



Q&A with Paul A. Jargowsky

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How did the term *concentrated poverty* come about?

Before the 1960s, people generally thought that poverty was related to place. For example, they would refer to rural, Skid Row or Appalachian poverty. Then in the 1960s, Molly Orshansky at the Social Security Administration invented the official poverty line, which was an estimate of how much it costs a family to cover basic necessities.

The problem with this definition is that its poverty threshold is the same regardless of the local cost of living, focusing solely on one family's income and ignoring the neighborhood context. The relationship between poverty and place came back into focus when William Julius Wilson, now a professor at Harvard University, published *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. This book reintroduced the concept of poor people

being worse off when their neighbors are also poor, compared with those living in mixed-income neighborhoods.

Why is it relevant to talk about *concentrated poverty* instead of *poverty* in general?

It is important to care about the total number of poor people. However, a poor child who goes to a failing school, whose classmates are poor and neighbors are not working at regular jobs, is much worse off than a poor child who is surrounded by people whose expectation is to achieve academically and professionally. It is significantly more difficult for children living in concentrated poverty to make wise choices because they are likely to lack the opportunity and information on how to improve their livelihoods.

What causes concentrated poverty?

There are push and pull factors at

work. First, we used to push people into neighborhoods of concentrated poverty by constructing large-scale public housing projects. Now we do the flip side of that. Very large tracts of land are developed just for higher-income households. By building housing for only one income level in a neighborhood, we segregate people. Second, increasing crime, such as at the time of the riots in the 1960s and 1970s, pushed the white middle class from the central city. This is what we commonly know as white flight. Third, new housing developments with attractive amenities pull people farther and farther out in the suburbs. This pattern continues now, such as when people move from the Dallas suburb of Richardson to Plano or McKinney.

Are there any positive aspects of *concentrated poverty*?

Let's look at immigrant gateways. When immigrants move into poor neighborhoods with other immigrants, their similar backgrounds help them transition into the new environment. The question is what happens to the second generation of immigrants. Are they living in these same high-poverty neighborhoods, or do they have and take the opportunity to improve their families' quality of life? When we talk about concentrated poverty, the core issue is the degree of upward mobility for people of all races, incomes, and so forth.

The strength of weak ties is an associated issue. While in the short term it may be comfortable to be surrounded by neighbors who are in the same conditions as oneself, in the long run it is more important to have access to people who have more resources, including knowledge about job opportunities. This is a well-known argument made by sociologist Mark Granovetter.



What do you think is a sustainable solution to concentrated poverty?

If more communities or cities were sharing the responsibility for providing housing for different income levels, then there wouldn't be as much concern that any one neighborhood would bear a disproportionate amount of the lower-income housing burden. Coordination between jurisdictions could help eliminate the destructive forms of competition so that the rules of the game change.

In the current housing situation, the rules of the game dictate that today's winners will be tomorrow's losers. We live in a society where there is a very predictable progression of suburban development. New suburbs will become old suburbs, which start deteriorating. When some people see minorities and poor people moving into their neighborhoods, they start to consider moving out. They are making a sensible choice, given the existing structure of how neighborhoods develop, because they understand what happens to property values.

This pattern of rapid laissez-faire housing development can facilitate segregation and the concentration of poverty and limit poor people's access to opportunity. Fortunately, this type of development is not inevitable.

Our current population is 300 million people, and it is projected to be 364 million by the year 2030, a 21 percent increase. We will have to build housing for all of these people. In addition, some current housing units will have to be replaced, so we will need a 25 to 30 percent larger housing stock.

In what pattern are we going to build? Are we going to build neighborhoods in such a way that poor kids will go to school only with other poor children? Are we going to build them in a pattern that leads to higher segregation by race or income so that poor people live in jurisdictions that lack basic infrastructure while rich people live in those with high-quality infrastructure and public services? Or are we going to build them so that there is less division between the income classes and racial groups, making it easier for poor people to be integrated into the social and economic mainstream?

In my opinion, spatial access to opportunity is the great emerging social challenge of the 21st century.

CONCENTRATED POVERTY: A PRIMER

(Continued from page 3)

Islands of Isolation: Two Communities

High-poverty neighborhoods and their residents are off the radar of most Americans. Yet such communities can be found throughout the country. In the Eleventh District, Hidalgo County's Delta Region and—at the other end of the state—South Dallas are two places where concentrated poverty has shaped neighborhoods and the lives of those who live in them. Many other rural and urban areas in the district share similar stories.

A Rural Setting

Set in the heart of Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the Delta Region—population 45,000-plus—encompasses the rural communities of Edcouch, Elsa, La Villa and Monte Alto. Boarded-up, underutilized, and irreparable commercial and residential buildings dominate the area. Large industrial canning and cotton facilities that long ago lost their luster dot the landscape. These are communities where Spanish is the language of commerce and the Catholic Church dominates the culture. Ninety-six percent of the population is Hispanic, and only Spanish is spoken in eight of every 10 households.⁸

Unemployment typically fluctuates between 20 and 32 percent, due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work. Other job options are limited. The result

is a poverty rate of 46 percent, one of Texas' highest.

Fewer than 45 percent of Delta Region adults have graduated from high school or earned a GED, far below the national average of 80 percent. Only 6 percent have at least a bachelor's degree. Because job opportunities are limited, residents who do complete college usually leave.

The Edcouch–Elsa School District is the region's largest employer. Approximately 60 percent of households earn less than \$25,000 annually, and median individual earnings run just under \$11,000. More than 90 percent of the students in the two school districts are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. The median home value is \$35,300.

Texas' rural population as a share of the state total fell between 2000 and 2005, a trend that's expected to persist. Population in the Delta Region, by contrast, rose by 6,900, or 18 percent, over the same period and is expected to continue rising. Many area residents originally came from Mexico as migrant farmworkers. In recent years, the population has continued to grow as families reunite, U.S.–Mexico trade expands and the cost of living remains low.

Many immigrant families move to this high-poverty area because land is relatively inexpensive, their extended families have established roots there, and educational opportunities and health

