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Local approaches to counter a wider pattern? Urban poverty in Portland, Oregon

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ABSTRACT

A model U.S. city, Portland Oregon's progressive policies are often credited with making it highly livable, with a vibrant urban core. Yet these policies have not protected Portland from broader trends that have increased urban poverty over the past several decades in the U.S., including social welfare cuts and the shift in the economy to the service sector. In terms of poverty dynamics and social policies, we argue that while regional planning and other progressive policies have helped protect Portland from extremely high concentrated poverty present in many large U.S. cities, it has still experienced growing social dislocations associated with national and macro-level social and economic factors. These trends suggest both the possibilities and limits of local policy, regional planning, and activism for ameliorating the deleterious consequences of social welfare retrenchment and franchise capitalism for vulnerable urban populations, and highlight the importance of the broader social policy context and economic change for understanding urban poverty and the experiences of the urban poor.

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1. Introduction

In research literature and popular media, Portland, Oregon is often described in glowing terms – especially for the city's participatory approaches to regional development (Abbott, 2001; Kunstler, 1993; Orfield, 2002; Ozawa, 2004; Rusk, 1995). Of the 25 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, Portland consistently ranks among the top five most livable. For social well-being and sustainability indices, access to amenities and services, progressive policy, engaged citizenry, and responsive local governance, Portland is known as an U.S. urban success story. We argue that poverty in Portland, while mitigated somewhat by local or regional conditions, reflects broad urban American patterns within the context of social welfare retrenchment and macroeconomic transformations.

While still considered economic motors of development as Jane Jacobs described (Stren, 2007, p. 250), U.S.

Portland is widely seen as a North American model of planning for regional sustainability, public transit, neighborhood involvement, and progressive policies. Yet it has not avoided urban poverty-related problems, such as homelessness, inadequate affordable housing, and strained public and social service resources. While markedly less severe than in other major metropolitan areas, Portland poverty's causes and consequences nevertheless parallel those of other U.S. cities. Intensifying urban poverty - with eroding welfare state support for social, civil, political, and economic rights – results partly from de-industrialization with globalization (Beck, 2000; Heisler, 1991; Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003; Wilson, 1996). We argue that poverty in Portland, while mitigated somewhat by local or regional conditions, reflects broad urban American patterns within a global economy.

^{2.} Literature on urban poverty

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¹ Retrieved from http://www.sustainlane.com/us-city-rankings/.

cities underwent systematic middle-class outflow, minority inflow, and industrial decentralization from WWII and especially from 1970 to 1990 (Orfield, 2002, p. 73). These historic urban–suburban migration patterns with urban poverty increasing as compared to the suburbs have begun to shift and even reverse since 1990 (Berube & Kneebone, 2006; Orfield, 2002, pp. 27, 72; Sawhill & Jargowsky, 2006). Since the early 1970s, poverty and inequality have been increasing accompanying corporate shifts to contingent workforces and dismantling the liberal welfare state (Goode & Maskovsky, 2001, p. 8; Jessop, 2002; Peck, 2001; Wade, 2003).

Varying local and regional poverty concentration and dispersal patterns often reflect global political economic forces. For example, recent global declines in financial support for urban municipalities are found to particularly disadvantage medium-sized cities (Garland, Massoumi, & Ruble, 2007, p. 8). Beyond economic globalism, these trends also result from political programs that Frances Fox Piven describes as devolution of national responsibility to local governments, including ending welfare with the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 'PRWORA' (Piven, 2001, p. 135).

William Julius Wilson argues that the persistent concentration of extreme inner city poverty emerges from the interplay of legacies of racial segregation and discrimination, migration to cities with associated weak labor force attachments, subsidized suburbanization, and the labor economy transition from goods- to service-producing industries. He also implicates employer discrimination and the mismatch between where low-skilled workers live and employment opportunities as well as reductions in federal aid to cities and other social safety net retrenchment (Wilson, 1991, p. 465).

Urban poverty research increasingly recognizes the critical importance of understanding urban poverty from a metropolitan perspective (Orfield, 2002, p. 72; Rosenbaum & Popkin, 1991, p. 355). Often contrasted with the culture of poverty approach – which posits that subculture entrenches the reproduction of poverty in urban ghettos – the geography of opportunity approach posits that studying a person's residential location within a city and social structural barriers are essential to understanding their experiences and outcomes.

As a relatively affluent city with lower levels of urban poverty than most American cities, Portland is noteworthy. Portland has below average rates of children eligible for free lunch and lower proportions of residents living in high-poverty census tracts (Orfield, 2002, pp. 2, 23). As with investigative journalist accounts of the low wage U.S. labor economy during the prosperous late-1990s (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 10), studying urban poverty in Portland is akin to evaluating a best-case scenario for U.S. urban poverty.²

3. Urban poverty dimensions

3.1. Income inequality and spatial distributions

As in other U.S. cities, the rate of urban poverty in Portland rate increased from the 1960s, in part as a result of post-WWII suburbanization. As employment and wealth shifted to suburbs, poverty concentrations increased in certain inner-city neighborhoods. The retrenchment of the social welfare safety net further concentrated poverty in some areas, but also contributed to increasing urban poverty older suburbs – now called outer urban neighborhoods or inner-ring suburbs (Berube & Kneebone, 2006).

While urban renewal was a government response to disinvestment accompanying early suburbanization in the 1960s, the post-1970s new urban development model stressed corporate growth, privatization, and cutting public social services (Bernstein, McNichol, & Nicholas, 2008; Ruben, 2001, p. 436). As urban manufacturing relocated to the suburbs or offshore the city was redeveloped as a growth machine emphasizing finance, insurance, and real estate (hereafter F.I.R.E.) sectors (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Ruben, 2001, p. 436).

These development patterns complicate the picture of urban poverty in part because the postindustrial city became increasingly suburban, while the central city's downtown was often seen as a destination for suburban consumers and tourists. However, with its history of citizen activism and progressive regional development policies, Portland is arguably an exception to these typical U.S. urban development patterns (Abbott, 2001; Kunstler, 1993, pp. 200–206). While Portland's poverty rates are below average for major U.S. cities, housing gentrification, the expansion of the F.I.R.E. sector, and recent poverty growth are notable.

At a national level, census data reveal growing income inequality in the U.S. since the late 1990s – with upper quintile incomes increasing while the lowest fifth declined by 2.5% on average (Bernstein et al., 2008). Inequality in Portland mirrors national inequality growth patterns due to shifts from manufacturing to non-union, low-wage service work, disproportionately growing investment incomes, and non-progressive tax and welfare policies (Bernstein et al., 2008). City planners also note globalization's local impacts through job outsourcing and above-average concentration in the largest traded sector specializations

One valuable source is The Regional Equity Atlas: Metropolitan Portland's Geography of Opportunity, by Campbell et al. (2007), which was published by The Coalition for a Livable Future and Portland State University's College of Urban & Public Affairs. The report is based on detailed GIS mapping and demographic analysis to explore equity and sustainable development connections. It focuses on the six-county "Portland-Vancouver Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area" (PV-PMSA)

as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, though resource constraints limit analysis to the four counties (Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington in Oregon, and Clark County, WA) comprising most of the Portland area's 1.9 million residents (The Coalition for a Livable Future, 2007, p. 103). Other sources include the U.S. Census 2008 American Community Survey, the Coalition for a Livable Future and Portland State University's Regional Equity Atlas (2007), Orfield's Metropolitics studies (1998, 2002), U.S. Housing & Urban Development (HUD) Dept. State of the Cities Data System, Oregon Center for Public Policy, Brookings Institution, Economic Policy Institute, the City of Portland, Multnomah County, Portland Public Schools and the State of Oregon.

³ F.I.R.E. ranks in Portland's 1990–2000 top six employment sectors, and in the top two fastest suburbanizing. (U.S. HUD Dept. *State of the Cities Data System*, retrieved from http://socds.huduser.org/Census/industry.odb?msacitylist=6440.0*4100059000*1.0&metro=msa.)

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