

Four Reasons to Abandon the Idea of “The Ghetto”

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This article questions one common use of the concept “the ghetto” to theorize conditions in poor, predominantly black urban neighborhoods in the United States. Many scholars use the term “ghetto” as shorthand to designate an area with a given demography. For example, Massey and Denton (1993, pp. 18–19), emphasizing race, employ it to designate “a set of neighborhoods that are exclusively inhabited by members of one group, within which virtually all members of that group live.” Wilson (1987), emphasizing class, employs it to refer to any neighborhood with a high concentration of poverty. Shorthand uses of the term “ghetto” are benign; they require no assumptions and introduce no complications. For this reason, they are not the subject of this critique.

For other scholars, however, *the ghetto* is not merely a neighborhood that happens to cross a demographic threshold; instead, it is an institution (Wacquant, 1997, p. 343; see Marcuse, 2002, for a discussion). This *strong conception* of the *ghetto* varies from scholar to scholar, but advocates tend to support one or more of the following ideas: the *ghetto* is a particular *type* of neighborhood; it exhibits a cohesive set of characteristics, such as deteriorating housing, crime, depopulation, and social isolation, that recur from city to city; it is directly or indirectly perpetuated by either dominant society or, specifically, the state; and it constitutes a form of involuntary segregation. Consider the following conceptions, which contain one or more of these elements: “an involuntarily spatially concentrated area used by the dominant society to separate and to limit a particular population group, externally defined as racial or ethnic, and held to be, and treated as, inferior” (Marcuse, 2002, p. 111); and “an ethnically and socially homogeneous universe characterized by low organizational density and weak penetration by the state in its social components and, by way of consequence, extreme levels of physical and social insecurity” (Wacquant, 2008, p. 5, italics in original; definition of “hyperghetto”). Scholars in this tradition often cite Wirth (1928), who drew parallels and contrasts between Jewish *ghettos* in Europe and those in the United States, and Clark (1965), who, focusing on African Americans, aimed to identify the distinctly American aspects of the *ghetto*: “the restriction of persons to a special area and the limiting of their freedom of choice on the basis of skin color” (1965, p. 11). Many scholars in this vein reject shorthand uses of the term “ghetto” as a-theoretical.

Proponents of strong conceptions of the *ghetto* are right to argue for more sophisticated theories on conditions in poor urban neighborhoods. However, this article argues that these strong conceptions ultimately undermine scholarly efforts to understand the complexity of poor black neighborhoods or their residents in the twenty-first century. If sociological ideas are useful to the extent they identify or clarify phenomena that were previously unknown or misunderstood, then these models fail by both misrepresenting poor black neighborhoods and masking important aspects of their conditions, creating muddled pictures where clarity is called for. Relying on propositions or assumptions scarcely substantiated by the available data, strong conceptions contain important grains of truth, but ultimately perpetuate the very stereotypes their proponents often aim to fight.

FOUR REASONS

This article offers four reasons to abandon strong conceptions of the *ghetto* in scientific studies of black urban poverty: the unacknowledged heterogeneity of poor black neighborhoods, the failure of most poor black neighborhoods to exhibit the characteristics of popular archetypes, the inadequacy of sole-entity conceptions of the state deployed in strong conceptions of the *ghetto*, and the failure of the idea of “involuntary segregation” to capture the complexity of contemporary black urban residential patterns.

HETEROGENEITY, NOT HOMOGENEITY

One of the most important assumptions behind strong conceptions of the *ghetto* is that poor black neighborhoods are relatively homogeneous across cities. The assumption is often implicit. When ethnographers in this tradition describe conditions in a given poor black neighborhood—say, a drug transaction on a desolate Detroit streetcorner—they rely on the reader’s tacit agreement that the patterns described therein manifest themselves similarly in poor black neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and other cities. And when pure theorists describe the *ghetto* as a type of neighborhood, they rely on the reader’s ability to call upon a picture of this type—of desolate streets, boarded-up housing, streetcorner drug dealing, and deteriorated landscapes—culled from whatever factors feed the reader’s image.¹

The assumption is sometimes explicit. Wacquant’s (2008) theory of urban marginality argues that “the black American ghetto” is “homogeneous,” and must be contrasted to other types of neighborhoods, such as the French *banlieues*, to which it is improperly compared. Banlieues, he argues, are characterized by “external heterogeneity,” such that conditions in one differ substantially from those in others. This situation “contrasts sharply with the social and spatial monotony exhibited by the ghettos of major U.S. cities. That is why we shall . . . speak of the ghetto in the singular and of the banlieues in the plural” (2008, p. 5; italics in original). There are many banlieues, but only one *ghetto*.

Are poor black neighborhoods homogeneous? Space does not permit a detailed answer, and I will not attempt to provide one in the few pages allowed by this symposium. Nevertheless, I will briefly explain two conditions which, aside from high violent crime, may be the traits most commonly attributed to poor black neighborhoods: depopulation and de-institutionalization.²

Consider depopulation. The image of poor black neighborhoods as depopulated is ubiquitous: supported by the fact that many urban neighborhoods lost residents over the 1970s and 1980s (Wilson 1987; Jargowsky, 1997), strong conceptions invoke images of boarded-up housing, vacant lots, and isolated streets. To assess the accuracy of this picture, I report population density data from all metropolitan areas for neighborhoods at least 50% black and at least 30% poor in 2000. I use zip code data for consistency across tables (data in later tables are only available at the zip level). Table 3 exhibits the average population density, with standard deviations.³ The bottom panel exhibits data for central cities only.

Two patterns are evident. First, poor black neighborhoods are generally more, not less dense than other neighborhoods. In central cities, the median poor black zip code has 4,558 persons per square mile; the median among all others, 3,778. Second, and most

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TABLE 3. Number of Persons Per Square Mile, Urban Zip Codes, 2000

		Metropolitan Areas	
		Poor Black Neighborhoods	All Other Neighborhoods
Median		3,686	492
Mean		6,596	2,304
SD		(11,466)	(5,595)
	<i>n</i>	235	13,320
		Central Cities Only	
		Poor Black Neighborhoods	All Other Neighborhoods
Median		4,558	3,778
Mean		7,850	7,059
SD		(12,361)	(11,725)
	<i>n</i>	191	2,534

importantly, poor black neighborhoods are remarkably *heterogeneous*. Among those in central cities, the standard deviation is 12,361 persons per square mile, about 1.5 times the mean. For example, in zip code 62090, a more than 90% black, more than 30% poor neighborhood in St. Louis, the population density is only 1,402 per square mile, consistent with strong ghetto theories; but in zip code 19139, one with nearly identical black and similar poverty rates in Philadelphia, it is a whopping 23,974. And in many of the black poor neighborhoods in Harlem (which have the highest density in the nation), it is over 80,000. Poor black neighborhoods range *substantially*, from desolate to overcrowded. And they vary even more than other metropolitan neighborhoods. (Analyzing subcategories of cities which reduces heterogeneity, does not alter the picture substantially. For example, within Rustbelt cities, the figures for poor black neighborhoods are: mean 5,790, S.D. 3,681).

Consider deinstitutionalization, or what Wacquant (2008, p. 5) called “low organizational density.” The idea that high-poverty neighborhoods are scarce in grocery stores, banks, childcare centers, and other basic amenities has characterized both weak and strong conceptions of the *ghetto* (Wilson, 1987; Wacquant, 2008; see Small and McDermott, 2006; Small, 2007). This scarcity is sometimes said to result from the absence of middle-class residents (who are expected to have a sustaining effect) or from abandonment by the state. Table 4 exhibits the mean number of small establishments—hardware stores, groceries, convenience stores, pharmacies, banks, credit unions, childcare centers, restaurants, laundries, and religious organizations—per 100,000 residents in poor black neighborhoods, and in all other neighborhoods, along with standard deviations, for all metropolitan areas.⁴

Two patterns are clear. First, poor black neighborhoods do not generally exhibit lower organizational density than other neighborhoods. Second, organizational density varies *widely* across poor black neighborhoods. The standard deviations are consistently high, in almost all cases greater than the mean. The interquartile ranges (not shown) are large, such that both low and high organizational densities are common. For example, 25% of poor black neighborhoods have fewer than 3.7 convenience stores per 100,000 residents, consistent with strong *ghetto* imagery; nevertheless, another 25% have more than 21.7, directly contradicting the models.

CITY & COMMUNITY

TABLE 4. Number of Small Establishments Per 100,000 Residents in Poor Black Zip Codes, Metropolitan Areas, 2000

	Poor Black Neighborhoods	All Other Neighborhoods
Hardware stores	3.9 (10.8)	4.9 (12.1)
Groceries	37.4 (29.6)	14.3 (29.6)
Convenience stores	15.9 (17.3)	10.5 (23.8)
Pharmacies	13.3 (17.1)	8.2 (12.8)
Banks	1.5 (4.0)	4.4 (10.6)
Credit unions	16.6 (62.1)	4.2 (14.9)
Childcare centers	29.8 (38.0)	18.7 (26.2)
Restaurants	45.8 (70.0)	35.1 (43.5)
Laundries	4.5 (6.6)	3.4 (7.2)
Religious organizations	75.7 (53.7)	56.0 (58.3)

Source: Author's tabulations, U.S. Census and Zip Business Patterns. Small establishments have 20 or fewer employees. See Table 3.

Neither population nor organizational density helps distinguish poor black neighborhoods as “types” from other neighborhoods—and both characteristics vary widely across poor black neighborhoods. This variation is likely associated with differences in resource access, transportation, congestion, gang penetration, police presence, and a host of other conditions. The variation is difficult to reconcile with the idea that the neighborhoods constitute a homogeneous entity.⁵ At a minimum, we should be speaking of “ghettos” in the plural.

STEREOTYPICAL, NOT TYPICAL

A closely related issue is representativeness. Some defenders of the strong conception of the *ghetto* might argue that not all poor black neighborhoods are *ghettos*, only those that also exhibit characteristics such as de-institutionalization and depopulation. But surprisingly few theorists in this vein have answered a natural question: How many such neighborhoods actually exist?

Table 5 offers some answers. The table quantifies the number of zip codes that meet increasingly refined strong conceptions of the *ghetto*, and reports the proportion of the entire non-Hispanic black urban population living in them. The table presents statistics for only four measures: majority black, high poverty, relative depopulation (indicating a population density below the city median), and relative deinstitutionalization (indicating an organizational density below the city median). The top panel shows that 41.6% of metropolitan blacks live in majority-black neighborhoods, confirming the persisting racial segregation documented by others (Massey and Denton, 1993). In addition, 12.6% live in the 235 metropolitan zip codes that are majority black and over 30% poor.

Among these 235 zip codes, however, only 9 are also below their metropolitan area’s median population and organizational density levels—that is, only nine meet the criteria of a basic strong *ghetto* conception. Since these figures are affected by the presence of suburbs, the bottom panel limits the figures to central city zip codes. Only 16 zip codes are majority black, poor, and below their central city’s median population and organizational density. And contrary to common conceptions, fewer than 300,000 blacks in 2000 lived in them.

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TABLE 5. Proportion of Black Urban Population Living in Majority Black Zip Codes with Selected “Ghetto” Characteristics, 2000

	Metropolitan Areas		
	Number of zips	Black Population	
		Count	Percent of total
All neighborhoods	13,555	28,726,814	100.0%
Neighborhoods >50% black	687	11,947,367	41.6%
and high poverty	235	3,626,895	12.6%
and depopulated	31	134,906	0.5%
and deinstitutionalized	9	20,952	0.1%
	Central Cities Only		
	Number of zips	Black Population	
		Count	Percent of total
All neighborhoods	2,725	15,419,162	100.0%
Neighborhoods >50% black	423	8,405,466	54.5%
and high poverty	191	3,246,516	21.1%
and depopulated	69	908,129	5.9%
and de-institutionalized	16	281,968	1.8%

Source: Author’s tabulations, 2000 U.S. Census and Zip Business Data. Depopulated neighborhoods are below the metro/city median population density; deinstitutionalized neighborhoods are below the metro/city median number of small establishments per 100,000 residents, based on establishments in Table 4. See Table 3.

Strong conceptions of the *ghetto* may correspond to popular media images, but they do not accurately represent the experience of very many urban African Americans. This partly results from the de-concentration of poverty that occurred over the 1990s, and the radically different dynamics of twenty-first century black urban poverty. We know that urban blacks are more likely than others to live in high-poverty neighborhoods and in predominantly same-race neighborhoods. But many live in predominantly black neighborhoods with poor, working class, and middle class blacks, and many others live in poor areas with neighbors of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

MULTIPLE STATE ACTORS, NOT ONE STATE

Many social scientists have shown that conditions in poor black neighborhoods result in part from state actions or inactions (e.g., Marcuse, 2005, p. 23ff; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Strong *ghetto* theorists therefore suggest that one institution (the *ghetto*) was created in part by another (the state). Some such theorists draw parallels to the state’s role in creating the Jewish *ghettos* of medieval and later Europe, wherein residential segregation was state enforced (Wirth, 1928). Others speak more broadly (and more subtly) of state activity during recent decades, wherein “the black American ghetto has undergone an accelerating process of organizational desertification which... was directly induced by the abdication of the state” (Wacquant, 2008, p. 214).

As with other aspects of strong conceptions of the *ghetto*, an important grain of truth, insufficiently assessed against empirical evidence, has muddled the issues at hand. State action certainly plays critical roles in urban residential patterns; however, there is no one state, no single institution whose actions are consistently favorable or unfavorable to the

ghetto. Instead, there are different state actors at the city, state, and federal level who respond to different political exigencies, and thus have multiple and sometimes contradictory interests. Thus, while it is clear that the federal government abdicated many of its responsibilities vis-à-vis the inner city during the 1980s, it is also the case that local governments, mayors, aldermen, and legislators in many cities and states—often by collaborating with the nonprofit sector—reacted against federal actions or sought to contain the deterioration of poor neighborhoods (often, to be sure, with mixed results). The stark differences in cities' abilities to revitalize during the 1990s—and the extent to which this revitalization generated its own residential inequities—bear evidence to the importance and differential effectiveness of *local* state actors.⁶ The importance of local state actors was heightened by passage of the most significant recent legislation to affect black poor neighborhoods, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The law transformed welfare to a system of block grants awarded to the 50 states, transferring to them the responsibility to allocate resources on the basis of locally determined priorities.

Local state actors may matter more today to the urban poor than they have at any time in the past 50 years. Thus, the heterogeneity of state actors parallels the heterogeneity of poor black neighborhoods. The notion of *the* state as an incontrovertible force in the perpetuation of the *ghetto* points to an easy culprit while failing to grapple with the complexity of interests at play. “The state” is a vague idea called upon to support another of its ilk (“the ghetto”), in the hopes, unfulfilled, that two amorphous entities may crystallize into an empirically convincing picture.

CONSTRAINED CHOICE, NOT “INVOLUNTARY SEGREGATION”

Many advocates of strong conceptions insist that the *ghetto* is maintained through “involuntary segregation.” Some aim to distinguish what African Americans experience from self-imposed segregation, by which, for example, rich whites construct gated communities. Others wish to reference the mandatory nature of medieval Jewish *ghettos*.

Unfortunately, the term “involuntary segregation” mischaracterizes the causes of black urban residential patterns. It is certainly the case that, still today, lax enforcement of anti-discrimination housing laws, steering, discriminatory lending practices, informational asymmetries, racial prejudice, and other factors strongly constrain the residential choices of blacks in the United States (Massey and Denton, 1993). The notion of “involuntary segregation,” however, assumes an absence of choice, whereas the notion of constrained or limited choice sets would be more appropriate. Most importantly, the notion gives the impression that people only live near other poor (or other African Americans) because they have no choice, an implausible proposition. For example, Pattillo (2007) describes the many moral, economic, and cultural factors encouraging middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans in Chicago to move to poor black neighborhoods in the South Side. Conversely, many poor black residents of New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side, or poor Puerto Rican residents of Boston’s Villa Victoria or Chicago’s Humboldt Park do not want to leave their neighborhoods, as many studies have reported (e.g., Small, 2004). And many blacks prefer to live among other blacks: the 2000 GSS showcard experiment (to assess racial preferences for neighbors) showed that blacks on average preferred a neighborhood that was 42% black (Charles, 2003, p. 186).

Residential segregation results from a complex combination of institutional and inter-personal, economic and cultural, majority-driven and minority-driven factors. Models in which the agency of either the poor or African Americans plays little or no role obscure more than they illuminate.

CONCLUSION

In the South Side of Chicago, the poorest black blocks exhibit a scarcity of amenities, reveal an abundance of empty lots, and lie several miles away from the nearest white neighbor; in Harlem, they exhibit a preponderance of people and establishments, lie within minutes of Central Park, and boast several express stops for major subway routes. In some cities, residents of poor black neighborhoods struggle to resist displacement; in others—with abundant stocks of prewar housing, struggling economies, or weak public transportation—these neighborhoods see no threat of gentrification, little hope of revitalization. While many poor neighborhoods are difficult places to live, not all of these are difficult in the same way. The strong conception of the *ghetto* glosses over these and other differences by presuming that black urban poverty looks and feels the same, faces the same challenges, and has the same consequences, everywhere. It does not. While often theoretically elaborate, the strong *ghetto* model remains an empirically unrefined conception of contemporary poverty, sustained by extensive field research in a handful of cities and fed by a predilection to search for similarities even in the face of glaring differences.

No one would deny that many conditions *do* recur from one poor black neighborhood to the next. For example, unlike organizational density, the jobless rate is rather consistently high across these neighborhoods (mean, 55.7%; S.D., 5.4%). But fundamentally conceiving of neighborhoods as homogenous institutions undermines a serious effort to assess both similarities and differences. The vast differences in character and context across poor black neighborhoods in the twenty-first century must be *theorized*, not *assumed away*.

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed many transformations that call for a reevaluation of the strong *ghetto* models and a closer look at differences between cities: the historic shift in responsibility for managing the welfare system from the federal government to the states; an almost unprecedented housing boom that gentrified some but not other poor neighborhoods; a subsequent housing bust whose consequences, still uncertain, depend on both national and local management by state actors; a dramatic rise in incarceration, fueled in part by adoptions in some but not other states of three-strike laws and mandatory sentencing; and the remarkable rise of the urban Latino population, which for the first time now surpasses (by more than 3 million) the non-Hispanic black population in metropolitan areas. Understanding these dynamics requires innovative theories, not a stubborn adherence to models originally designed for other groups in other eras.

Notes

¹ The danger is that the reader's images may be influenced less by experience than by the popular media. Recent studies of African-American neighborhoods have sought to dispel many of these images by studying black middle-class neighborhoods, or poor neighborhoods exhibiting low unemployment rates (Patillo, 2007; Lacy, 2007; Newman, 1999).

² Violent crime data on all neighborhoods across all cities are unavailable, as far as I am able to discern.

³ All tables exclude zip codes with fewer than 100 residents or more than 1,000 establishments (as shown in Table 2) per 100,000 residents. Out of 13,736 zip codes, 181 are excluded. I use a 30% because very few zip codes are more than 40% poor. Using tract data would increase the standard deviations in Table 3 and increase the counts in the second, third, and fourth rows of both panels of Table 5.

⁴ Figures for central city neighborhoods are not substantially different (available upon request).

⁵ Some traits of poor black neighborhoods, such as the jobless rate or the percent white, exhibit low variances. But several variables typically implicated in strong conceptions of the *ghetto*, such as the unemployment rate, proportion Latino, and residential instability, exhibit great heterogeneity across poor black neighborhoods. (Data available upon request.) A much longer study should examine these issues.

⁶ On these issues, see Salamon (1995); Small and Stark (2005); Small, Jacobs, and Masengill (2008).

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