



“Summary of article by William Julius Wilson: Ghetto-Related Behavior and the Structure of Opportunity” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 368-371

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

“Summary of article by William Julius Wilson: Ghetto-Related Behavior and the Structure of Opportunity”

[T]he residents of ... jobless black poverty areas face certain social constraints on the choices they can make in their daily lives. These constraints, combined with restricted opportunities in the larger society, lead to ghetto-related behavior and attitudes -- that is, behavior and attitudes that are found more frequently in ghetto neighborhoods than in neighborhoods that feature even modest levels of poverty and local employment. Ghetto-related behavior and attitudes often reinforce the economic marginality of the residents of jobless ghettos. [52]

The poorest residents of major cities often live in a socially self-contained world, within which legitimate paid work has largely disappeared. Much has been written about the resulting "culture of poverty," involving behavior and attitudes which make it difficult for the urban poor to get and keep paying jobs. In this chapter, a leading sociologist argues, on the basis of interviews in inner-city Chicago neighborhoods, that residents of black ghettos often share mainstream beliefs about the value of hard work, honesty, obeying the law, and avoiding welfare -- but face a system of constraints and opportunities that prevent them from acting on these beliefs.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WORK

Many of the contemporary problems of the urban poor are the results of persistent joblessness. Such problems have not always plagued the inner city: in the 1950s ghetto neighborhoods were poor, and just as segregated as they are now, but they had a high level of employment.

A number of factors have contributed to the decline of the ghetto economy. The decline in mass production and in low-skill, blue-collar jobs, rising educational and training requirements for many occupations, and the growing suburbanization of work have all made employment less accessible to poor inner-city residents. Government policy has also worsened the economic plight of poor neighborhoods. In the decades after World War II, federal programs made mortgages readily available for suburban housing, while constructing massive low-income housing projects in the city, reinforcing residential segregation by race income. Then in the 1980s, as jobs began to disappear from the inner city, changes in federal policy led to drastic cutbacks in basic urban programs just when they were most needed.

The downward spiral of ghetto areas has led to the departure of middle-class and employed working-class blacks, depriving the neighborhoods of resources and role models. In contrast, Mexican-Americans, Chicago's second-largest minority group, are much more likely to live in areas of only moderate poverty, with many small business (often owned by Mexicans) and local services.

MODELS OF SUCCESS

The lack of jobs in the poorest black neighborhoods translates directly into a lack of male role models who achieve success through legitimate employment. Instead, the men who appear economically successful are engaged in criminal activity, particularly drug dealing. Interviews with young and middle-aged men reveal that they are well aware of this pattern. In some cases, men who had tried to support families on paychecks from legitimate jobs concluded that they could only fulfill their family responsibilities by engaging in at least a little drug dealing.

The drug trade, of course, has caused numerous problems, including the widespread possession and use of guns by drug dealers -- many of whom are trigger-happy adolescents. This may decrease social integration, as residents become fearful of leaving the safety of their homes. On the other hand, even the poorest neighborhoods have social networks involving high degrees of interaction. Some parents deliberately pursue social isolation in order to protect themselves and their children from undesirable behavior patterns that have become local norms. Children raised in impoverished neighborhoods are not only at risk from the dangerous activities around them; they are also unlikely to learn habits and styles of interaction that lead to success in school or work.

The economic segregation of ghetto neighborhoods leads to isolation from mainstream society. Among jobless blacks, women are less likely than men to have friends who are working, married, or have any post-secondary education; blacks, both male and female, are less likely than Mexicans to have a close friend who is employed. Among those who are employed, blacks are less likely than Mexicans to report that a friend or relative helped them find their current job.

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

[T]he total culture of the inner-city ghetto includes ghetto-related elements, but it also includes a predominance of mainstream elements. Many media discussions of the "underclass" often overlook or ignore these mainstream elements. [67]

Survey research shows that nearly all inner-city blacks believe that plain hard work is important in getting ahead. Nonetheless, they live in circumstances that do not always allow them to act on this belief. Those who work in low-skill, low-paying jobs, often with long commutes on public transportation, typically have little or no prospects for advancement on their current jobs, and no opportunities for education or training for better jobs. Meanwhile, the temptations of unemployment and illegitimate sources of income are ever-present. In stable neighborhoods, economically marginal individuals face greater social pressure to engage in legitimate, mainstream activities. In ghetto neighborhoods, on the other hand, means of adapting and

surviving economically gain a local legitimacy, regardless of how the larger society views these actions.

Some ghetto-related behaviors, such as street corner panhandling, may be situationally adaptive. Other practices, including idleness and public drinking, may be verbally condemned by many residents, but still culturally transmitted by example or role modeling. Regardless of the community's beliefs, it lacks the basis to create and enforce alternative models. Accidental cultural transmission occurs when behaviors are functional in a dysfunctional environment: adolescent males, denied other forms of accomplishment, learn that they gain respect when they carry and are willing to use assault weapons.

JOBLESSNESS AND EFFICACY

Regular employment provides organization, discipline, and a sense of purpose in life, while prolonged unemployment can create the opposite traits. Lack of a formal job need not imply idleness, but even difficult informal endeavors are unlikely to involve regularity and consistency in hours of work. The problems created by this lack of structure are more severe when they are shared and reinforced by others in the neighborhood. One of these shared problems is a perceived lack of "self-efficacy," that is, the absence of the belief in one's own ability to act and accomplish one's goals. People may acquire a feeling of futility either because they doubt their own abilities, or because they believe they face an unresponsive or hostile environment. Both varieties of futility are strengthened by unemployment, particularly when it is long-lasting and widespread in the community. The ghetto community develops a low collective efficacy, which is spread via the process of accidental cultural transmission; this is both a consequence of, and a cause of, the weak labor-force attachment of many residents.

As confirmed by the Chicago interviews, people get tired of trying to save money, find work, or find better housing, when their repeated attempts have ended in failure. Survey respondents blamed their failure to find work on competition from foreigners, the scarcity of jobs, the government's failure to provide jobs, lack of access to decent jobs in the suburbs, and the need to care for their children; only a few saw racial prejudice as the major obstacle they faced.

As this list suggests, many are making rational decisions based on the limited choices available to them. Although welfare recipients received meager cash payments, they were (at the time this was written) eligible for food stamps and Medicaid; most of the jobs they could get were at or close to the minimum wage, and did not include health benefits. Leaving welfare to take such a job, and then paying for health care, would be an economic step down, not up. Likewise, leaving a minimum wage job that provides no benefits is not always an enormous loss. Many welfare recipients want to leave welfare and find work, but their environment gives them no viable opportunities to do so -- and all too many opportunities to absorb an economic step down, not up. Likewise, leaving a minimum wage job that provides no benefits is not always an enormous loss. Many welfare recipients want to leave welfare and find work, but their environment gives them no viable opportunities to do so -- and all too many opportunities to absorb behaviors and attitudes that arise from, and reinforce the absence of work.