

New Urban Poverty

DAVID BENASSI

University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy

ENRICA MORLICCHIO

University Federico II of Naples, Italy

INTRODUCTION: URBAN POVERTY AS SOCIAL ISSUE

For a long time, poverty was considered a “natural” condition for the majority of the population. It is only with the Industrial Revolution and the impressive process of the urbanization of huge masses of workers that poverty has become a social and political problem, initially in the English industrial cities and subsequently in the rest of Europe and in the United States. According to a vast literature, the urban concentration of deprived masses is the basic mechanism for the reproduction of social disadvantage: space matters indeed. Although large areas of chronic rural poverty exist, especially in the less developed countries, it is mostly the urban environment that has called attention to the phenomenon of poverty in industrialized countries, academically as well as politically. Moreover, it is in the urban context that the concept of absolute and relative poverty had been set as a universal standard by which to estimate the extent of this phenomenon. Social and economic transformations during the past few decades have led to the reemergence of severe forms of impoverishment in practically all the cities of the industrialized world, helping to maintain this focus.

This entry begins by considering the main explanations offered for urban poverty. Then it gives a historical look at the broader patterns of urban poverty, in order to

better understand what is really “new” in contemporary poverty. Finally, some implications for future research will be drawn.

MAIN APPROACHES IN THE STUDY OF THE NEW URBAN POVERTY

The well-known study by C. Booth, *Life and Labour of People in London*, written between 1886 and 1903, is the first attempt to understand urban poverty through a scientific approach (Booth 1902–1903). Booth drew a series of detailed maps of the streets of London on the basis of a cartographic method that was already in use at that time but had never been applied on such a broad scale. His work makes it clear that urban poverty is a product of social mechanisms, that people are poor because they are unable to earn a sufficient salary, and that their spatial concentration makes their life harder. This focus on the spatial distribution of poor individuals and families was adopted some decades later by theorists of social disorganization (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925). Social disorganization was one of the two paradigms of the Chicago School that greatly influenced the study of urban poverty; the other was social isolation.

Social disorganization theory

Social disorganization theory states that the concentration of poverty in urban spaces encourages the development of subcultures that lead to deviant behavior. The theory of disorganization has essentially been proposed to explain changes in crime rate from one neighborhood to another. It occupied an important place in academic and political discourse at the time of the Chicago School,

The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies. Edited by Anthony Orum.

© 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Published 2019 by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118568446.eurs0466

and has continued to be prominent, as seen recently both in the United States and in Europe. However, social disorganization theory has received strong criticisms. The most severe of these criticisms asserts that the concentration of urban poverty in a neighborhood does not necessarily imply social disorganization. Jane Jacobs (1961), for instance, underlines the role of *public characters*, namely the excluded and the economically marginal, who play a fundamental role in the production of social capital and social order in the neighborhood.

Another criticism refers to the lack of a shared definition of the concept of social disorganization. In fact, this concept it has been used to explain a variety of different phenomena, such as lack of social control over youngsters, lack of trust and social relations among neighbors, weak social engagement, and high rates of crime (Small 2004; Wilson 1987). The idea of social disorganization is therefore too vague and only generically associated to urban poverty. It is more fruitful to refer to the social relations that flourish in the city, and specifically in the neighborhood.

The ghetto poor and the “concentration effect”

The debate on the ghetto poor addresses new urban poverty mainly at a different analytical level from that of the concentration of poverty in urban areas. According to this approach, urban poverty is not so much a product of the high concentration of low income families as the result of the conditions and prospects of the poor. The most important contribution from this perspective is indeed W. J. Wilson’s (1987) work on the “truly disadvantaged” – that is, a segment of the American population often referred to as a predominantly Afro-American “underclass,” whose members live in inner cities and urban areas stricken with poverty, family instability, high unemployment, a poor educational

system, and crime. This population also suffers from problems such as high rates of drug addiction, out-of-wedlock births, and welfare dependency. In the last decades of the twentieth century the concept of *underclass* has had much success also in the political arena, especially among conservatives (Auletta 1983; Murray 1984). It is exactly this prevalent stigmatizing orientation that pushed Wilson to focus even more on the spatial configurations of poverty – the ghetto poor – and to examine how the spatial dimension tends to give rise to a syndrome of deprivation that he calls “effects of concentration.” Such effects comprise exclusion from the formal labor market, social isolation, lack of welfare state support, or a stigmatizing treatment by such institutions.

Research on the neighborhood effect

The work of Wilson spawned a significant empirical literature on the effects that residence is likely to produce on the socioeconomic trajectory of individuals – what is now known as *the neighborhood effect* (Galster 2010). The essential point is that living in a poor neighborhood limits one’s relationships to a circle of people from the same background, hindering upward mobility or exit from poverty. Neighborhood effects are determined by a variety of mechanisms, which can be social-interactive (social networks, relative deprivation), environmental (exposure to violence or to pollution, decayed physical built environment), geographical (spatial mismatch), and institutional (stigmatization, low public resources) (Galster 2010). Some criticisms of this theory have been raised, pointing out that the neighborhood effects are a minor factor and, above all, are difficult to measure. Critics claim that social bonds and social relations are never limited to the neighborhood of residence but can easily spread all around the city, even for those who live in poverty (Wellman 1999).

Cultural explanations

Starting with the seminal work of O. Lewis (1959), culture has also been discussed as a factor influencing poverty and, primarily, entrapment in a condition of poverty. According to Lamont and Small (2008), culture is a tool that individuals use in order to understand their situation and decide what actions to take. But it is still debated whether culture is an independent variable that influences poverty or the result of the adaptation of the poor to their deprived conditions.

According to this perspective, the macro socioeconomic structure influences the preferences and aspirations of individuals (Dumais 2002, 47). Indeed, some authors criticized the idea of intergenerational transmission of values and attitudes that would favor entrapment in poverty. Rather, chronic poverty is the consequence of spatial concentration and of institutional discrimination against disadvantaged groups. This is exactly the point raised by Wilson, as we have already seen: people living in disadvantaged neighborhood suffer a lack of opportunities to exit from poverty not because of the intergenerational factor, but because they are entrapped in an unfavorable social context. In a more general sense, it is argued that the concentration of poor and unemployed people might lead to bonding capital, but not so much to bridging capital, or even to linking capital. Therefore a culture of poverty is the consequence of poverty rather than its cause; and for this very reason the attitude of “blaming the victim” is wrong.

WHAT IS NEW IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN POVERTY?

In order to understand the historical transformations of urban poverty, it is useful to refer to the idea of a sequence of accumulation regimes, as advanced by E. Mingione

(1991). Figure 1 shows the time frame defined at one end by the extensive regulation regime – which is characterized by processes of proletarianization and by a low level of state intervention – and at the opposite end by high commodification from the fragmented regime that emerged from the crisis of the 1970s – which was characterized by unstable integration in the labor market, social polarization, and a state-supported neoliberalism, or at least a retrenchment of the welfare state. In the middle there is the intensive regime that resulted from increasing productivity through state intervention and through the social regulation of wages.

Taking the extensive accumulation regime as a starting point, as we can see from Figure 1, two main models of urban poverty emerged during the early industrial period: on the one hand there was the traditional working-class community; on the other there were settlements of newly arrived immigrants with a closed system of values and behaviors that later gave rise to several types of ethnic neighborhoods. Except when production sites depended on the location of raw materials, as in the mining or early steel industry, traditional working-class communities sprang up in the historical, often centrally located areas of large industrial cities as a result of the length and toughness of the working day, which did not allow for daily long-distance commuting and thus gave rise to new districts (Kesteloot 2004). These working-class districts were not just dwelling places. They provided inhabitants with common values that derived from common workplace and migratory experiences.

During the intensive accumulation regime, five types of urban poverty configuration emerged: (1) the traditional working-class suburbs; (2) the Fordist social housing model; (3) the so-called Italian *coree* (“Korean bedsits/cubicles”) and other types of urban shantytowns; (4) the ethnic neighborhoods;

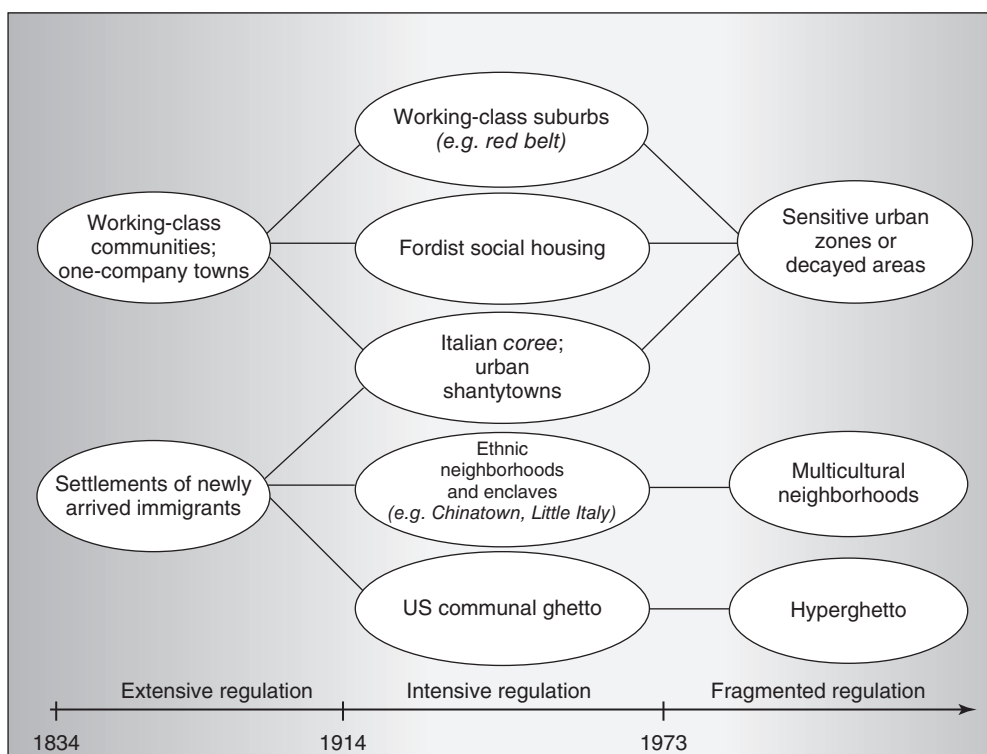


Figure 1 Urban poverty in the “extensive,” “intensive,” and “fragmented” regimes

and (5) the American communal black ghetto. The population of the poor neighborhoods of European cities was not ethnically, racially, or culturally different from the rest of the community. It was composed of working-class families with a weak position in the labor market, yet fully integrated in the urban social structure. Urban poverty was the condition of workers unable to reach the standards of well-being and socioeconomic stability of the rest of the population, but their aspirations were the same. In some cases these communities would undergo processes of gentrification by transforming their space into middle- and upper-class residential areas.

The new Fordist neighborhoods reflected the difficult conditions of reproduction of the workforce in areas where large companies were concentrated. They were, on the whole,

large peripheral social housing estates; but in countries with a relatively late industrialization, such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal, one can find a significant presence of spontaneous agglomerates that sprang up through the use of recycled rubble and leftover material from building sites, as in the case of the *coree* that were built in the city of Milan in the 1950s and were called this because they made their first appearance in the era of the Korean War (see Alasia and Montaldi 1960).

The ethnic neighborhood or enclave was an area inhabited, by choice, by a larger or smaller number of people who belonged to a group that defined itself through some ethnic, religious, or other characteristic in order to preserve its basic cultural traits, maintain its social cohesion, strengthen the bonds of solidarity and the networks of mutual support between members, and promote its

own economic and political development. The ethnic neighborhood therefore implied a voluntarily segregated ethnic community that was more permanent than the settlements of newcomers of the past. However, unlike the ghetto, it did not express an institutionalized form of segregation, based on a group's subordination to others (Marcuse 2001). Moreover, its immigrant or ethnic concentration was far below the level of segregation of the ghetto: only a minority of members of a particular ethnic or immigrant group lived in the same area, and only a fraction of the residents in that space were part of the group. On the whole, ethnic neighborhoods were able to ensure a certain level of internal cohesion and to incorporate new immigrants, thanks to the existence of networks of mutual support that had a dual basis: work relationships and memberships of ethnic or religious groups. But, as noted by Musterd (2011), ethnic neighborhoods are also indicative of the fact that integration did not succeed in terms of assimilation.

The black communal ghetto of the mid-twentieth century was a segregated microcosm, but one that had its own internal division of labor, social stratification, networks of reciprocity and social support, and institutions of collective representation: it was a "city within the city" (Wacquant 2008, 3). It was characterized by (a) the very high concentration of a specific social group (almost all the African American population lives in the ghetto, and most of the population of the ghetto is African American); (b) the fact that this concentration was imposed, not chosen; and (c) a condition of subordination to other social groups, on the basis of characteristics defined from outside ("biological" and "racial" discourses), but also combined with a sense of collective identity. Another relevant aspect is that, in the case of the ghetto, the concentration in space is neither arbitrary nor accidental but based on procedures whose

legitimacy is recognized and reinforced by the state. As Marcuse (2001) pointed out, the black ghetto was in fact created and put into place by the state.

The post-Fordist transition has reopened the question of urban poverty in terms that are quite new. Between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, European cities have been witnessing a transformation of the working-class neighborhoods. First of all, the presence of immigrants is increasing everywhere and tends to concentrate in specific urban areas. This ethnic diversification has led to the formation of multicultural neighborhoods, a phenomenon that sometimes generates collective anxiety, as the numbers of residents of foreign origins increases. In countries with a long-lasting tradition of immigration (France, United Kingdom, the Netherlands), the problem concerns above all the integration of second and third generations, which are hardly able to reach the standard of living of the overall population. In Southern European countries (Spain, Italy) the main problem is the typical immigrant, who has just arrived without his or her spouse. Although the role of these immigrants, both in the formal and in the informal economy, is of considerable importance, it is exceedingly difficult to translate this "functional integration" into improvements in working conditions. Although they make the city work by cleaning, repairing, maintaining, and serving it, they have not been able so far to make the city pay (fairly).

Generally speaking, European cities did not have anything like the experience of the American black ghetto, as they lack both a concentration of disadvantaged groups with racial homogeneity and a very high concentration of poverty. At the same time, however, the social character of the urban spaces occupied by immigrants has changed, primarily in France and in the United Kingdom, where new social tensions have emerged and have

given rise to riots in areas labeled “sensitive urban zones” (Lagrange and Oberti 2006).

The second reason for urban poverty change in European cities has to do with the breaking of social bonds and the resulting impossibility of taking part in the life of the community. At least some parts of the “zone of transition,” which historically integrated newcomers into the city, have become neighborhoods of relegation (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 1992). Integration takes place increasingly through a process of spatial and economic distancing of the super-rich from poor communities. This process leads to a sort of “immunization” (De Leonardis 2013), which obscures any economic and power differences without deleting them.

In the United States the most relevant shift is from the communal ghetto of the postwar years to the “hyperghetto,” which was characterized by segregation on the basis of both race and class and by the lack of a shared collective identity (Wacquant and Wilson 1989). The sudden implosion of the communal ghetto that led to the hyperghetto was the result of the interaction of three processes: (1) the collapse of the social and occupational structure of the inner cities and the already mentioned “effects of concentration” (Wilson 1987); (2) an emerging but dominant influence of discrimination in housing, which led to an “American apartheid” (to borrow the eloquent title of the classic study of Massey and Denton 1993) that, by 1970, exacerbated the concentration of black poor in the inner cities; and (3) the linking between penal welfare reform and the regulation of the marginal population in the context of a retrenchment of the protective institutions of the welfare state.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH

What we have observed thus far opens at least three lines of particularly interesting

research. The first is the one traced by the theorists of “advanced urban marginality” as in the already mentioned work of Wilson and Wacquant. As S. Paugam (2013) has also shown through his analysis of disqualifying poverty, unlike the old industrial low-wage workers and the racial and ethnic minorities struggling for their economic and civil rights, the new urban poor could reduce their social participation and their civic commitment to the organization of public life. Disqualifying poverty reflects (a) a loss (actual or potential) of the status that results from participating in the labor market; and (b) a perception of the inferiority of those who receive assistance in a social system based on achievement and merit. The current poverty poses, then, not only a problem of social protection – of “counting *on*” – but also one of recognition – of “counting *for*”: in that sense it has been turning into a new social question that threatens social order and cohesion.

A second line of inquiry concerns the analysis of residential and social segregation as a problem of reembedding connected to the current tensions between market and society in individualized, destandardized, and fragmented regimes – characteristics that have been exacerbated by the long-lasting economic and financial crisis (Ghezzi and Mingione 2007). This line of research leads one to concentrate on new types of moral economies: specific local cultures, traditions of mutual help, communities’ and groups’ capacity to resist, and other relevant dimensions of social life that are also, in part, the effect of the historical conditions of the sociospatial organization of cities.

There is, finally, a third line of research. The emergence, in contemporary cities, of innovative and spontaneous forms of solidarity and community alliances with subjects from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who apparently do not share

the same class condition, has not yet been adequately analyzed. It is especially here that the notion of “togetherness” proposed by A. Amin and N. Thrift (2012) could be a useful tool for future social research on new urban poverty – where it could serve to conceptualize and study the practices, sites, institutions, and networks within which people try to cope with poverty and make ends meet.

SEE ALSO: Concentrated Poverty; Social Disorganization

REFERENCES

- Alasia, F., and D. Montaldi. 1960. *Milano, Corea*. Milan: Feltrinellia.
- Amin, A., and N. Thrift. 2002. *Cities: Re-Imagining the Urban*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Auletta, K. 1983. *The Underclass*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Booth, C. 1902–1903. *Life and Labour of the People in London*. London: Macmillan.
- De Leonardi, O. 2013. “Altrove: Sulla configurazione spaziale dell’alterità e della resistenza.” *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 3: 351–378.
- Dubet, F., and D. Lapeyronnie. 2001. *Les quartiers d’exil*. Paris: Seuil.
- Dumais, S. A. 2002. “Cultural Capital, Gender, and School Success: The Role of Habitus.” *Sociology of Education*, 75: 44–68.
- Galster, G. 2010. “The Mechanism(s) of Neighbourhood Effects: Theory, Evidence, and Policy Implications.” Paper prepared for presentation at the ESRC Seminar “Neighbourhood Effects: Theory and Evidence,” St. Andrews University, Scotland, February 4–5.
- Ghezzi, S., and E. Mingione. 2007. “Embeddedness, Path Dependency and Social Institutions: An Economic Sociology Approach.” *Current Sociology*, 55(1): 11–23.
- Jacobs, J. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, NY: Random House/Vintage Books.
- Kesteloot, C. 2004. Urban Socio-Spatial Configurations and the Future of European Cities.” In *Cities of Europe: Changing Contexts, Local Arrangements and the Challenge to Urban Cohesion*, edited by Y. Kazepov, 123–148. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lagrange, H., and M. Oberti, eds. 2006. *Émeutes urbaines et protestations: Une exception française*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Lamont, M., and M. L. Small. 2008. “How Culture Matters: Enriching Our Understanding of Poverty.” In *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*, edited by C. Lin and D. R. Harris, 76–102. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lewis, O. 1959. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Marcuse, P. 2001. “Enclaves Yes, Ghettoes No: Segregation and the State.” Paper delivered at the conference “International Seminar on Segregation in the City,” Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, July 26–8.
- Massey, D. S., and N. A. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mingione, E. 1991. *Fragmented Societies: A Sociology of Economic Life beyond the Market Paradigm*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Murray, C. 1984. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Musterd, S. 2011. “The Impact of Immigrants’ Segregation and Concentration on Social Integration in Selected European Contexts.” *Documentas d’Anàlisi Geogràfica*, 53(3): 359–380.
- Park, R., E. W. Burgess, and R. D. McKenzie. 1925. *The City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Paugam, S. 2013. *Les formes élémentaires de la pauvreté*. Paris: PUF.
- Small, M. L. 2004. *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wacquant, L. J. D. 2008. *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wacquant, L. J. D., and W. J. Wilson. 1989. “The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City.” In *The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives*, edited by W. J. Wilson, 8–25. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Wellman, B. 1999. *Networks in the Global Village*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Wilson, W. J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

FURTHER READING

- Bridge, G., and A. Watson, eds. 2002. *The Blackwell City Reader*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Jargowsky, P. 1997. *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Silver, H. 1993. "National Conceptions of the New Urban Poverty: Social Structural Change in Britain, France and the United States." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 17(3): 336–54.
- Whyte, W. F. 1943. *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W. J. 1997. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York, NY: Alfred Knopf.