

*Case Study*

# Gads Hill Center: revisiting the function and cause of social settlements in a time of COVID

Maricela Garcia<sup>1</sup>, Maria del Rosario Vidal de Haymes<sup>2</sup> and Llewelyn Cornelius<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> CEO, Gads Hill Center, USA<sup>2</sup> School of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA<sup>3</sup> School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has extended across the globe and has made visible the hyper vulnerability of socially marginalized groups, the inadequacy of public health systems, and the fragility of national and global economic systems. Inflection points, such as the pandemic, often signal that the affected sectors, in this case nation states and their social institutions, regional bodies, and international organizations, must make a fundamental examine and consider the actions needed to strengthen their institutions and footing. In this case study we present how this historical moment has lead a 122 year old American social settlement to re-examine their role and model of practice in an effort to continue to contribute to meaningful changes that diminish human suffering and vulnerability, while advancing the rights and flourishing of the communities of color that they accompany.

Keywords: Settlement House Movement, communities of color, COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has extended across the globe and has made visible the hyper vulnerability of socially marginalized groups, the inadequacy of public health systems, and the fragility of national and global economic systems. The coronavirus has revealed the deep historical injustices that continue to exist for peoples of color in the United States, whom have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, by the police in the early months of the pandemic further revealed this pattern of vulnerability and racial injustice in the United States. While indifference, cruelty, and antiblack and anti-immigrant structural violence have been persistent features of the United States, the brutality and lack of regard for life exhibited by the police as they slowly asphyxiated the late Mr. Floyd was simultaneously unimaginable and undeniable, as is the suffering and death that COVID-19 has inflicted on communities of color.

Inflection points often signal that the affected sectors, in this case nation states and their social institutions, regional bodies, and international organizations, and civil society must make a fundamental examine and consider the actions needed to strengthen their institutions and footing. In this case study we present how this historical moment has led Gads Hill Center, a 122-year-old American social settlement, to reexamine its role and model of practice in an effort to continue to contribute to meaningful changes that diminish human suffering and vulnerability, while advancing the rights and flourishing of the communities of color that they accompany.

A case study approach is especially helpful to ‘investigate contemporary phenomena within a real-life context’ (Yin, 2009, p. 14). In this instance, through a review of historical records and contemporary client survey data, we consider how a social settlement adapts to a dynamic context shaped by an evolving public health crisis with broad and extensive social and economic implications that impact the families and community that participate in the Center. By examining the particular case of Gads Hill Center in Chicago, lessons can be

learned regarding the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in marginalized communities and alterations in programming to respond to changing public health concerns and address community vulnerability.

This case study begins with a brief review of the history of social settlements in the United States, situating Gads Hill Center in that context. This is followed by an overview of the Gads Hill settlement that extends from its origin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary moment - the historical period of industrialization to the present period of a global pandemic, moments of tremendous social discontinuity and transition. The case study continues with a summary of the impact of the pandemic on Gads Hill Center participants and the settlement's efforts to respond. It concludes with a discussion of the Center's decision to return to its origins in an effort to remain responsive and vital to the community. This discussion is situated in the century old tension between the "function" and "cause" professional projects of social work, the former referring to individual intervention in the form of casework, and the later referring to social reform.

## 2. Background

Gads Hill Social Settlement was founded in Chicago in 1898 with a mission to improve community conditions and the well-being of its residents. It was one of approximately 400 hundred settlement houses established in the United States between 1880 and 1920 in response to the large influx of European immigrants and the urban poverty and labor exploitation associated with this period of rapid industrialization and urbanization (Gibson, 2016; Berry, 1986). The Settlement House Movement reflected the broad commitment to social reform of the Progressive era and the impulse of the emerging field of social work to move towards an orientation of social solidarity and community welfare, and away from the individual charity and uplift approach of the Charity Organization Societies (Scheuer, 1985; Berry, 1986).

The Settlement House Movement in the United States was influenced by the ideas of British social reformers concerned with the replacement of the craftsman by routinization of work, the brutal working conditions and poverty of the factory worker, growing class inequality, and the materialist ethos and emphasis on self-interest associated with the Industrial Revolution. In reaction to these dynamics and traditional conceptions of charity, these reformers advanced social settlements to attend to the needs of the working poor through a collective and holistic approach that focused on addressing the causes of poverty and cultivating community cohesion and organizations. The settlement served as a community center and meeting space for local organizations, a space of culture

and learning, and a place where residents of slum districts could gather for education and recreation. Settlements, such as Toynbee Hall in East London, became a model for other settlements in England, as well as the United States (Scheuer, 1985).

Many early settlements in the United States focused on attending to newly arrived immigrants. Their efforts ranged from serving as a "information and interpretation bureaus" to efforts to promote the labor, housing, and financial service rights of immigrants through investigation and reform actions against unscrupulous employers and employment agencies, slumlords that offered congested and unsafe tenement housing, and predatory financial services that charged exorbitant fees for savings services and remittance transfers all targeting new immigrants (Addams, 1893; 1916). In addition to direct advocacy, settlements helped initiate social reform organizations and legislation, such as the Immigrants Protective League in Chicago that advocated for humane programs to assist immigrants and opposed restrictive immigration policies and derogatory depictions of eastern and southern European immigrants that had popular currency in the era (Leonard, 1973).

The American settlements also promoted immigrant incorporation through the provision of cultural, educational, and social spaces and activities. They offered an arena for "educational enterprise to build a bridge between European and American experiences in such wise as to give them both more meaning and sense of relation" and address the breach in meaning, values, and understanding between immigrants and their children and for the dissemination of information to "the honest immigrant parents totally ignorant of American laws and municipal regulations" and parenting norms (Addams, 1916, pp. 235-235 & p. 251). The settlements provided a place to hold social gatherings and celebrations, at a time when the only other public meeting option that existed for immigrants was a saloon and a place for cultural exchange and learning where immigrant women could share their traditional needle and culinary crafts with American hostesses (Addams, 1916).

In addition to these immigrant specific efforts, American social settlements, although diverse in nature, engaged in many common initiatives. Common initiatives included kindergartens, day nurseries and recreation spaces for children; gathering spaces for social exchange and participation in autonomous groups; social reform efforts; and various educational, cultural, and social activities to facilitate personal growth and community identity and solidarity (Scheuer, 1985; Addams 1916).

### 3. Gads Hill Social Settlement: the early years

On April 18, the state of Illinois issued a non-for-profit Charter to the Gads Hill Social Settlement, later changed to Gads Hill Center. The founding statement of purpose in the Charter indicated that:

‘The object shall be to improve the living conditions of the neighborhood and to assist and stimulate the people of the district through education, helpful recreation, wholesome social intercourse, and neighborly cooperation’ (Gads Hill Center Collection, 1916).

Gads Hill, located in the Lower West Side area of Chicago, was established shortly after the city’s incorporation in 1833. The Lower West Side, previously inhabited by Germans and Irish immigrants, became an enclave for eastern European immigrants, primarily Bohemians after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which raged for 24 hours, killing 300 people and leaving more than a third of the city’s inhabitants homeless (Abbott, 2012). Bohemian immigrants named the neighborhood Plzň after the second largest city in west Bohemia—now Czechoslovakia. (Gads Hill Center Collection, 1916).

After World War I, continuing a long pattern of ethnic succession, the once German, then Irish, then Bohemian neighborhood, now referred to as Pilsen, became a primary destination for Mexican immigrants. Historically, diverse immigrant populations were drawn to the area by employment opportunities offered by the railroads, industrial plants, and small companies that grew in the transportation hub of the Illinois-Michigan Canal and several railroad lines.

As part of the Settlement House Movement, Gads Hill Center was established to provide community services to address the social problems of the time associated with industrialization and urbanization and the large influx of eastern and southern European immigrants. Leila Moss Martin, one of the founders and first Center director, was the driving force in Gads Hill’s early years. Among her accomplishments were: the founding of Arden Shore in 1900 to provide a camp for mothers and children; the 1905 opening, in cooperation with the Visiting Nurse Association, of the first free tuberculosis camp in the region; and the 1912 opening of the first playground in the district, Barret Playground (Gads Hill Center Collection, 1916).

In 1903, Gads Hill marked a new direction with the goal of anchoring their efforts with a central building through which the settlement work would be concentrated and from which supervision of smaller neighborhood centers would come. In 1916, the building which continues to be the center was constructed on the eastern three lots of ten which were

donated to Gads Hill, and the remaining seven were used as a playground. Industrialist and prominent citizens provided the leadership and financial support crucial to the Center in its formative years (Gads Hill Center Collection, 1916).

In between the two World Wars, Gads Hill started a private circulating library for children in 1919 and in 1928, the Chicago Public Library established a sub-branch on the first floor of the Center, where it continued to operate until 1988. During this period adult education and English language and citizenship classes were initiated, along with woodwork workshops, parent education and social clubs, forming the core programs in the settlement (Gads Hill Center Collection, 1916). The resources to support the programs, in the form of volunteers and in-kind and monetary donations, came from private donors and business in the Pilsen neighborhood. Local business in the neighborhood supported the Center because it provided services to the children of the workers and was considered a valuable component of the neighborhood ecosystem.

### 4. The middle years

By the mid 1900’s the emergence of social work as a profession and urban populations shifts clashed, leading to the decline of the settlement movement and model. At this point, most settlement workers identified themselves “social workers” rather than social reformers and considered the people they were helping as clients rather than neighbors (Koerin, 2003). The shift from European immigrants to internal African American migrants from the rural south to midwestern and northern urban centers during the Great Migration was met with a mixed response from settlements, ranging from closures, to racially segregated activities and facilities, to the following of white neighbors to other neighborhoods (Lasch-Quinn, 1993).

The 1960’s Great Society program advanced the erosion of the social settlement model. This was a moment of significant social change in the United States as Lydon Johnson, who as Vice President to John F. Kennedy assumed the role of the 36<sup>th</sup> President in 1964 following Kennedy’s assassination. Johnson continued the legislative agenda initiated by Kennedy which focused on broad civil rights, poverty and health care programs, public school aid, and tax reform aimed at ending poverty and racial injustice, a broad agenda known as the Great Society. Under the Great Society, the federal government began offering private agencies funding to support and expand their social welfare and anti-poverty programming.

By 1965, settlements and neighborhood centers were receiving equal proportions of public and private funds (Berry,

1986). These modifications associated with the Great Society represented more than a change in funding sources from predominantly private to government bases; they also represented shift in philosophy, scale and focus. Philosophically, centers moved from the settlement tradition of horizontal partnerships with program participants in the pursuit of a common goal to improve the neighborhood and the lives of the residents, to a more vertical relationship in which program participants were converted to service recipients. On the level of scale, settlements were transformed into large scale service providers “to discrete groups of needy residents” with less investment in social action and community building (Hirota, Brown and Martin, 1996; Landers, 1998; Koren, 2003).

Over these years of social transformation, the principles underlying Gads Hill Center have remained similar to those of its founding mission. But similar to other remaining settlements, Gads Hill Center has added new programs including neighborhood resource development, employment related childcare, positive youth development programs and Head Start programs, a school readiness program for young children from low-income families (Berry, 1986). Similar to early settlements, contemporary neighborhood centers and remaining settlements continue to provide a variety of services and programs to immigrants and individuals residing in low-income communities. Yet unlike traditional settlements, they work with more racially diverse communities and serve multiple neighborhoods, often through satellite centers and in partnership with other agencies (Koerin, 2003). The injection of funds from the federal government influenced the philosophy and identity of Gads Hill Center and other settlements, moving them away from their founding principles in various ways, such as the departure from staff residence in the settlement house or neighborhood, distancing them from the directly experience, identity, and conditions of the neighborhood.

## 5. The later years

Today, Gads Hill’s offerings primarily focus on educational support and enrichment programs that aim to assist children from low-income families to thrive in school. The programs support a continuum of education, beginning from birth through high school graduation. Gads Hill continues to serve a large immigrant population in its’ Early Head Start and Head Start programs, school readiness programs, tutoring and mentoring programs, mental health services, and community programs. The community programs resemble some of the original features of the settlement tradition and include English as a Second Language classes, voter registration, leadership development,

and training and supporting a cadre of Community Outreach/Health Promoters to implement education and civic engagement initiatives in the neighborhoods where the four Gads Hill Center sites are located.

After a community needs assessment in 2000, Gads Hill opened a child development center in North Lawndale, an under-resourced African American neighborhood, and started serving the families from this community in 2002. Since then, the organization has expanded its presence in both African American and Latino neighborhoods across the southwest side of Chicago. The programs are designed with a racial justice lens and are culturally and linguistically attuned. Direct service workers and high-level administrative staff are predominantly Latino and African American, reflecting the composition of the neighborhoods in which the centers operate.

Just as in the late 1800s, Gads Hill Center continues to serve families that experience economic, health, and educational inequalities. The structural inequalities that affect the development of the children that participate in the center’s programs remain the same, but the demographic composition of the families has changed from European immigrants to Latin American immigrants and African Americans. In addition to facing some of the same persistent economic and social obstacles, African American and Latino children face institutional racism.

## 6. The contemporary moment: global COVID-19 pandemic

To date there have been 15.9 million reported cases of Covid-19 and 295,664 COVID related deaths in the United States. After a downward trend in infection rates and a flattening of reported deaths, the nation is experiencing a dramatic escalation in cases and deaths. This pattern has been roughly replicated in the state of Illinois, with 834,668 COVID cases and 15,076 deaths to date, and in Chicago with a positivity rate of 14 percent and 2,849 deaths (New York Times, 2020; Cook County Department of Public Health, 2020). Nationally and locally, the COVID infection and mortality rates have disproportionately impacted African Americans and Latinos. For example, in Chicago postal zip code areas with majority Latino populations have the highest rates of infection, while postal zip code areas in the city with majority African American populations have the highest death rates. These disparities reflect long-standing patterns of social exclusion, segregation, and racial discrimination in the nation and in the city (Zamudio, 2020).

The causes for this disproportionate impact are varied and many, yet all reflect a common root: systematic racial

inequality. African American and Latino workers comprise the majority of essential workers in the United States and the nature of their employment, housing, and transportation do not allow for preventive public health social distancing measures. Latinos and African Americans are more likely to be employed in essential service and care industries that do not allow for remote work, live in densely populated areas and reside in multigenerational and multi-family households, and depend on public transportation. Furthermore, the social inequalities faced by these communities have resulted in higher incidence of pre-existing health conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, and asthma. Racial bias in health care aggravates disparities by hindering access and equity in care (Li, 2020).

### 6.1 Pre-pandemic population and programs

Gads Hill serves more than 4,500 children and their families annually. Ninety-six percent of these families have income that is at or below the federal poverty line, which makes their children eligible to enroll in the Center's programs. In accordance with its mission to create opportunities for low-income families to build better lives, over the last two decades Gads Hill has opened additional sites and programs in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods, home to Latino and African American families, reflecting the city's pervasive pattern of racial segregation (Gads Hill Center, 2019).

The Center's programs are designed to support the cognitive, language, and social emotional development of children. Special attention, commitment, and sensitivity is needed to support the healthy development of the children served by the Center. The environmental factors that shape the communities in which they live, such as poverty, racism, violence, environmental toxins, and institutional disinvestment, are known to affect children's development. It is well established in the research that early experiences affect the quality of the architecture of the brain by establishing either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health and behavior of subsequent years (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). The first five years of life represent a critical developmental period in which children benefit from stimulating environments that promote curiosity, offer enrichment experiences, and build confidence.

Segregated neighborhoods, absent of resources and security, create environments that disadvantage children from the start by limiting their opportunities to realize their full potential. For example, poverty limits the capacity to pay museum fees, books, educational toys, and other enriching activities and opportunities. Many of the immigrant children

and families that attend the Center have irregular or mixed immigration status families and experience profound and persistent stress associated with the worry of family separation due to the very real possibility of detention and deportations. Ninety-six percent of the Latino children that participate in Gads Hill programs are U.S. born, but more than 50 percent have immigrant parents and 38 percent live in mixed immigration status families (one or two parents undocumented, but the children are US citizens). Not surprisingly, early adverse childhood experiences or traumatic events are prevalent among the children and youth of Gads Hill Center (Gads Hill Center, 2020).

### 6.2 Lessons learned from the pandemic

The deep poverty and racial injustice that these families experience was magnified by the pandemic and was documented by Gads Hill staff through surveys that were administered on a weekly basis beginning in March. The data presented in the following is derived from these weekly surveys (Gads Hill Center, 2020).

Most parents held jobs before the coronavirus pandemic but worked in low paid service and hospitality sectors. The low wages and absence of benefits associated with their employment make it almost impossible to lift their families out of poverty through work alone. The profile of the families at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic indicated that 96 percent have income below the federal poverty line; 35 percent lack health insurance; and more than half meet the federal standard of housing-cost burdened, expending more than 30 percent of their income on housing, yet live in overcrowded conditions. These factors created the conditions for the coronavirus to spread quickly and broadly among the families served by the Center.

To better understand and formulate a response to the emerging needs of the children and families during the pandemic, Center staff began to administer weekly surveys in March to 950 families, approximately 25 percent of all families that participate in Center programming. The survey results indicated that 168 parents had lost their jobs within the first two months of the state enforced lockdown, a number that increased to 324 by the 15<sup>th</sup> week. Without financial reserves, these families immediately found themselves in a crisis situation.

During the first two weeks of the city of Chicago lockdown, families identified their greatest needs as access for food, baby formula, diapers, wipes, and other sanitary products. These items became scarce at stores at the onset of the pandemic. April, in the third week of the pandemic, 200 families reported insufficient funds to pay rent and utilities.

This information helped Gads Hill pivot its emergency assistance priorities to focus on preventing homelessness. In two months, the Center provided more than \$80,000 USD in cash assistance to prevent evictions and homelessness.

Lack of health insurance puts any family at risk of bankruptcy when confronted with medical bills to address illness. It also prevents individuals from staying healthy by accessing regular medical checkups and other preventive services. For uninsured workers, the Covid-19 pandemic presented particular risk, as they had limited access to medical care. The working poor often cannot afford health insurance and seek medical care at emergency rooms when they fall seriously ill. Immigrant families with irregular status and live under the threat of detection, are less likely to seek public-sponsored medical attention due to fear that seeking testing and treatment could trigger a public charge inadmissibility determination, preventing immigration relief or status change in the future. While U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services agency has indicated that this will not be the case for Covid-related testing and treatment, there is little confidence in the immigrant community that they will not be harmed due to the aggressive immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant actions of the current administration (USCIS, 2020).

The strong communication maintained with program participants through weekly survey and daily calls and messages has allowed Gads Hill Center to monitor emergency needs and respond in a timely manner. Through these communication channels, staff learned about families that had contracted the corona virus and organized individualized emergency plans to support the families. Staff developed teams to deliver emergency items to the clients' homes, helped single parents who became ill to find relatives to take care of their children while they recovered, and connected families with emergency medical care.

In the first two months, 103 families reported cases of coronavirus contraction. Within five months, the number increased to 210 cases, or 22 percent of families surveyed. Entire families contracted the virus due to the inability to isolate. Adequate housing is unaffordable for low-income families, resulting in overcrowded conditions. Family members who contracted Covid-19 could not isolate to keep from spreading the virus to other family members because the size of the dwellings was inadequate for the number of household members. In cases when multiple family members contracted the corona virus, Gads Hill staff made arrangements to deliver meals and other essentials items.

Interviews with the families revealed that the parents primarily contracted the corona virus at work. Most of them

were considered essential workers, but their places of employment did not provide adequate personal protective equipment while working in close proximity with coworkers and customers. The interviews identified other factors that contributed to the rapid spread of covid-19 cases in the Latino and African American neighborhoods, including the reliance on public transportation or carpooling to and from work, absence of paid sick leave that required one to work even while ill, and language barriers to seeking information regarding prevention, testing, and treatment.

Gads Hill planned to immediately migrate its program to an online format after the Governor announced a state-wide lockdown in March. To prepare accordingly, all the families received a survey about their technology need to engage in remote learning for their children. More than 300 of the 1,000 families that responded to the survey indicated that they did not have a computer or internet services. To overcome this technological obstacle, the Center purchased electronic tablets and acquired donated computers to equip the families with the electronic equipment needed for distance learning. In addition, staff worker to connect families with internet access and purchased software to support e-learning. Due to cost, the devices were limited to basic features and the internet speed tended to be slow, especially when more than one person was connected. This pervasive digital divide is another manifestation of deep social and economic inequalities in American society. Most likely, children from low-income families will fall behind their educational goals during remote learning because of the digital divide and other poverty related factors, since internet is not considered an essential utility that is routinely made more accessible and affordable through public expenditures.

## 7. Path forward rooted in community and purpose

The structural violence revealed by the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color, the daily extinguishing of black and brown lives at the hands of the police with near impunity, and the repression of social protest calling for justice has awakened a national racial reckoning. For Gads Hill Center this inflection point has led to an organizational examine:

- Has the Center become an extension of a system that keeps people surviving, yet denies meaningful opportunities to build bountiful and dignified lives?
- Is the Center able to fully realize its' mission by merely providing compensatory services to shore up some of the harms of structural violence experienced by children and families of color relegated to poverty in socially excluded communities?

- As an organization, has Gads Hill privileged service provision over social reform?

As the staff of Gads Hill Center has reflected on these core questions, they have considered their foundational purpose and model as a social settlement and concluded that this is the moment to reclaim their settlement roots and work alongside the families and communities that the Center accompanies to address the sources poverty and disadvantage. Now, as in the past, Gads Hill has committed to invest in community organizing, leadership development, and advocacy for meaningful policy and institutional change. Toward that end, Gads Hill Center has a clear and unified commitment to civic engagement and social action as core strategies to achieve the mission of the settlement.

To implement this strategy, Gads Hill Center has put in place internal systems to measure and evaluate progress and impact. They include racial and economic justice commitments and measures directly articulated in the organizational goals, theory of change, program logic models, core competencies, job descriptions, and onboarding modules.

Aware of the impact of systemic racism on staff and program participants, Gads Hill Center has engaged in a racial healing process in partnership with the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Initiative of Chicago. Moreover, the organization has instituted an internal process of weekly seminars to discuss and discern a collective vision of what constitutes a Good Society and how they can contribute to its realization.

The Center recognizes that organizational change at every level is required to align the staff, board of directors, community residents, and private funders and donors with a common vision and purpose to build a Good Society, one neighborhood and city at a time. Towards that end, a multilevel plan has been developed with the input of all stakeholder groups. The plan includes developing curriculum for child and youth programs that include social awareness and racial justice modules. The plan also recognizes that social change and policy reforms that aim to close the income and racial inequality gap and create equity and opportunity for all America families depends on broad grassroots involvement. Towards that end, the plan includes a commitment to supporting organic and authentic leadership roles among Center participants that are directly affected by the social concerns that they choose to address. Thus, investing in leadership development, has been prioritized as an organizational goal.

## 8. Conclusion

Since its inception at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the profession of social work has held in tension two professional projects, “function” and “cause,” the former referring to individual intervention in the form of casework, and the later referring to social reform. This tension was sharpened by Porter Lee’s address to the National Conference of Social Work in 1929, in which he further polarized the debate at the center of the efforts to define the nascent field of social work and associated professionalization movement (Jarvis, 2006).

With a century of hindsight and a recognition of the complex and vexing problems of the present inflection point, Gads Hill has begun an intentional process of moving past the internal social work debate to integrate both practice approaches, drawing upon the cause and function and settlement house traditions of social work. By recouping their founding spirit, purpose and traditions, century old settlements, such as Gads Hill Center, can remain evergreen and community engaged. Gads Hill Center’s process of discernment has led them to this decision as they near their 125 anniversary, a conclusion that affirms that made in 1959 by a cross-sectional national committee of the Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, and reiterated by Margaret Berry, the former Executive Director, on the centennial anniversary of the settlement movement.

‘Today the role of the settlement has two aspects as the two faces of a coin; function—that is, its services to individuals and its neighborhood; and cause—its leadership in analyzing, mitigating, and helping to eradicate the factors that make for suffering and breakdown’ (Berry, 1986).

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