An Examination into Economic Segregation

It is only a short drive between northern Chicago and its south and west side and yet these areas of Chicago are worlds apart. Plagued with impoverished neighborhoods, Chicago’s south and west side are home to high crime, unemployment, and failing schools. Economic segregation has hindered Chicago from effectively combating poverty and its subsequent effects. In this paper, I will explain the concept of segregated poverty and highlight a few of the federal government policies that helped to segregate citizens between economic and racial lines. The concept of poverty culture and the characteristics of an urban impoverished neighborhood will be examined before delving into an in-depth analysis of the effects of living in poverty-stricken areas has on its occupants. Lastly, I will share my experiences with volunteering to help Chicago’s urban poor and highlight solutions that could help desegregate poor neighborhoods.

To fully understand the impact of economic segregation, in particular segregated poverty on communities, economic segregation must first be defined. Economic segregation is the separation between economically disparate groups of people based on income and wealth levels. Segregated poverty or concentrated poverty, is the disproportionate concentration of poor people living in a designated area and is a direct offshoot of economic segregation. These impoverished neighborhoods, often called ghettos, are home to a large number of people whose income level falls below the federally defined poverty line. To determine the poverty rate of a neighborhood,
the number of its occupants who fall below the poverty line is divided by the total population living in that neighborhood (Jargowsky). Patrick Sharkey, a New York University sociologist, defined a poor neighborhood as one where 20% of the residents were poor (Rothstein 22). In contrast, researchers commonly have used census tracts with poverty rates of 40% (Jargowsky 9). For clarity, all the research in this paper defines an impoverished neighborhood as one with poverty rates at or above 40%. Furthermore, the focus of this writing will center predominately on urban, economically segregated neighborhoods and the resulting socioeconomic effects on its population. There are many rural and suburban areas throughout the United States that suffer from concentrated poverty but the hardships of rural poverty is oftentimes different than that of its urban counterpart. To avoid confusion, the research explored and cited in this paper concentrates specifically on the plight of America’s urban poor in economically segregated area.

The social make up of impoverished neighborhoods is striking particularly across racial lines. In 2011, Rutgers University professor Paul Jargowsky, analyzed Census date to determine the racial breakdown of high-poverty neighborhoods (Rothstein 22). He found that 7% of poor whites lived in poor neighborhoods, 15% of poor Hispanics, and 23% of poor blacks lived in poverty-stricken neighborhoods (Rothstein 22). Furthermore, this concentration of minorities living in poor neighborhoods also afflicts non-poor minorities. Jeffery Timberlake cites in his 2000 work on racial and ethnic inequality that:

non-poor black and Latino families with children were over four times as likely as non-poor white families with children to live in neighborhoods with poverty rates in excess of twenty percent. Non-poor black families with children were nearly ten times as likely as their white counterparts to live in the poorest neighborhood type, and nonpoor Latino families were nearly eight times more likely (Timberlake 337).
This economic disparity between races can trace its lineage to the housing segregation policies enacted throughout the United States history. Often called de jure segregation, policies were established by federal, state, or local government to explicitly separate the races (Rothstein). For example, federally funded public housing began as explicitly racially segregated with housing projects officially designed for whites and blacks separately. Even as the white population began moving from these projects to the suburbs, any opportunity to integrate the races was stopped with the establishment of the “neighborhood composition rule” that declared “that public housing should not disturb the pre-existing racial composition of neighborhoods where it was placed” (Rothstein 24). Additionally, the federally subsidized relocation of whites to the suburbs prohibited the relocation of blacks. Builders received explicit federal loan guarantees so long as no sales were made to blacks and deeds prohibited the re-sale of homes to blacks (Rothstein 24.) These are just a few examples of historic, widespread racially discriminatory policies whose effects continue to be seen in neighborhoods today.

Despite evidence of a long standing history of laws and policies that separated people by color, economic class, and therefore, isolated the poor, the notion that poverty was a choice or a by-product of a characteristic flaw of the impoverished still remained. Oscar Lewis contended that the poor were prolonging their plight and that a culture of poverty is to blame. He writes:

Once [the culture of poverty] comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime (Schiller 157).
Sociologist William Wilson expanded on this notion of a poverty underclass but contended that it was not the culture of the group in poverty to blame but rather external causes forced people living in poverty-stricken areas to behave a certain way. He argued that changes over time to the American economy had reduced available jobs to inner-city residents and that the exodus of middle-class blacks from poor urban areas has increased the social isolation of the poor (Schiller 159). Even so, policymakers and the public believed that this social isolation coupled with poverty causes individuals to not respond to mainstream prosperity, incentives, or values. Furthermore, this spawns an “underclass” that encourages single-parent households and discourages labor force participation (Schiller 155).

Indeed, there are unique characteristics of the people who make up America’s ghettos compared to more middle class or prosperous neighborhoods. But determining whether some of these characteristics are in fact a trait of the poor or an effect of living in isolated poverty is difficult to determine. For example, examining high unemployment rates in a particular neighborhood does not factor in that this high number could be the result of employed adults moving out of the ghetto, leaving the unemployed behind (Jargowsky, Bane). However, there are a couple of consistent components of impoverished neighborhoods that researchers have determined. As stated previously, poorer neighborhoods have disproportionately large populations of minorities (Jargowsky, Bane). Family structure is different within the urban poor with sixty to seventy percent of all families headed by a single parent and with children of single parents receiving less social resources (Jargowsky, Bane 26-28). Moreover, most schools in poor inner-city neighborhoods see high incidents of crime and are overcrowded. More than half of residents in poor neighborhoods do not complete high school and only one in four has any exposure to college (Jargowsky 110). Adding to these economic and social disparities is the fact
that inner-city schools have far lower standards than suburban schools and potential employers may view applicants from notorious inner-city schools differently than other job applicants (Jargowsky). This suppresses the chances of the inner-city poor to relocate and obtain meaningful employment.

While these characteristics are a facet to inner-city ghettos, they should be looked upon as a symptom of living in isolated poverty rather than as a personal character flaw of the poor. As previously noted, there have been historic government policies that have contributed to the separation of people based on race and economic status. These policies have only contributed to the isolation of poverty in certain areas and therefore contributed to a concentration of the symptoms of poverty. Blaming the poor for their plight is unfair, short-sighted, and offers no solution to the issue of poverty at hand.

The effects of living in an impoverished area can be drastic on its residents’ daily lives. The most pressing of all is the penchant of crime and violence. As Elijah Anderson points out, “muggings, burglaries, carjackings, and drug-related shootings are now common enough to concern all urban and many suburban residents” (670). Anderson asserts that these violent tendencies are the result of the circumstances of living in poverty. The lack of high paying jobs, racial discrimination, violence, and the propensity of drug use are all circumstances that plague high poverty neighborhoods and effect how poor people interact with their surroundings (Anderson). Throughout his research, Anderson contends that there is an “inner-city street code” that is adhered to by the population of an inner-city ghetto. This code is a set of informal rules that govern interpersonal public behavior, including regulating the use of violence (Anderson 671). These codes of conduct are enforced by the neighborhood under the understanding that should they be violated that there will be penalties. Therefore, knowledge of the code is
defensive and yet necessary to safely operate in public (Anderson 671). Families whose only fault is being poor often teach their children the interworking of this code in an effort to keep them safe as they navigate their poverty-stricken neighborhood. While attempting to keep them safe, parents also open the door for children to fall from society and into the streets.

With impoverished areas having a high crime rate, it also copes with a high level of incarcerated individuals. Current statistics regarding the social make-up of incarcerated individuals show that a vast majority of people in prison are black or Hispanic. As of 2014, the male prison population was 37% African American and 22% Latino (De Giorgi 5) Furthermore, recent estimates claim that black children born in 1990 to a high-school dropout father had a 50.5% chance of having their father incarcerated by age 14 (De Giori 5) As the Alessandro De Giorgi eloquently pens in his 5 Theses on Mass Incarceration: “the ubiquitous presence of the prison in the lives of underprivileged young males of color inevitably casts the net of the penal state onto their families—destroying marriages, incapacitating fathers, traumatizing children, and impoverishing relatives who must cope with the high costs of having someone behind bars” (11).

A growing body of research examines these social and economic effects of incarceration. According to Bruce Western and Christopher Muller, the dominant hypothesis in this field claims that released prisoners seeking employment do poorly in the job market due to potential employers’ aversion to hiring ex-offenders or because being in prison has reduced a person’s skill set and social network to help obtain work (171). The authors further contend that incarceration helps to establish and reinforce the negative social effects of poverty. To this point, they write: “if penal institutions significantly increase unemployment, undermine family stability, diminish the life changes of poor children, and discredit police and the courts as sources of social order, we can say that mass incarceration had become constitutive of the social
experience of poverty in contemporary America” (Western 175-176). It only stands to reason that incarceration aids to isolate the poor and feed into the vicious cycle of poverty that exists in poor inner-city neighborhoods. By disproportionately targeting individuals of color and stripping ex-offenders the ability to successfully reintegrate into society, incarceration further impedes poor minorities in escaping the ghetto from which they were born.

Although desegregation laws were brought into effect with the Civil Rights Movement, segregation of schools still exist today along racial and economic lines. This school segregation is a direct reflection of segregated poverty. As stated earlier with regards to the racial breakdown of inner-city poor neighborhoods, the majority of residents in impoverished ghettos are black or Hispanic. Therefore, the majority of schools within these areas are mainly African-American and Hispanic. Children attending schools located in poverty-stricken areas are more disadvantaged socially and economically when compared to their peers attending schools in middle class or wealthy neighborhoods. These factors directly affect a student’s academic performance. In his book on urban neighborhoods, Paul Sharkey calculates that “living in poor neighborhoods over two consecutive generations reduces children’s cognitive skills by roughly eight or nine points [which is] roughly equivalent to missing two to four years of schooling” (Rothstein 23). There are several factors that cause this cognitive disadvantage in urban poor students. When faced with multitudes of disadvantaged students, teachers have little time to help students overcome the personal, family, and community hardships that they face (Rothstein 22). Furthermore, children surrounded by violence and crime suffer from greater stress that causes them to come to school ill-prepared for lessons causing teachers to focus less on education and more on discipline (Rothstein 22). Also, children isolated from mainstream society fail to possess the standard English necessary to succeed in life. Lastly, when parents
themselves lack educations, children have few college educated role models to emulate (Rothstein 22). These factors represent just some of the multitude of hurdles faced by children raised in urban poor areas.

Educational disenfranchisement can directly affect the health of individuals. In a studying entitled *Education and Health Among U.S. Working-Age Adults: A Detailed Portrait across the Full Education Attainment Spectrum*, researchers examined the health data of individuals spanning every education level from the 1997-2009 National Health Interview Survey. In their findings they conclude that high school graduates are 3.5 times more likely to report “worse” health when compared to individuals with professional or doctoral degrees (Zajacova et al. 40). Moving up the educational chain, every additional education credential was associated with significantly improved health. The report found that working age adults at the lowest educational point on the spectrum had the odds of reporting ill health 15 times more frequently than adults on the other end of the spectrum (Zajacova et al. 55). The table below taken from the *Education and Health Among U.S Working-Age Adults: A Detailed Portrait across the Full Education Attainment Spectrum* study, quantitatively depicts the differences in employment, income, body weight, tobacco use, and alcohol use among participants categorized as having less than high school education, high school education, and more than high school education. As depicted in the table, individuals who did not complete high school have higher occurrences of unemployment, higher obesity rates, and higher tobacco use compared to people who completed high school and college.
Research is clear that people living within urban poor areas are disproportionately more inclined to be educationally suppressed and by default suffer from negative health.

As citizens of the United States, people feel compelled to help alleviate the suffering of those less fortunate through volunteering through churches and non-profit organizations. While this work well intended, it is often ineffective at directing addressing the root causes of poverty or at offering universal and consistent help to those in need. For my L3 competence for this class, I volunteered fifteen hours at a nonprofit food bank located in Chicago. My experience in obtaining this opportunity and completing the associated work was eye opening to the difficult task of working to help Chicago’s underserved.
Immediately upon receiving this class assignment, I investigated various non profits that worked with individuals affected by isolated, inner city poverty. As stated in my initial paper proposal, I initially reached out to the Sergeant Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, a nonprofit advocating the advancement of laws and policies that benefit people living in poverty, and One Million Degrees, a nonprofit that offers support to low-income minority students who are first-generation college. I felt confident that with my past work experience with an international non-profit I would quickly be offered a volunteer position to complete my necessary hours while successfully helping to alleviate the struggles of the poor. I was rather naïve. After several emails to Michelle Paradise, an operations & human resources associate with Shriver National Law Center, expounding on my resume and detailing my desire to help, she granted me a brief in person interview. In person, Michelle explained to me that the hours I asked for did not merit the effort required to train me as a volunteer at Shriver. She stated that as an organization they typically sought more permanent volunteers with a minimum of 3-6 months commitment to volunteer work and explained that the organization relied on permanent staff to maintain basic office work to ensure consistency.

Deflated but undeterred, I contacted Michael Golden, a board member with One Million Degrees expressing my desire to help. I also assumed that our personal friendship would help secure an opportunity. In a voicemail, Michael restated what Michelle had previously told me: One Million Degrees has employed administrative staff to ensure operations run smoothly, it only seeks volunteers that can offer a regular, long term, time commitments, and in any event it’s only volunteer positions require a completed bachelor’s degree to participate. Out of ideas, I contacted my mentor, Roderick Williams who works with incarcerated and reformed convicts through Convicted2Change, convinced that this close relationship would net me an exciting
opportunity to really do some good in this world. Instead, Rod told me to get my hands dirty and seek out more menial and entry level volunteer work. Relaying the same message as Michelle and Michael, Rod spoke about the difficulty and expense of on-boarding new volunteers when most are temporary. As nonprofits with limited budgets, it is strategically a sound operational move to hire employees to complete an organization’s necessary tasks and leaving optional, temporary, or unique work to visiting volunteers. Our conversation recalled my own nonprofit experience with volunteers while in working in Guatemala. Although volunteers did not report directly to me, I loathed working alongside many of them. The volunteers that sought out our organization in Guatemala City were embarking on a “travel tourism” adventure where they travel and volunteer in various countries. Popular with college students, these volunteers were more tourists than workers. Unreliable and sporadic, their work was shoddy and inconsequential to the overarching mission of the organization. They flew in and out on the wings of altruism and achieved nothing in the way of helping those in need. In order to complete my fifteen hours of volunteer work I had to become what I loathed: a local “volunteer tourist.”

Lakeview Pantry, one of Chicago’s largest and longest-operating food pantries, aims to alleviate hunger and poverty by providing food to people, raising the awareness of hunger and poverty in society, and increasing the independence of people through innovative, self-help programs (“About Us”). Welcoming volunteers of all skills, Lakeview Pantry offered me the opportunity to fulfill my credit hours and help those in need in my city. After a one hour volunteer training class expounding on Lakeview Pantry’s history and safety protocols, I discussed what I tasks I felt most comfortable doing with Melissa, my training class instructor. Afterwards, I went to work sorting canned goods and lifting and packing boxes. Due to proximity to my house, I concentrated my efforts on helping Lakeview Pantry’s secondary
location located at 1414 W. Oakdale, near St. Alphonsus Catholic Church at the intersection of Wellington and Lincoln Avenues. Working Tuesdays and Saturdays, I helped receive, sort, and invoice donations as well as unload two truck deliveries before weighing, recording and storing the items. Even though the work did not seem to directly affect the sources of poverty, I felt that the work I was doing was helping to alleviate some of the stress of the needy.

Upon reflection of my volunteer experience, I was left with a better understanding of the struggles nonprofits contend with battling with mission to help the poor. From restrictive budgets, limited volunteers, and an unending uphill battle against poverty, nonprofit organizations struggle relentlessly to make progress in the name of good. Although my volunteer work was a blip on the radar of assistance, it served as a reminder that change, real change in the paradigm of poverty, can only come with the assistance of the community at large working together for the betterment of the whole.

While citizens at the local level can serve to ease the suffering of inflicted impoverished areas, addressing the cause of economic segregation can only occur at the national, state, or local government level. At the local level, Chicago’s housing reform and Plan for Transformation is the largest and most ambitious effort to remake public housing in the United States (Chaskin 240). It aims to overhaul long-standing public housing policies that encouraged the rise of economic segregation in the first place. In addition to renovating some existing public housing, the reform aims to demolish the most problematic public housing sites and replace them with new construction in mixed-income developments (Chaskin 240). Chicago’s Plan for Transformation is shaped by focusing on “redevelopment, poverty de-concentration, and sustainable neighborhood change (Chaskin 241). Despite good intentions, critics point to the dislocation of residents and resulting lack of affordable housing as major roadblocks to the plan
Although this project has shortcomings, its aim to decentralize poverty and create a mixed-income neighborhood is a step in the right direction. Continuing to isolate poor individuals and families in certain areas only continues to further propagate the societal issues that correspond with dense poverty.

At the state and federal level, continuing innovative policy reforms could help alleviate poverty. For example, the Earned Income Tax Credit of the 1990’s has offered citizens the opportunity to receive tax credits that help bolster their annual income (Jargowsky 201). Another possible tax solution is to offer mortgage subsidies to families who move into impoverished areas. Jeffery Timberlake proposes that white families could be offered government incentives to enter largely minority communities (Timberlake 338). This movement of the white middle class back into poor communities could help stabilize the neighborhoods. Critics of this cite that this infringes on affordable housing for the poor and rewards whites for simply the color of their skin.

Richard Rothstein concludes his research with an argument that I have find most honest and compelling. He proposes that only by “reacquainting ourselves with that [racist] history” will we as a nation be able to take a step forward (23). Instead of expunging the true story of race relations in school textbooks, we must stand in the truth that our country was founded on the backs of black slaves. The United States has had a long standing history of racism and discrimination towards people of color. Since the founding of this country, laws have been enacted that disenfranchise African Americans and minorities. Although many of these policies have been overruled by the courts, today’s society still suffers from the effects of this institutional racism and one only has to look as far as the nearest poor neighborhood to see these effects in action. Disproportionately populated by blacks and Latinos, America’s ghettos and
penal system is the physical representation of the systematic racism and isolation of minority groups. Continued avoidance of addressing our racial history will only serve to ensure that the plight of the urban poor will persist for subsequent generations.

Throughout this paper, a review on economic segregation and its causes has been presented. Several of the effects of isolated poverty have been discussed in detail as well as potential policy reforms that could aim to decentralize poverty and integrate poor people throughout the existing community. Through my volunteer work, my belief that economic segregation is a national, widespread issue that can only be confronted through comprehensive social policy reforms at the national level strengthened in resolve. Even the best intended organization or individual has limits to how effective they can be in addressing the root causes of isolated poverty. If we as a nation are to witness a dynamic change in the economic structure of our cities, that change can only begin with a fundamental shift in how we truthfully address our national racial past and work together to create a more inclusive future.
Works Cited


