

Neighborhood as a Social Fact

Lessons from the Case of Chicago

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Robert Sampson's new book reiterates the importance of place-level characteristics as determinants of social conditions. While social patterns are not reducible to individual phenomena, the persistence of barriers faced by African American communities (segregation, isolation, incarceration) prevent social mobility.

Reviewed : Robert Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, The University of Chicago Press, 552 p.

« No man is an island, entire of itself » — John Donne...

Robert Sampson's wide-ranging analysis of place-level effects on life in Chicago is must reading for anyone interested in cities and social inequality. Place-level effects are social conditions (for example crime rates, poverty rates or degrees of trust in one's neighbors) that prevail in a territory and impact all of the inhabitants of the territory regardless of their individual characteristics. These "effects" have a complicated causal logic that is difficult to discern through traditional randomized experiments involving individual behavior. As Sampson says (p. 379) "I have shown throughout this book that virtually all social life is interdependent in underappreciated spatial forms—'things go together' in and across distinct places." Sampson reiterates the importance of place-level characteristics, challenging what he sees as a growing tendency to trace only individual-level determinants of social conditions. In his most recent book, the sociologist does not invoke critical theory or concepts such as neo-liberalism (a term that does not appear in the index), but rather uses empirical evidence to demolish the image of individuals as monads hooked to their electronic devices, cut off from immediate surroundings, "present" only to others like themselves in the global village, and able to set their own destiny by their rational choices. In an era when the neo-liberal ideology of atomistic individualism is being infused into the social sciences via neuroscience and rational action theory, Sampson affirms the Durkheimian tradition by demonstrating through empirical evidence that social patterns are not reducible to individual phenomena.

To make his case for the enduring role of place, Sampson turns to Chicago. Chicago with its history of distinct ethnic neighborhoods, strong one-party government, and extreme racial segregation and isolation is a best case scenario for Sampson's thesis that "place matters." Even a casual visitor driving through the city can see the dramatically divergent fortunes of different areas. Sampson also provides evidence, however, that place-level effects matter in many cities, with supporting data from Stockholm and ongoing research in Los Angeles, Brisbane, Tianjin (China), Moshi (Tanzania), and Bogotá. Sampson uses a vast and rich body of evidence for his analysis which builds on the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods; the book therefore includes: a longitudinal cohort study of 6500 children and families; two representative community surveys (in 1995 and 2002); observational studies of a sample of neighborhoods with follow-up seven years later; a panel study of key leaders (2800 in 1995 and over 1000 in 2002); a study of 4000 collective action events from 1970 to 2000; a field experiment in 2002 and 2010 focused on the propensity of people to mail back "lost letters." ; archival records and census data. Data were collected at both the community-area level (for example, in Hyde Park) and the neighborhood-cluster level, a smaller and more homogenous unit comprising two to three census tracts; a sample of neighborhoods stratified by socio-economic status and ethno-racial composition was included in the study.

Much of the argument unfolds through the examination of correlations between two (or sometimes more) key place-level variables (for example, past and recent poverty rates, homicide rates, non-profit organizational density) among Chicago community areas. These formally defined community areas—not "neighborhoods" in a narrower sense based on the subjective experience of the small spaces of everyday life – constitute Sampson's units of analysis in much of the data displayed and discussed in the book. There are 77 of these areas in Chicago, with residential populations varying from less than 3000 to nearly 100,000, with the mean being 37000 at the time of the study (and 35,000 in 2010). In addition to the analysis of correlations, Sampson provides many maps showing the spatial distribution of community area characteristics. More complex statistical analysis is provided in an extensive set of end-notes.

Differences among Community Areas

Concentrated Disadvantage

Sampson's analysis focuses on differences among community areas that are associated with well-being and with its absence, that is, with concentrated disadvantages in health, safety, and economic conditions. Although Sampson presents a vast panoply of findings, readers may have difficulty in pulling their thoughts away from the most powerful conclusion—the persistent concentrated disadvantages of a substantial slice of predominantly African American neighborhoods. To capture this state of affairs, Sampson even returns to the language of the past, such as Patrick Moynihan's phrase "tangle of pathology," (from Moynihan's controversial 1965 policy report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.") to refer to a cluster of disadvantages that are interconnected and inextricably linked to racial segregation and isolation. Sampson's citation of earlier discussions underlines his pessimistic assessment that little has changed for the better in these community areas. Unemployment, poverty, family disruption, high infant mortality rates, low birth weight, welfare dependency, homicide, and all forms of violence are strongly correlated with each other and spatially clustered in an identifiable fraction of African American neighborhoods. Although Sampson does not provide an exact count, the proportion of areas of concentrated disadvantage can be estimated to constitute about 20% of the city's community areas. All the

areas of concentrated disadvantage are predominantly African American, but not all African American communities experience concentrated disadvantage.

Legacies of Inequality

The correlation of the per cent of families in poverty in 1960 and in 2000 is .78, signaling what Durkheim called a “social fact,” an enduring pattern, and in current terminology, a process of social reproduction. For Durkheim, the statistics worthy of attention are rates that persist over time in a territory and therefore point to long-term underlying conditions; and the .78 correlation suggests that a high poverty rate in a community area in 1960 is a strong predictor of a high poverty rate in 2000, even if specific individuals and families have moved in or out of the territory.

One major new force has emerged in the overall situation since the 1960s and 1970s—and it is for the worse—the unnatural disaster of mass incarceration that is devastating already-disadvantaged African American communities. Using the phrases “incarceration regime” and “hyper-incarceration,” Sampson points to an astonishing gap between the incarceration rates of white and black communities—for example, the highest rate in a predominantly black community area (West Garfield Park—with a rate of 4226/100,000) is 42 times greater than the highest rate in a white community (103/100,000). The new burden of incarceration and the problems of re-entry faced by former inmates exacerbate the older “legacies of inequality” in the communities.

Collective Efficacy

This story of racial isolation and concentrated disadvantage is the existential core of *Great American City*, but Sampson elucidates and deepens it with other findings. One set of findings focuses on the concept of collective efficacy, based on the presence of shared dispositions—shared feelings and propensities for action—that foster social control and social cohesion. These dispositions are measured in terms of perceptions of trust and perceptions that neighbors would intervene when civic order is challenged (the survey included the hypothetical scenarios of protesting against closure of a local fire station and intervening in situations of fights or truancy of neighborhood children). The reader should keep in mind that in the survey dispositions and perceptions were measured rather than actual instances of civic action; however the researchers also collected data on actual collective-action events (including community festivals, public meetings, charity events and a declining number of rallies and protests) and on the presence of non-profit civic organizations. Sampson suggests that collective efficacy is akin to “weak ties, “a relatively impersonal sense of civic responsibility and trust, rather than strong ties of interpersonal connections which can actually accentuate crime. Collective efficacy is also generally associated with organizational capability in the neighborhood, such as the presence of block clubs, local crime prevention programs, family planning centers, and afterschool youth programs, as well as strong and stable leadership networks. Interestingly Sampson finds that church density is only weakly related to other measures of civic engagement and in black communities is negatively related to collective efficacy and trust (probably not because churches cause diminished trust, but because their proliferation is a symptom of underlying problems in establishing trust and order).

Collective efficacy varies widely across Chicago community areas. It is consistently related to lower rates of violence and better health outcomes, and remains very weak in the areas of concentrated disadvantage. While the areas of concentrated disadvantage are all

predominantly African American, this does not mean that African American neighborhoods are all beset by concentrated disadvantage, since collective efficacy is high in some predominantly black neighborhoods and racially diverse ones. However a history of poverty in a community area of Chicago (measured by the 1970 poverty rate for the each area) was a predictor of low collective efficacy in the area in the survey conducted by Sampson and his research team at the end of the century.

Sampson examines the persistence of disadvantage and racial isolation in terms of the narrow limits of geographic and social mobility ; a host of data allows him to trace the movement of individuals and families across the landscape of community areas and suburbs. Here too the news is daunting: residential mobility is limited and there are few paths out of black neighborhoods whether these are poor or non-poor. There is more mobility among Latino, white, and mixed neighborhoods, poor and non-poor. For an in-depth and experimentally controlled analysis of the low degree of mobility out of areas of concentrated disadvantage, Sampson devotes a chapter to the experiment of Mobility to Opportunity which reveals the difficulties of attaining genuine mobility. . MTO was a federal program that used a randomized design (a lottery) to identify recipients of rent vouchers that enabled them to move out of high poverty neighborhoods. The small random sample of extremely poor African American families that received vouchers to move into lower-poverty neighborhoods in the Chicago area generally moved southward and further from the city center, but the destination areas were also very poor and far from meeting the program's target level of less than 10% poverty.. The destination tracts to which the "experimental group" moved had a 37% poverty rate compared to 42% for the controls; the difference is statistically significant, but Sampson is forced to conclude that "...the experimentals were still living in neighborhoods that by most definitions had high poverty rates and at levels the average American will never experience. (269).¹" The destination areas were as racially isolated as the previous areas of residence ; and in Chicago, both the experimental and the control group ended up in areas that were almost 90% black.. The closing of public housing projects on a mass scale in recent years has had a similar effect as displaced residents generally moved into racially isolated lower-income communities further from the city center, including the poorest suburbs and small regional towns.

Sampson provides interesting insight into the situation of Latinos and immigrants. Although on many measures of advantage and disadvantage, Latinos occupy a position that is intermediate between that of whites and blacks, they are less spatially isolated from whites and like whites, they avoid residence in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Neighborhoods in which many Mexican American immigrants live have lower rates of violence than other areas, controlling for social characteristics. (In other words, adjusting for the level of poverty of individuals, families, and the neighborhood as a whole, the researchers found that neighborhoods with a high concentration of immigrants have substantially less violence than other neighborhoods with similar levels of economic disadvantage). Here Sampson's data help to debunk the xenophobic moral panic that "immigrants cause crime." In his words, the finding "upends popular stereotypes." and shows that "increases in immigration are correlated with *less* crime, and immigrants appear to be less violent than those born in America, particularly when they live in neighborhoods with high numbers of other immigrants (252)".

¹ The US poverty rate currently stands at slightly over 15%; in Cook Country in 2010 it was about 17%. In the city of Chicago, it is about 32% among African Americans. Although the poverty rate has some problems as a measure of poverty, these figures provide an indication of prevailing levels and clarify Sampson's comment.

Theoretical and Ideological Implications: Against Individual-level Reductionism

It is impossible in a review of a few pages to do justice to the number and complexity of Sampson's findings and conclusions. He convincingly demonstrates once again what sociologists have known since Durkheim's day—that social contexts, including spatial contexts, are crucial in the understanding of human behavior and that the analysis of individual behavior, experience, and choices can account for only a part of the overall patterns.

There are strong links between individual-level reductionism as theory and as ideology, a linkage to which Sampson alludes cautiously. In the United States, there has always been a prevalent mythology that everything is “up to the individual,” a mythology that diminishes the propensity for collective action and creates an atmosphere of self-blame for economic failure. At its cruelest this mythology surfaces in the absurd idea that anyone who receives some form of welfare should be required to work—as if we really had a full employment economy.

The expansion of the ideology of individualism and the myth that individuals are free from social contexts is perfectly synchronized and intertwined with globalization, neo-liberalism, and a surge in inequality as Robert Reich predicted in 1991. Corporate leaders and affluent “symbolic analysts”² can detach themselves from “space,” from communities and regions in difficulty, from taxing authorities, and from their less advantaged co-nationals. Living in gated communities, never participating in public institutions, and enjoying the commodification of privilege³, they experience objective conditions that sustain the subjective illusion that it is “up to the individual”. The poor and racially disadvantaged are the most “stuck” in their spatial contexts, literally and figuratively “kept in their places.” As Sampson observes in his analysis of the very limited mobility of African Americans in the metropolitan region and the persistence of economic and racial isolation. He concludes that “for the average neighborhood, the racial and economic hierarchy of neighborhoods is highly durable (308).”

Even the “freedom” of the affluent is illusory, and empirical analysis can reveal that they too are “creatures of circumstance” (in Karl Marx's felicitous phrase) whose fortunes are also products of place. In that respect, Branko Milanovic's *Worlds Apart: Measuring Global and International Inequality* (2005) is a wonderful companion piece to Sampson's magisterial study; Milanovic shows the powerful and growing impact of place on economic well being in international perspective. Examining the purchasing power of all individuals on the globe, the World Bank economist concludes that 60 – 70% of the variance (total variation) in purchasing power among the world's individuals can be predicted from between-country variation (i.e., differences among countries' per capita purchasing power), with another 20% or so predictable from within-country (class) difference, leaving only a very small proportion of the differences in human beings' purchasing power related to individual characteristics such

² Reich uses the term “symbolic analysts” to refer to an emerging stratum of brokers, information specialists, professionals in advanced corporate services, lawyers, speculators, and intellectuals closely tied to dominant economic interests. The term converges with Antonio Gramsci's concept of “organic intellectuals of capitalism,” though Reich is not a Marxist.

³ Sandel (2012) has brought public debate to the way in which the United States is moving from a market economy to a market society in which advantages, benefits, and even political rights are available as commodities at prices that are prohibitive for all but the wealthy.

as IQ and personality traits-- and maybe a random bit of luck.⁴ This is a powerful and complementary conclusion about the importance of place, a macro-level finding that matches Sampson's meso-level (metropolitan area and city) analysis of the enduring effects of spatial contexts.

What is to be done against concentrated disadvantage?

Sampson's dauntingly bad news about racial isolation and concentrated disadvantage point to the need for structurally and spatially targeted interventions. He does not call for an end to individually targeted remedies, but insists that spatially targeted policies are vital. Sampson is relatively cautious in suggesting details, stating that his "intent is not to evaluate or proffer specific interventions but to point the way toward how a new agenda might be conceived" (421). He does specifically mention better crime and violence prevention and more attention to early childhood development. He points out that demolition of public housing—a repetition of the tear-down approach of urban renewal-- is not a way of relieving concentrated disadvantage. The legacies of inequality cannot be addressed by destroying public housing (though demolition is favored by real-estate developers when it is in high-value areas such as Cabrini-Green on the near north side) and then giving out inadequate rent vouchers to displaced individuals who will move into other zones of isolation and disadvantage.

Sampson has surprisingly little to say about education (and no schooling-related terms appear in the index), considering the fact that only half of the young black men who enter the public high schools actually complete the degree (with the outcomes being only modestly better for black women and Latinos/Latinas). School failure is a major force in unemployment and strongly associated with incarceration. Therefore many would argue that massive intervention in schooling beyond early childhood is needed—with dramatically smaller class sizes, rigorous curricula and qualified and experienced teachers who are recognized as professionals rather than treated like hired hands in a quasi-privatized system (the issue that is at the heart of the Mayor's current dispute with the Chicago Teachers Union). Some might argue that intervention in education in turn needs to be part of a federal "domestic Marshall Plan" for the most disadvantaged communities in order to reverse the "legacies of inequalities" --but that is an unlikely prospect in the current fiscal and political climate.

In the meantime, sociologists share Sampson's analysis, but the popular press has generally fallen into silence, apart from some courageous reporting such as Steve Bogira's on-going articles in the *Chicago Reader* about racial isolation, violence, and poverty and Darnell Little and David Mendell's work in the *Chicago Tribune* which in 2003 revealed a fact confirmed and reiterated by in Sampson's book, that one of the manifestations of racial isolation is the close proximity between black middle-class neighborhoods and neighborhoods of the very poor. Apart from social scientists and a small number of journalists, a vast pall of silence and "naturalization" (a taken-for-granted, unproblematical attitude) has been drawn over inequality and racial isolation by the media and the local power structure.

⁴ In other words, if we want to know what best predicts where an individual stands in the global distribution of purchasing power, the best step is to learn where the individual lives—country location is a far better predictor than any individual qualities, behaviors or values. About 60-70% of the variance—the variation in individual purchasing power from the overall mean—can be predicted from knowledge of the per capita purchasing power of the country in which the individual lives. Class position within a country accounts for most of the remaining variation, leaving very little variation to be accounted for by individual characteristics and unknown variables.

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