



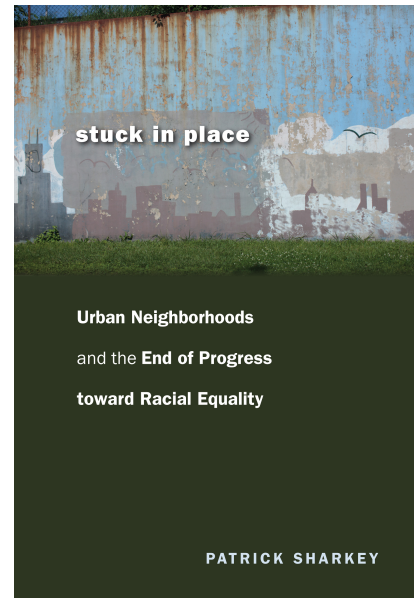
The Persistent Geography of Disadvantage

NYU sociologist Patrick Sharkey takes a hard look at why racial inequality in so many American neighborhoods spans generations.

RICHARD FLORIDA | [@Richard_Florida](#) | Jul 25, 2013 | [3 Comments](#)

Why, fifty years after the March on Washington, is black-white inequality still so strong in America?

It's this basic question that stands at the heart of [sociologist Patrick Sharkey](#), my NYU colleague. Sharkey's perceptive analysis provides a concerning answer: Inequality stems from place itself and is located in the urban neighborhoods that generations of African-Americans have called home. Despite the civil rights gains of the 1960s, there has been little change in the concentrated disadvantage faced by a large number of black families. Sharkey found that over 70 percent of the African-American residents of America's poorest and most segregated neighborhoods are the children and grandchildren of those who lived in similar neighborhoods forty years ago. The persistence of intergenerational poverty and economic disadvantage is thus inextricably linked to location and place.



[Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Toward Racial Equality](#)

In your introduction you write, "The story of neighborhoods and race in America is one of enduring, inherited inequality." What does that mean?

The finding that motivates much of the book is that the severe neighborhood disadvantage experienced by black American families during the civil rights era has been passed on to the current generation, with little change. Two-thirds of black children who were raised in the poorest quarter of US neighborhoods a generation ago now raise their own children in similarly poor neighborhoods. About half of all black families have lived in the poorest American neighborhoods over the last two generations, compared to just 7 percent of white families. These figures indicate that neighborhood inequality is multigenerational, something that is passed down from parents to children in the same way that genetic background and financial wealth are transmitted across generations.

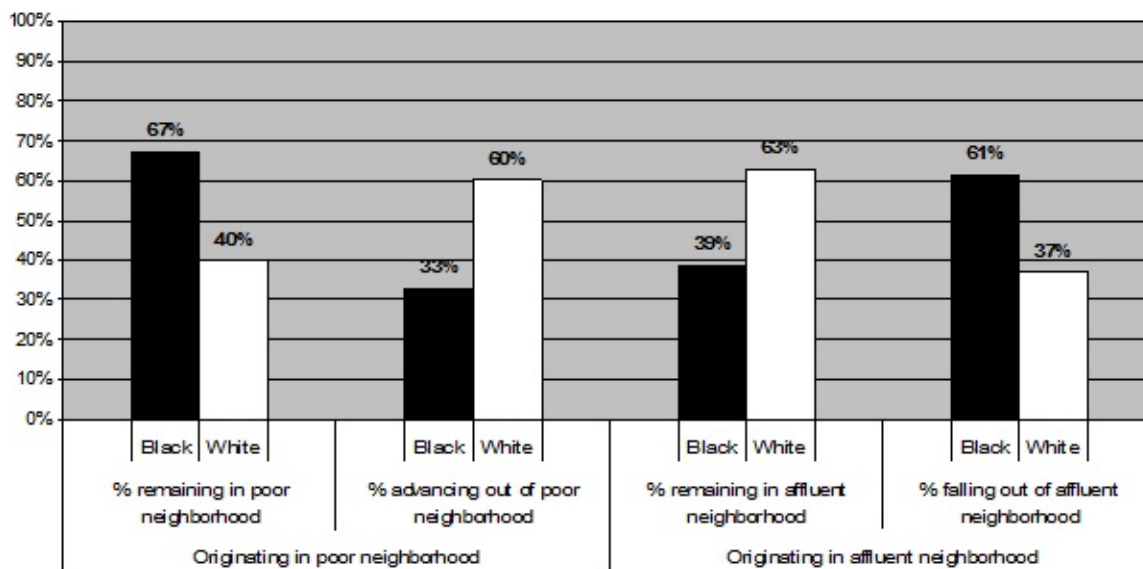
The major factor you examine in your book is what you call "contextual mobility." How does contextual mobility offer a new way for us to look at inequality?

Most research on American inequality focuses on the distribution across the population—of family income, wealth, and educational attainment. In my book I argue that families' neighborhoods are another crucial dimension of inequality in America that is commonly overlooked. And, it's central to understanding the life chances of different groups within our society. Where children live affects the quality of the schools they attend, the children with whom they interact on a daily basis, the quality of the air that they breathe, and the level of violence around them.

More and more attention is now being given to the question of how common it is for individuals or families to move across the distribution—to go from poor to rich, or from manual labor to a managerial position. This second dimension of inequality is measured with levels of mobility, whether it is income mobility or educational mobility or occupational mobility. When I discuss contextual mobility, I ask whether families in wealthy neighborhoods tend to stay in wealthy neighborhoods over generations, and whether families in the most

disadvantaged neighborhoods remain there over time or advance upward.

By focusing on the persistence of neighborhood advantage and disadvantage we start to see a very different picture of the connections between racial inequality and neighborhood inequality in America. The challenge of urban poverty, from this perspective, is not only that poverty has become more concentrated over time or that racial segregation has persisted, but that the same families have experienced life in the nation's poorest neighborhoods over multiple generations. We have to start thinking about urban policies that have the capacity to alter the trajectories of families who have lived in disadvantaged places for multiple generations.



Intergenerational mobility out of the poorest and most affluent neighborhoods among blacks and whites.

You've identified a number of different reasons why African-Americans have largely remained in similar types of neighborhoods. What do you see as the major causes of this remaining segregation and inequality?

I can only offer pieces of an answer to this very complex question. Discrimination is one part of the answer, as we have solid experimental evidence showing that racial discrimination is still prevalent in urban housing

markets. Group differences in income and wealth also play a role, although it is a much smaller role than most people think.

A third piece of the puzzle relates to group preferences for neighborhood composition. Lots of studies have shown that black Americans prefer to live in neighborhoods where there is a non-trivial presence of other black families, and these preferences may lead them into neighborhoods that are more segregated and less affluent than what they might otherwise be able to afford. But perhaps more important than blacks' neighborhood preferences are the preferences of other groups to live apart from black Americans. As an example, I find in my research that black young adults originating in highly segregated cities often make moves into much more integrated communities when they leave home and form their own households. But as we track these young adults later in their lives, however, they tend to drift back into poorer, more segregated neighborhoods as they move further into adulthood. What explains this pattern? It is not that the young adults are moving back into poor, segregated communities as they get older, but rather that their communities are changing around them. In other words, even when black young adults choose to start their adult lives in more integrated communities, they end up in neighborhoods that are relatively segregated because of the residential decisions made by others around them.

You especially focus on the effects of neighborhood context during childhood. Why are these formative years so important?

Interventions that reach only children are ignoring the lingering consequences of neighborhood disadvantage as experienced by parents

Research from developmental psychology, neuroscience, public health, economics and sociology has converged around the finding that early life experiences and environments have lasting effects on children's developmental, academic, and economic outcomes later in life. The effects of exposure to disadvantaged, chaotic or violent neighborhood environments do not disappear as a child moves into adulthood, but linger on to affect individuals' mental health, economic opportunities, educational attainment and resources and skills for parenting. In these and other ways, the effects of childhood neighborhood disadvantage extend into adulthood and to the next generation. Because of this, I find that any interventions designed to address neighborhood disadvantage must reach multiple generations of family members. Policies that reach only children are ignoring the lingering consequences of neighborhood disadvantage as experienced by parents, a generation earlier. Programs like the Harlem Children's Zone, which are designed to reach both parents and children, reflect the ideals of multigenerational policy. Still, a final implication of this finding is that interventions that are effective in reaching young people are particularly efficient because they are likely to have cross-generational effects.

In the last part of the book, you compare two different types of policies that have been used to combat racial inequality: Programs to physically move disadvantaged residents to new neighborhoods, and programs that emphasize reinvestment in America's poorest urban neighborhoods. Why do you argue that this second kind of reinvestment will be the most effective?

I argue that any approach must begin by focusing on policies that have the chance to create a transformative, sustained change in families' environments. This can be done with certain types of residential mobility programs and certain types of investments in disadvantaged communities.

There are a few examples of residential mobility programs that offer families the chance to exit intensely poor, violent neighborhoods and to make permanent moves into lower-poverty communities that offer higher-quality

schools, more economic opportunities, and less violence. The Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program conducted in the 1970s in Chicago is the best-known program, but there are currently programs being implemented in Baltimore and Dallas that are giving families the chance to make moves that improve their lives and lead to a permanent change in their neighborhood environments. However, these programs are the exceptions. Most mobility programs are designed in ways that do not provide families with the type of counseling and support that would allow them to find homes and integrate into new communities where they may not have the same of networks of support, where they are unfamiliar with the housing market or school system, and where they may not be welcomed by landlords or neighbors. It is essential that we take steps to reduce residential discrimination and to expand residential opportunities. But I'm doubtful that the problem of multigenerational neighborhood disadvantage can be addressed by handing out housing vouchers or attempting to engineer integrated neighborhoods.

The argument for an approach focusing on investments in communities begins with the observation that every community across the country relies on consistent investment from the state to thrive. Federal subsidies for home mortgages and roads and highways made suburbanization possible, but restrictions on these subsidies made them largely unavailable to nonwhites. Even now, the largest investment that the federal government makes in housing goes to the home mortgage interest deduction, which disproportionately benefits the wealthiest homeowners.

High-poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods have not received the types of consistent, sustained investments in schools, child care centers, public safety, housing, transportation and infrastructure that are taken for granted in most American communities. There is strong evidence to suggest that if these investments were extended to low-income, minority communities, then growing up in a poor or racially segregated neighborhood would not have such severe consequences for the life chances of black Americans and other groups of nonwhite Americans.

***Stuck in Place* discusses the need for "durable investment" in urban neighborhoods. What do you mean by this term, and how do you think that "durable investment" can be achieved?**

We have few examples of policies that have been sustained when the public's attention shifts away from issues of urban poverty.

Durable urban policy has three basic requirements. We have plenty of examples of policies that meet the first two—disrupting multigenerational patterns of neighborhood inequality and generating real and transformative changes in the places that people live. But we have few examples of policies that have been sustained when the public's attention shifts away from issues of urban poverty or when the political winds shift away from the challenges of cities. A quick review of urban policy over the past four decades reveals a cycle in which urban issues receive a great deal of attention and exciting new initiatives are announced, only to be diluted or abandoned and forgotten before the programs have any chance to be effective.

I am not a political scientist and I don't study social movements, so I have no expertise in how to generate a coalition of support behind durable urban investments. But there does seem to be growing recognition throughout the policy world that the key to sustainable prosperity lies in our cities and the urban areas that surround them. A related insight, and one that rarely makes its way into discussions of metropolitan policy, is that the fortunes of entire urban areas are compromised when cities contain sections featuring areas of severe concentrated disadvantage, low-quality schools, and high levels of crime and violence.

One final point on urban politics is that a durable urban policy does not necessarily require a massive influx of new funds into poor, nonwhite communities. Instead, what is required is a shift of priorities in the way that funds are spent in such communities. If you want to see some stunning visual representations of how much our nation already spends in low-income communities, check out [The Justice Mapping Center's](#) maps of block-by-block expenditures, in New York City and elsewhere, used to lock up residents in prisons and jails. The point of these maps is that we are spending an enormous amount of resources in disadvantaged communities, but the resources are not being used to make investments in the families, core institutions, and organizations that are essential to creating enriching, safe, and prosperous community environments.

This interview was edited for clarity and length. All images courtesy Patrick Sharkey.

About the Author



Richard Florida is Co-founder and Editor at Large of CityLab.com and Senior Editor at *The Atlantic*. He is director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto and Global Research Professor at NYU. [MORE](#)

[ALL POSTS](#) | [@Richard_Florida](#)

Every day, you experience 125 years of Emerson innovation

Find out "What's Next" for cold chain 