



Ending the cycle of poverty through socio-economic integration: A comparison of Moving to Opportunity (MTO) in the United States and the Bijlmermeer Revival Project in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In many advanced industrialized countries, one trend in housing programs has been to attempt to reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty and other social problems through the “de-concentration” of urban poverty. In this article, we compare two re-location and urban renewal programs in the United States and the Netherlands, that we argue are based, in part, on assumptions about neighbourhood effects. This neighbourhood effects literature contends that living in close proximity to other impoverished people has a negative effect on the behaviour, dispositions, and welfare of low-income individuals, particularly children. Specifically, this article compares the “Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Experiment” (MTO) in the United States and the “Bijlmermeer Revitalization Project” in the Netherlands.

The MTO and Bijlmermeer programs have demonstrated that a multifaceted approach to socio-spatial integration can provide significant social benefits to the poor. At the same time, these projects reveal that re-location policies must take into account these groups’ specific contexts in order to increase the likelihood of desired outcomes through such programs. The goal of reducing concentrations of poverty in urban centres should include opportunities for re-location, while simultaneously working towards the urban renewal of high poverty urban neighbourhoods. We argue that maintaining political and public support for urban poverty de-concentration programs requires further experimental, qualitative and quantitative research aimed at explaining the complex and non-linear relationship between urban concentrations of poverty and social problems. This would also allow for targeting of de-concentration efforts to improve social and economic opportunities for all.

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Introduction

A recurring question in the study of urban poverty is whether a concentration of impoverished people living in one area adversely affects their chances at socioeconomic success, and even more importantly, their children’s fortunes. Research evidence, from the famed Gautreaux program – a historic experimental re-location program in Chicago – to Wilson’s classic book on urban poverty, *When Work Disappears*, have sparked global interest in development strategies and other programs that aim to “de-concentrate” poverty.

Deconcentrating poverty is argued to increase a low-income individual’s chances at success, as well as significantly improving the safety and economic wellbeing of those living in these neigh-

bourhoods (Goering et al., 2002; Goetz, 2003). Opponents of de-concentration programs contend that these strategies focus solely on improving an area’s economic vitality, rather than the best interests of those residents living in a high poverty area (Crump, 2002, p. 291; Smith, 2006). Officials might be seen as advocating dispersal of the poor in order to make way for reconstruction and commerce within city centers (Goetz, 2000, p. 169). Others might view these programs as an assault on community power, or as attempts to break up ethnic enclaves that can provide cultural and economic resources for recent immigrants (Leeming and Shakur, 2004). Opponents of de-concentration programs argue that resources should instead be used directly to push for the kinds of investments (in high quality education, for example) that would promote the upward mobility of the poor within their own neighbourhoods (Goetz, 2003).

We examine the debates surrounding “neighbourhood effects”, and maintain that support of de-concentration programs should be based on a careful examination of community context and in light of the complex, non-linear relationships between concentrations of

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poverty and certain adverse effects. Next we compare the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment with the Bijlmermeer program in the Netherlands to demonstrate two different applied approaches to the de-concentration of poverty. Comparing some of the successes and shortcomings of MTO and the Bijlmermeer program reveals that re-location programs must be multifaceted, involving all affected communities, and must also be sensitive to regional factors.

Does neighbourhood matter?

In the United States as well as in Europe (following the US model), policy-makers have embraced the idea of dispersing the poor in order to diminish the concentration of poverty in low-income neighbourhoods. Intuitively, these policies seem to make sense. Where are the worst social problems and dislocations? In the highest poverty neighbourhoods. Many middle and upper-middle-class families make decisions based on the folk notion that neighbourhood matters, selecting their own residential location with a keen eye on the quality of public amenities and schools. The neighbourhood effects literature sensibly posits that where people live matters: that the resources, experiences, and qualities of neighbours and neighbourhood institutions shape outlooks, behaviour, and opportunity, if not at a deterministic, at least at a probabilistic level (Wilson, 1996). Adverse behaviours characteristic to the poor are replicated within poor neighbourhoods, trapping individuals in a spiral of economic decline and in turn, reproducing poverty (Bauder, 2002; Wilson, 1987).

The research literature has advanced in many regards from Oscar Lewis's *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan, New York* (1967) and Charles Murray's simplistic arguments in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy* (1984). The prevailing consensus is that neighbourhood effects are actually likely smaller than previously imagined (Dietz, 2002). While it is true that those living in the highest concentrations of poverty are in fact often the worst off, that does not mean only the neighbourhood is at fault. Lacking connections, drive or resources to reside in a better neighbourhood, the worst off also select into worst neighbourhoods (Mayer and Jencks, 1989; Small and Newman, 2001; Tienda, 1991).

While some evidence suggests extremely challenging barriers for residents of extremely high-poverty neighbourhoods to find and maintain formal employment (Anderson, 1990), other empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that the working poor live alongside the welfare poor in these communities (Newman, 1999, 2006). Some succeed, many struggle, while some overcome. There is growing recognition that the character of poverty matters, as well. Neighbourhoods where most families are disconnected from formal employment are far worse off than those with mostly working poor residents (see Klinenberg, 2002).

Neighbourhood effects are also no longer thought of simplistically as being linear (Buck, 2001, p. 2265; Small and Newman, 2001). In other words, social pathologies do not increase incrementally with each percentage point increase in poverty. Alternatively, research suggests a threshold effect such that high-poverty neighbourhoods defined as having 20% or more of households living below the US poverty line have greater social dislocations than other neighbourhoods; yet it is extremely high-poverty neighbourhoods – where more than 40% of households are earning less than the poverty line – that we see the serious manifestations of urban social dislocation we attribute to urban ghettos (Sampson and Groves, 1989). At the same time, one must be careful not to assume that inner-city cultures are internally homogenous. Such an assumption ignores the diversity of backgrounds present within the “ghetto” (Small and Newman, 2001) which often create a dy-

namic of contradicting “mainstream” and “ghetto-specific” forms of behaviour (Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1996).

Poor neighbourhoods reinforce the cycle of poverty

An individual's behavioural norms and outlooks are largely shaped by the people with whom this individual has most frequent or sustained contact. Wilson and other urban scholars assert that a cultural enclave takes form when socially and economically-deprived individuals reside in a cluster. When unemployment, welfare dependency, crime, and other unfavourable statistics define a community, a sub-cultural enclave is formed (Wilson, 1987, p. 23; Wacquant and Wilson, 1989). This enclave reinforces these degenerative patterns and generates prejudices, tastes and outlooks that tend to further socially isolate the neighbourhood (Bolt et al., 1998, p. 87; Bauder, 2002).

In addition, it is quite common that a high-poverty neighbourhood will become further stigmatized and socially isolated due to its physical appearance of decay (Wilson, 1987; Wilson and Kelling, 1982). When landlords and landowners do not feel the need to maintain their properties, the neighbourhood enters a cycle of decline (Sampson et al., 2002, p. 465). For this reason, an impoverished neighbourhood will begin to appear unsafe both socially and economically, thereby prompting the exit of businesses and the middle class (Jargowsky and Bane, 1991; Wilson, 1996). After a cycle of decline and exit, very few role models or job opportunities remain, which can trap people in poverty (Bolt et al., 1998, p. 87).

Once this cycle is in motion, the impoverished neighbourhood becomes isolated from the mainstream, making it increasingly difficult to find a job on the outskirts within mainstream businesses (Rankin and Quane, 2000). A high-poverty neighbourhood is often associated with stereotypes that negatively affect the employability of residents, since employers have a tendency to discriminate against individuals for their expected deficiency of soft skills or concerns about social connections to illicit enterprises (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Wilson, 1996). Empirical evidence suggests the increasing importance of soft skills for employability, which include a personality suited to the work environment, grooming habits, group-oriented work behaviours, and manners, can be shaped in part by one's area code (Wilson, 1996, p. 137). The trend of screening out individuals based on their area code prior to job interviews is a prominent practice within US cities with inner-city ghettos (Wilson, 1996, p. 59).

The isolation of the poor in high-poverty neighbourhoods can also diminish the potential for political coalitions with mainstream groups to advocate for policies and programs to address the needs of the urban poor. Empirical evidence on inner-city US neighbourhoods has found that concentrated poverty and joblessness results in declining community efficacy and high levels of social disorganization. (Wilson, 1996, 2009). As a result, the residents lose the power to fend for themselves causing “organizational desertification” (Pinderhughes, 1987; Bolt et al., 1998, p. 87). Their lack of political power within their own neighbourhoods exacerbates the decline in governmental funding of basic public services such as healthcare and schooling, once again perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Alex-Assensoh, 1997).

Arguments against the theory of neighbourhood effects

Although the spatial expansion of concentrated poverty has occurred in numerous cities throughout the United States, the “neighbourhood effect” model remains flawed and difficult to prove because it relies on a unidirectional causal relationship. A unidirectional causal relationship assumes that a single cause results in a single outcome. For instance, the theory of neighbour-

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