

Concentrated Poverty

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Abstract

Concentrated poverty refers to a spatial density of socioeconomic deprivation. The concept and term is primarily utilized in US policy and scholarship to refer to areas of “extreme” or “high” poverty defined as areas with “40 percent of the tract population living below the federal poverty threshold.” Concentrated poverty has taken on multiple conceptual formations, being used as an analytic measure, a designation of territory, and a causal variable in explaining social, health, and economic outcomes. While initial scholarship on the topic focused on the causes of concentrated poverty, most contemporary urban research focuses on measuring and explaining its effects.

Keywords: housing; neighborhoods; poverty; space and spatiality

Concentrated poverty refers to a spatial density of socioeconomic deprivation. The measure and concept is utilized primarily in US policy and scholarship, alongside or in place of the more common measures and conceptions of social and ethnic segregation and social integration used in Europe and other areas of the world. This is largely due to the US federal census, which delineates areas of “extreme” or “high” poverty as areas with “40 percent of the tract population living below the federal poverty threshold” (Bureau of the Census 1970). In the urban scholarship, concentrated poverty has taken on multiple conceptual formations, being used as (a) an analytic measure, (b) a designation of territory, and (c) a causal variable in explaining social, health, and economic outcomes.

History of the measure for census purposes

There have long been areas of concentrated poverty, and the distinct social problems associated with place and poverty have been the grounds of social scientific studies and reform movements since the mid-nineteenth century. However, the measure of concentrated poverty and the coalescence around its analytical conception occurred only in the 1970s in the United States. The definition was first developed by the US Bureau of the Census as part of its work for the newly established Office of Economic Opportunity, designed to administer most of the War on Poverty Programs created as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society legislative agenda. The measures’ stated goal was to identify areas of major concentrations of poverty within large metropolitan areas in order to inform policy decisions as well as to create objective standards for distributing resources and implementing anti-poverty programs.

The original measure was formed through an attribute-based criterion (Bureau of the Census 1970). Each census tract was ranked by an equally weighted measurement of “poverty-linked characteristics”:

- household income;
- level of education;
- number of single-parent households;
- percentage of low-skilled workers; and

- quality of the housing stock.

The lowest quartile within the rankings was designated “low income.” Reports based on the 1970 census took the earlier attribute-based measure based on a variety of socioeconomic attributes and translated it into one related to the single economic statistic of household income. This was done by finding the best-fit correlation between the poverty levels of those areas categorized in the lower quartile in 1960s census – that is, the percentage of people living in poverty within those given census tracts – and then applying this threshold to the 1970s census data. It was found that the threshold of those living in poverty at the top of the lower quartile of the attribute-based measure contained a population in which 20 percent of its residents were living at or below the poverty line. From this marker, “low income areas” in the 1970s onward became defined as those tracts with 20–39 percent of its inhabitants falling below the poverty. The census also added an additional designation of “high poverty” or “extreme poverty,” referring to those with 40 percent or more of its inhabitants falling below the poverty line. The 20 percent threshold adopted in 1970 was derived by calibrating a threshold of household income that most closely approximated the 1960 census’s lower quartile. The 40 percent threshold to designate “high poverty areas” was set by doubling the low income threshold.

Critiques have been leveled against both the federal definition of poverty as well as the census definition of concentrated poverty by the 40 percent threshold. Criticisms of the definition of poverty are legion, the most salient being the inability to fully consider the needs of different family types (e.g., the need for childcare services, health insurance, etc.), the noncash benefits from public sources, the cash and noncash resources or lack thereof from social and familial networks, and the consideration of regional variations in cost of living expenses. On a more fundamental level, others have critiqued the idea that poverty should be measured in absolute terms and instead maintain it should be based on a threshold of relative needs or in relation to a national median income, as is done in most European nations. An adoption of such a measure would radically change the perspective and debate surrounding not only US poverty, but also concentrated poverty and segregation. For instance, while it was found that concentrated poverty by the US Census measure decreased in cities across the United States in the 1990s, adopting the relative measure of poverty would have tracked increases over this same period (Swanstrom, Ryan, and Stigers 2007).

Compounding this fundamental critique of the poverty threshold is the lack of any theoretical justification for marking the threshold of concentrated poverty at 20 percent or 40 percent today. The census moved from an attribute-based measure, which calculated weighted scores on indicators of education, family structure, work type, and housing stock within a given census tract, to the simpler statistical designation of an area in which 20 percent of its residents fall below the poverty line. When first conceived, the measure of concentrated poverty was designed to reflect a multidimensional condensation of economic and social ills. The conversion from this *multiple attribute-based criterion* to a *singular statistical-based criterion* calibrated to household income is premised on a statistical homology found in data produced in 1960 and later projected onto the census ever since. Although the attributes and statistics are linked in 1970, there is no logic why there should be any tight correlation between the attributes used when calibrating the

initial measure (education, family structure, work type, and housing stock) to the 20 percent and 40 percent income parameters that since became attached to the designation when considering today's urban neighborhoods over 50 years later. Furthermore, there is no justification as to why doubling the 20 percent threshold of the "low income areas" should designate an area as "high poverty" or "concentrated poverty," in the 1970s census.

History of the concept in the social sciences

The 1970 census measure was quickly imported wholesale and unquestioned into the US academic field, providing a rich series of empirical findings, identifying new dynamics of post-Fordist poverty, and kick-starting a renewed interest in the role of space and place in social, political, and economic relations. The first major work of scholarship to utilize the census measure beyond merely descriptive ends was William Julius Wilson in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). In this work, Wilson utilizes concentrated poverty as an *analytic measure* to gauge the changing spatial organization and intensification of poverty; as a *territorial category* to designate an object of analysis; and a *causal factor* in and of itself, to explain the disadvantaged life chances of the poor. All three of these conceptualizations have since served as the basis for a wide range of social science research traditions as well as policy interventions.

The most frequent application of the descriptive measure is to analyze historical and geographic change as an *analytic measure*. Drawing from the basic census indicator, Wilson found that poverty concentration increased on a number of axes between the 1970s and 1990s, including the number of people living in areas of "extreme poverty," as well as the number of "extreme poverty" tracts within most American cities (Wilson 1987, 1996). It is therefore used to measure both the *density* of poverty within cities, as well as the *expansion* of high poverty within cities. Paul Jargowsky built from the same census indicator a different analytic measure, expressing the *proportion* of all poor individuals in a certain area (e.g., city, metropolitan region, or county) who live in census tracts of high poverty (Jargowsky 1997). This definition thus captures a relative perspective of *concentration* with implications for polarization, but is significantly different from the other common measures in that the measure is proportional and drawn at the level of the population rather than the territory, although many in the social science field utilize the term interchangeably. The uses of concentrated poverty in this way most often bring forward the understanding of the active forces behind poverty concentration in a politico-institutional framework, rather than its effects. The trends tracked using these three analytic techniques (density, expansion, and proportion) have served as the empirical modus operandi in academic arguments evaluating the relative weight of racial segregation, deindustrialization, spatial mismatch, white flight, the flight of the black middle class, and changes in age and family structure in relation to urban restructuring and the production of urban poverty. The most well known criticism of the use of concentrated poverty as an analytic measure is made by Massey and Denton (1993) who contend that a relative indicator based on segregation is more rigorous and meaningful, claiming that "levels and trends in poverty concentration are best studied with well-established measures of segregation that use complete information on the spatial distribution of income instead of an ad hoc and arbitrary one."

As a *territorial category*, “areas of concentrated poverty” have become the primary basis for constructing and delimiting comparative studies of poverty across neighborhoods. Serving as a spatial eligibility requirement, in the bureaucratic field (not unlike the poverty threshold for individuals in receiving various welfare benefits), the 40 percent benchmark was explicitly created to aim targeted assistance at the most hardcore zones of urban relegation. The statistical measure came to play a similar role in the academic field, giving analysts targeted sites of research from which to build empirical comparisons. Later scholars grafted on a number of negative behavioral traits, often unintentionally, to define the territorial category; and, after the height of debate surrounding the “underclass” in the 1980s, the category of “concentrated poverty” became increasingly used to replace the racially charged and politically controversial categories of the ghetto, *barrio*, and slum. Although the term has definitional consensus around the 40 percent benchmark, it has highly conflicting analytic interpretations and has become increasingly used in the literature to denote areas of “urban problems,” a discursive shift some scholars see as a form of “conceptual camouflage” to the persisting significance of race (Wacquant 2002).

Concentrated poverty has increasingly been recognized as a *causal factor* in compounding the effects of poverty by isolating residents in these neighborhoods from networks and resources useful to realize human potential. While concentration has social causes, its manifestation as spatial enclosure results in a magnification of poverty that can be studied as an autonomous force. This conceptualization can be traced back to the Chicago School of Sociology that saw concentration as a key biotic process with an independent effect breeding decomposed and pathological social forms. Today, a large research program on neighborhood effects and mechanisms exists which is predominantly interested in concentrated poverty, aimed at measuring and understanding how living in a poor neighborhood impacts an individual or family differently than a poor person living in a better-off neighborhood. Therefore, the concentrated poverty rate aims to capture the extent of a possible “double burden” imposed on poor families living in extremely poor communities: both being poor and living in a poor community. The poor living in poor communities are often faced with unique community disadvantages such as higher crime rates, lower quality educational opportunities, weaker job networks, and less affluent social networks, compared to those in poverty living in more affluent communities. This use of the concept is most often used in ecological-demographic or culturalist paradigms that are less interested in explaining the cause of concentrated poverty, but rather the causes of life chances and socioeconomic outcomes from living in urban environments of concentrated poverty.

Finally, it is important to note that the measure and concept of concentrated poverty is largely unique to the United States. While the spatial concentration of poverty is a significant aspect of non-US research studies – for instance, a flurry of comparative work on areas of poverty in the wake of the underclass debate of the late 1980s and 1990s (Mingione 1996 [or 2008 as in the Refs?]) and continued research into sites of public housing, refugee resettlements, and poor immigrant communities – the term itself is primarily used in the most general descriptive example of an impoverished area. In the European context, this is largely due to the fact that most censuses in the region define poverty relatively rather than absolutely [Is there a word missing here? “define poverty comparatively”?], highlighting levels of inequality rather than severe desperation.

Following this, scholars studying in these national contexts tend to conceptualize areas of extreme poverty in terms of “economic spatial segregation,” “social and ethnic segregation,” and “income mix” (Musterd and Ostendorf 2013).

Causes and trends of concentrated poverty in US cities

Despite the limitations of the measure, along with its problematic denotations and applications in research, the spatial organization of poverty remains a central field of inquiry for social scientists who use longitudinal census data to describe demographic and economic trends of urbanization.

1970–1990

Between 1970 and 1990, the number of people living in high poverty neighborhoods doubled. Sociologist William Julius Wilson found, during the 1970s, that (a) poverty increased dramatically throughout metropolitan areas of the United States; (b) at the same time, the number of poor people residing within these areas increased; and (c) this exacerbation of poverty conditions occurred primarily within African American neighborhoods. Several scholars would go on to affirm that in the 1970s America saw a dramatic increase in the number of neighborhoods that classified as areas of concentrated poverty (Jargowsky 1997). This trend extended, to a lesser extent, into the 1980s, as the number of neighborhoods qualifying as areas of “extreme poverty” continued to increase, but at a slower rate than it had throughout the 1970s. These trends of concentrated poverty at the level of the census tract and neighborhood were similarly reflected at the level of metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). In both decades in the period 1970–1990, the differential between the poverty rates of central cities and their suburbs increased, reflecting an increasing spatial concentration of MSA poverty within central cities (Madden 1996).

This changing spatial distribution of poverty has been attributed to a number of structural factors, primarily in the economic sphere (Wilson 1987; Massey and Denton 1993; Quillian 1999). *Racial discrimination and segregation* of African Americans in restrictive covenants, municipal policies, and federal housing programs forced blacks, unlike other immigrant groups, into particular areas of inner cities. At the same time, blacks were discriminated against far more severely than other groups in the labor market, making them disproportionately poor and concentrated in low-paying jobs, particularly in the industrial sector. A *spatial mismatch* between jobs and workers resulted from the expansion of suburbs, wherein the inner city poor were largely cut off from taking advantage of new opportunities due to distance. *White flight* from inner city neighborhoods occurred with the construction of the federal highway system and federal mortgage programs that systematically excluded poor people of color. Later, after the civil rights movement ended racial restrictions on federal housing loans and programs, and opened up limited opportunities for black mobility, the flight of the black middle class to suburbs further increased the proportion of poor in the inner cities and weakened some civic institutions and investment in the local economy. Although concentrated poverty increased among blacks, Hispanics, and whites throughout the 1970s–1990s, increases were far more dramatic among blacks, followed by Hispanics, and then, to a much lesser extent, whites.

1990–2000

The number of people living in high poverty neighborhoods in the United States declined by 24 percent, or 2.5 million people, in the 1990s (Jargowsky 2003). The steepest declines in high poverty neighborhoods occurred in metropolitan areas in the Midwest and South. The share of the poor living in high poverty neighborhoods declined among all racial and ethnic groups. This was especially the case for African Americans, wherein the share of poor black individuals living in high poverty neighborhoods declined from 30 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2000. This decline of high poverty neighborhoods occurred in rural areas and central cities, but suburbs experienced almost no change.

2000–2012

Whatever gains may have been made in the reduction of concentrated poverty in the 1990s, it is clear that they did not persist. Between 2000 and 2008–2012, the number of census tracts with poverty rates over 40 percent grew by nearly three-quarters (Kneebone 2014). The share of poor people living in these sorts of neighborhoods grew by similar margins from 5.6 million in 2000 to 11.6 million by 2008–2012. This trend has been attributed to both the downturn of 2000 and the 2008 recession. This poverty not only affected inner cities, but also continued to spread into the suburbs, extending the suburbanization trend of concentrated poverty first noted in the 1990s. Furthermore, the concentrated poverty rate of 2010 was approaching its all-time high, estimating that the concentrated poverty rate in US metropolitan areas grew to 15.1 percent in 2010 – up considerably from 11.7 percent in 2005–2009, and nearing its 1990 high of 16.5 percent. This trend seems to confirm William Julius Wilson’s original thesis that extremely poor neighborhoods and their residents are the last to benefit from growth when times are good, and the first to feel it when tough times arrive.

With these new trends of urbanization and suburbanization, some scholars question if concentrated poverty is adequately captured using the 50-year-old statistical instrument, crafted in the context of white flight and deindustrialization. For instance, suburbs are now home to the largest and fastest growing poor population in the country and areas comprised largely of working poor populations do not suffer from the extreme levels of dysfunction, crime, and blight that were initially used to construct the measure; however, they nonetheless meet the 40 percent threshold.

Effects of concentrated poverty

Several studies have pointed to the role of “neighborhood effects” caused by concentrated poverty (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). These studies have illustrated that crime and delinquency, education, psychological distress, and various health problems, among many other issues, are affected by neighborhood characteristics, particularly the concentration of poverty. Thresholds, or tipping points, also prove important. In a recent review of research, George Galster and colleagues notes that studies suggest

[lex]that the independent impacts of neighborhood poverty rates in encouraging negative outcomes for individuals like crime, school leaving, and duration of poverty spells appear to be nil unless the neighborhood exceeds about 20 percent

poverty, whereupon the externality effects grow rapidly until the neighborhood reaches approximately 40 percent poverty; subsequent increases in the poverty population appear to have no marginal effect. (Galster, Quercia, and Cortes 2000)

Housing values and rents show a similar pattern. Data from the 100 largest US metropolitan areas from 1990 to 2000 show little relationship between neighborhood poverty rates and decline in neighborhood housing values and rents until poverty exceeds 10 percent, at which point values decline rapidly before becoming shallower at very high poverty levels.

One of the largest studies examining the effects of concentrated poverty was completed by the Pew Economic Mobility Project which tracked 5,000 families since 1968 and found that no other factor, including parents' education, employment, or marital status, was as important as neighborhood poverty in explaining why African American children were so much more likely to have lower incomes than their parents as adults (Sharkey 2013). Thus, the concentrated poverty rate aims to capture the extent of a possible "double burden" imposed on poor families living in extremely poor communities: both being poor and living in a poor community. The study also found that negative effects on the better-off children rose in such areas too.

While initial research failed to isolate the direct effects of "concentrated poverty" in and of itself, more recent work has shifted to identifying the mechanisms that matter. Interactive effects such as social contagion, collective socialization, and social networks form local social norms and organize economic resources and opportunities. Environmental effects such as exposure to violence and physical surroundings may impart psychological or physical effects. Geographic effects, such as a neighborhood's spatial relation to employment and public services may adversely impact job and educational opportunities. Finally, institutional effects – such as the stigmatization held by powerful institutional or private actors; local institutional resources of private and nonprofit public institutions such as benevolent charities, day care facilities, and medical clinics; and market actors such as local businesses – shape poverty in particular places. The shared premise of this research stream is that social processes and institutions endogenous to neighborhoods mediate the effects and impacts of concentrated poverty and often point to targeted policy interventions surrounding particular mechanisms.

Some scholars have criticized this burgeoning field of "neighborhood effects" research that provides an analysis of concentrated poverty as merely a causal variable of hiding the underlying power relationships that cause concentrated poverty. They argue that this framework of analysis often presents poor neighborhoods and the problems they contain as primarily the product of urban spatial structures (Slater 2013). This theoretical slippage reflects the confusion that results from using spatial metaphors as simplified expressions for complex sociospatial processes. The conception of concentrated poverty as primarily a problem of space has helped provide the justification for simplistic spatial solutions such as public housing destruction and mobility programs to complex social, economic, and political problems that have had mixed records, while diverting policy attention from the underlying causes of concentrated poverty (Gans 2010; Goetz 2013).

Another stream of research has focused on the cultural effects of concentrated poverty in producing a distinct "inner city" or "underclass" culture, and to what degree this perpetuates inequality. Much of this scholarship describes inner city culture(s) as

composed of both “ghetto specific” and “mainstream” forms of behavior in response to concentrated poverty and seeks to explain the specific ways this differs from mainstream or middle-class culture(s). The wide array of studies, many ethnographic, do not represent a coherent theory of how to think about inner city culture, and are limited in their generalizability because they often focus on one city, one neighborhood, or one group. Rather, they provide important correctives to predominant perceptions among sociologists to the ways groups make sense of, respond, challenge, or reproduce concentrated poverty, and open the door to more nuanced and systematic theoretical work than the “neighborhood effects” scholarship (see Small and Newman 2001)

Policy interventions: Deconcentration of poverty

Since the early 1990s US federal housing policy has aimed at spatially deconcentrating poverty. In 1995, then Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Henry Cisneros called “highly concentrated minority poverty urban America’s toughest challenge” (cited in Goetz 2003: 43) This issue has been addressed directly by US housing agencies by creating income diversity in new or redeveloped housing projects and encouraging the use of tenant-based housing vouchers for families to locate in neighborhoods that will improve the life opportunities of family members.

The most well-known of the mobility initiatives were the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program and the Gautreaux program, which provided Section 8 vouchers to residents of public housing so that they could move out of public housing and into lower poverty and racially integrated neighborhoods. The Gautreaux program had clearer and stronger results than MTO: those who moved out of concentrated poverty were more likely to leave welfare and gain employment and whose children were more likely to graduate high school (Rosenbaum 1995). In the case of MTO, changes in employment and educational improvement were not significant and nearly half of the participants moved back or remained in their original neighborhood. Furthermore, most participants did not move into the suburbs, but instead more frequently into other nearby urban neighborhoods of lower poverty. However, the program did show significant improvements in a sense of security among the participants, which resulted in the reduction of stress, fear, and depression, particularly among women and young girls (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010).

Several scholars have questioned both the success and broader ability of such policy interventions as an adequate response to concentrated poverty. Ed Goetz’s comparative study of Hope VI projects reveals how voluntary programs like MTO and Gautreaux, though justifiable on other grounds, will not make a dent in concentrated poverty because these programs take only those families most likely to succeed in their new environments and will never reach sufficient scale to noticeably affect overall settlement patterns (Goetz 2013). Low poverty areas are not anxious to receive large numbers of poor, public housing families, and there will typically be political backlash if current residents feel that these families are being forced into their neighborhoods, and it was this type of resistance that ended the expansion of the program in 1995. Other studies point out that dispersal programs incorrectly assume the poor can relocate as easily as the middle class does, since very real resource constraints limit the ability of public housing families to abandon existing support networks. In many cases, mobility programs are tied to the destruction of public housing, in which moving is not a choice, but “the right to

stay put” is denied to residents. For these reasons, scholarly critics of the policy paradigm claim that deconcentrating policies simply spreads out poverty while diverting attention from policies that would reduce poverty (Gans 2010).

Besides moving poor people out of poor neighborhoods, federal, state, and local authorities have also intervened to move wealthier people into poorer neighborhoods through the development of mixed income housing developments. Since 1992, the US federal government’s Hope VI program has funded the demolition of older high rise buildings, composed entirely of extremely low income residents, and the construction higher quality, low density housing with various tiers of income earners. The voucher components for those displaced have the same issues as those discussed above, except that public housing families who are displaced and relocated typically reconcentrate in other poor neighborhoods nearby; well over half are moved into other public housing units and very rarely relocate to low poverty suburbs. While the higher end housing does successfully create a socioeconomic mix to the neighborhood by attracting higher income people than had previously lived on site through deep subsidies for their apartments, scholars have also noted how the programs are tools of gentrification – not only in their forceful displacement of the former low income public housing residents, but also through the displacement that can follow with increased rents of surrounding properties as the neighborhood is deemed more attractive.

Rethinking concentrated poverty

This entry has outlined the construction of the administrative measure of conceptual poverty, its conceptual evolution, array of current usage in the social sciences, and policy implications. It has also provided a series of critiques, some so fundamental that they may seem to suggest abandonment of the term altogether. Yet, despite the unreflexive usage of the measure and the imprecision of the concepts that flow from it, concentrated poverty is nonetheless a critical process of urbanization and the spatial distribution of poverty a critical dynamic that should not be ignored by social scientists or policy-makers.

Building from the critiques reviewed in this entry, a few new lines of research may be suggested. First, research can move beyond the taken-for-granted definitions of the current universal measure used for administrative purposes. This could be done by measuring concentrated poverty with alternative definitions of extreme poverty, such as utilizing relative rather than absolute definitions, experimenting with other thresholds of concentration beyond the 20 percent and 40 percent cutoffs, and examining concentrations at varying scales beyond the census blocks that are built into the census data for administrative rather than analytic purposes. Rather than a universal measure, these could be calibrated appropriately or variably tested for the empirical question at hand. While curating and cleaning such data beyond the ready-made census measure adds various challenges, the data are being made increasingly malleable.

Second, a relational and processual conception of concentrated poverty that integrates all of its dimensions (analytic measure, territorial category, causal factor), that delineates the relationship between concentration–deconcentration, segregation, and desegregation, can overcome many of the shortcomings highlighted in the critiques reviewed. While there has been a sustained investigation into the empirical relationship between segregation and concentration, the relationship between segregation and

integration (often mistaken as mere opposites) is severely lacking and conceptually confused (Ruiz-Tagle 2013), as is the relation between poverty concentration and deconcentration (Goetz 2003). As Massey and Denton and so many other scholars have shown, there are tight dialectical relations between poverty concentration and segregation, and therefore future research must also untangle the interconnection between deconcentration and desegregation. This is not simply a technical task of statistical exercises weighing variables, as the neighborhood effects literature have it in their epistemological foundations, but a historical task in explaining its causes and an ethnographic task in gauging the effects of experiments in deconcentration.

SEE ALSO:

EURS0080; EURS0083; EURS0105; EURS0111; EURS0455; EURS0141; EURS0216; EURS0466; EURS0312; EURS0377; EURS0388; EURS0394; EURS0300

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