 2001, 2006). This perspective emphasizes the importance of group membership and peer influence as critical factors (although by no means the only factors) in the maintenance and reproduction of poverty. Substantial research in sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and economics has demonstrated the importance of groups and peers on affecting behavior. For example, Wilson (1996), Anderson (1999), and MacLeod (1995) have all shown the influence that peers and a lack of positive role models can have on negatively affecting the aspirations and behavior of inner city impoverished youth.

To illustrate, if one's peers have little motivation to graduate from high school, their lowered aspirations can then downwardly affect their fellow students' academic outlooks and efforts. As Durlauf notes, "If the educational effort and aspirations of one child are influenced by the efforts of his friends and peers, then

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