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The Forgotten Many: A Study of Poor Urban Whites

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Being White in America is thought to ensure social and economic stability, but the lives of Whites who are poor run contrary to these assumptions. Members of this group, the focus group of this study, receive food stamps, public aid and general assistance payments on a monthly basis. And they rely on public health clinics and food pantries to get by—programs and services that are viewed by the larger society as being tapped only by Blacks. This paper examines the differences and similarities between the poverty experiences of Blacks and Whites. The research for this analysis consisted of participant observation and individual interviews performed in a predominantly White community of a major midwest city.

According to the poverty literature (Jarrett, 1994; Lieberman, 1980; Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987), poverty effects vary according to the social situation of the individual. Understanding this, a comparative analysis of the historical and contemporary social situations of Blacks and Whites in this country stands to enlighten and inform us of the effects of poverty on each group. For instance, are poor Whites socially or spatially isolated in communities as are poor Blacks? What strategies do Whites employ to mitigate the effects of poverty on their lives? How do the resources available to Whites differ from those of Blacks? The objective of this research is to gain insight into the poverty experiences of Whites, and to subsequently examine how their experiences compare and contrast with those of Blacks.

Data for this study were collected using participant observation, individual interviews, and visual observations of the neighborhood. These activities were performed over a 180 hour period

during winter and spring of 1995. The twelve informants for this study receive some form of welfare assistance, or qualify for other programs targetted toward low-income families. All but two are able-bodied adults between the ages of 25 and 40, one is 48 years of age and the other is 54. These characteristics were targetted in an effort to eliminate issues of physical handicap and age, each of which are listed among the common discriminatory hiring practices in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) creed.

Introduction

The Bureau of Census reports that more than 61% of the nation's 6.9 million households receiving some form of public assistance, are White households. Twenty-eight percent are Black, and the remaining 10% are Hispanic, Asian and American Indian (1990 *Census of Population—Social and Economic Characteristics*). Despite this distribution, poverty is still perceived by many American citizenry as a condition unique to Blacks (Will, 1993). But over the last thirty years researchers have made significant contributions to the poverty discourses in efforts to dispel common-sense notions surrounding the subject. Of particular interest to this discussion is Wilson's perspective presented in his 1987 publication *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

Wilson (1987) writes of how poverty is influenced by structural shifts that have left fewer good-paying jobs for skilled workers. The resulting unemployment destabilizes communities that lack certain crucial resources. Wilson coined the term "social isolation" to characterize this condition, and he defined it as "the lack of sustained contact or interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (1987, p. 60). Access to mainstream role models and institutions are crucial for people living in poverty, for it serves to socialize them to the routines and practices of mainstream participation. Understanding this, sustained interaction and access with those who exercise mainstream behaviors are determinants of mainstream assimilation and socioeconomic mobility.

This paper argues two key points. First, Wilson's social isolation thesis does not account for poverty among Whites who

live in urban areas. On the contrary, the findings of this analysis indicate that poor Whites live in communities that have social and economic variation and the presence of mainstream individuals and institutions. Secondly, this paper argues that because of the social and economic variation in their communities, poor Whites have access to resources that serve to insulate them from the most extreme effects of poverty, such as homelessness, hunger and to some extent joblessness. Together these two factors, the absence of social isolation and access to resources, highlight the significant distinctions of poverty effects between Blacks and Whites.

To present the first argument, I will use Wilson's thesis of social isolation as a framework for demonstrating the extent to which poor Whites are socially isolated. For the second argument, I will use Jarrett's (1994) framework for identifying the dynamics and structure of social and familial networks to demonstrate the extent to which poor Whites make use of the resources available to them, and to discuss how their access to such resources serves to buffer them from the tenuous effects of poverty. As a third step of this analysis, I will discuss some of the barriers to mobility faced by poor Whites. The findings indicate that while this group has certain advantages over poor Blacks, their mobility is nonetheless impeded by similar structural factors and unique dispositional factors that interfere with their ability to move out of poverty. I will then conclude with a discussion of how the social and spatial situations of poor Whites ameliorate the effects of poverty for them, and how the absence of similar situations for poor Blacks intensifies these same effects.

Social Isolation Factors

Wilson argues that due to the economic downturn beginning in the late 1970s, race can no longer be considered a factor in determining poverty. Instead, poverty is influenced by deindustrialization and downsizing leaving fewer good-paying jobs for skilled workers. The resulting unemployment destabilizes communities that lack social and economic variation among the residents. Wilson defines the role of mainstream representations in communities as follows:

. . . even if the truly disadvantaged segments of an inner-city area experience a significant increase in long-term spells of joblessness,

the basic institutions in that area (churches, schools, stores, recreational facilities, etc.) would remain viable if much of the base of their support comes from the more economically stable and secure families. Moreover, the very presence of these families during such periods provides mainstream role models that help keep alive the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception (Wilson, 1987, p. 56).

Mainstream residents bring stability to communities by virtue of their presence. They are involved in the schools and school programs. They attend church and support its programs with their time and donations. They use the recreational facilities and assure their children are involved in the organized activities. Finally they patronize the stores, and by doing so they maintain these services in the community and keep them accessible to all of the residents.

Wilson also states that access to role models and institutions facilitates the socialization of individuals to the routines and practices of mainstream participation.

In neighborhoods in which nearly every family has at least one person who is steadily employed, the norms and behavior patterns that emanate from a life of regularized employment become part of the community gestalt . . . In other words, a person's patterns and norms of behavior tend to be shaped by those with which he or she has had the most frequent or sustained contact and interaction (Wilson, 1987, pps. 60–61).

Waking to an alarm clock, supporting the schools and churches, and dressing appropriately for work are habits warranted, and in theory socially and economically rewarded in mainstream life. Understanding this, sustained interaction and access to "individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (Wilson, 1987, p. 62) are determinants of successful assimilation and ultimately socioeconomic mobility.

Socially isolated communities are characterized in part by what Wilson refers to as "concentration effects."

. . . the communities of the underclass are plagued by massive joblessness, flagrant lawlessness, and low—achieving schools, and therefore tend to be avoided by outsiders . . . I should also point out

that whereas poor blacks are frequently found in isolated poor urban neighborhoods, poor whites rarely live in such neighborhoods (1987, p. 58).

Flagrant lawlessness, widespread joblessness and low-achieving schools are symptoms of predominantly poor communities. In effect these communities lack the social and economic resources needed to stabilize individuals, families and institutions. Although Wilson does not cite housing policy or racial segregation as causal factors of social isolation, he does acknowledge the prevalence of these conditions in Black communities. And these conditions serve as barriers to job and educational opportunities that stand to improve the social and economic statuses of the residents who live there.

This section assesses the level of social isolation in Caroline, the target community of this study, by examining its level of socioeconomic variation, its community programs and its institutions. The findings indicate that Caroline's characteristics are opposite those of poor Black communities. Life in Caroline therefore carries with it implications of how poverty is mediated for Whites by the resources available to them, and how they are insulated from the concentration effects of social isolation. The findings of this study support this conjecture. To determine the extent to which Caroline is socially isolated, the level of socioeconomic variation is first addressed.

Socioeconomic Variation

Caroline is situated in the corner of a major midwestern metropolitan city. It is a predominantly White community (86% White) which consists largely of municipal employees and skilled workers. The collapse of several steel factories in the area and the layoffs of people at the nearby Ford assembly plant has had an effect on the economy of the community. The median family income dropped from \$43,041 in 1979 to \$36,797 in 1989. In 1980, 4% of the residents lived beneath the poverty line. In 1990, this proportion doubled to 8% (1990, *Community Area Fact Book*).

Caroline is comprised of three subareas: Easton, Parkway and Main Caroline. Easton is where the only trailer park in the city is located. The living here can be characterized as "unsettled", where the families move quite frequently and rely on government

entitlements and informal work to survive (Howell, 1973). Parkway consists of a subdivision of single family bungalow homes constructed in the early 1960s. The residents are skilled and white-collar workers who grew up in Caroline, or who moved here from other parts of the city to make the community their home. They are young couples just beginning families of their own, recently retired people who were former employees of local industry, and elderly people who comprise 10% of Caroline's population. The families in Parkway stay put, work formal jobs and participate in community programs and activities such as Bingo, Little League and softball. The living here can be characterized as "settled" (Howell, 1973).

Main Caroline is the oldest residential area in the community, consisting largely of frame and brick buildings and several small businesses. It is comprised predominantly of owner-occupied single residence homes, although a small percentage of the residences are multi-unit dwellings. Several of the homes have falling wood, worn shingles, broken steps and cluttered yards. The businesses consist of small shops in the form of a local restaurant, a cleaners, an ice cream shop, a meat market, and a health care center. There is one major fast food chain outlet, a Burger King located at the southern edge of Main Caroline. The families of Main Caroline are physically settled but economically shaken. Worn shingles, broken doors and steps are visible signs of the residents' struggle.

While some people in Caroline came to the community from elsewhere in the city, the community is for the most part self-reproducing. This is particularly true of Main Caroline. The people here are mostly elderly, who are life-long residents of the community, and/or their adult children or grandchildren who inherited the homes. The younger generation consists largely of skilled workers, some of whom are employed, and some of whom have lost their jobs due to lay-offs and plant closures in the area.

Despite the spatial and class divisions inherent in the three sub-communities, the residents do peacefully coexist. Moreover, the social and economic variation in Caroline indicates that the poor residents are buffered from the widespread joblessness aspect of the concentration effects of isolation. Only 8% of the community is documented as living in poverty. Even counting

the working poor, home ownership and the existence of a large majority of residents who work, the low level of documented poverty indicates that unemployment is not the norm. This serves to advance the perception that work is a viable alternative to welfare, and simultaneously, it facilitates assimilation to the practices and routines of work and career. In terms of socioeconomic variation, Caroline residents are not socially isolated.

Social programs are important to communities in that they promote growth and development of youth, and help to maintain social control by keeping them busy. The following discussion addresses the extent to which Caroline residents are socially isolated in terms of community programs.

Community Programs

Youth programs provide exposure to various areas of American culture (arts, craft, sports). These are needed to facilitate their socialization to the mainstream way. Little League and softball are among the programs available in Caroline. The local community center offers arts and crafts, ping-pong, dancing and movies both after school and in the evenings. Unlike Little League and softball, the community center's activities are free of charge, making them accessible to those who would otherwise be unable to afford them. Bingo parties are an example of fundraising events conducted by the center to raise money for its services. The center also relies on grants from private companies which offer them as part of their community services programs.

All activities at the center are supervised by adults. The children are on a first name basis with the staff, and efforts are made to keep the children busy, and interested in coming up with ideas for things to do. Ski trips, parties and a teen newspaper are just a few examples of the activities. Through these projects the community is able to maintain some semblance of social control by reducing the potential for idleness, boredom, and various forms of delinquency. This became particularly evident during discussions at the monthly neighborhood policing meetings.

During my visits to the community policing meetings, resident complaints consisted primarily of cars double parked in front of the schools during school dismissals, speeding cars, kids hanging out on the corners (before curfew), and the lack of police

response when a house was burglarized six months prior. There were no reports of shootings, robberies, assaults or murders—a far cry from the lawlessness in isolated communities. Social control of the youth is therefore a residual effect of youth programs. They serve to maintain civility in the community, while simultaneously promoting growth and development of the youth and socializing them to the culture of the mainstream. In this manner, poor Whites are buffered from the flagrant lawlessness aspect of the concentration effects of isolation. In terms of social programs and the functions they serve in communities, poor residents of Caroline are not socially isolated. In the following segment I discuss the availability of the institutions in Caroline and the role they serve in assimilating individuals into the mainstream.

Institutions

The role of the church and schools are examined in this segment to determine the extent to which Caroline residents are socially isolated with respect to institutions. The findings indicate that the institutions in the community are stabilized by families who are better off socially and financially than those who are poor. Because of these individuals, each institution is able to play a crucial role in insulating Whites from the extreme effects of poverty. I will first discuss the role of the church in this process, and then proceed to discuss the roles of the schools and stores respectively.

Churches serve secondary yet critical functions in communities. In addition to spirituality they provide facilities for various meetings and gatherings, and they offer programs and services that are directed toward the needs of the larger community. Specific to Caroline these programs and services include food distributions and educational resources.

The food pantry distributions are organized through the Saint Vincent DePaul Church, and carried out at the local catholic grammar school. On the second and fourth Wednesday of each month, the poor residents of Caroline go to the school gymnasium to receive groceries. During each of my visits there, 65 to 80 people came to the food pantry—approximately 10% of the residents in the community documented as poor.

The ability of the church to provide services for the needy is made possible through contributions made by the city's food depository as well as the monetary donations and volunteerism of church parishioners. In effect the support of mainstream residents enables the church not only to serve as a mainstay in the community, but also to provide for the needy segment of Caroline's population.

Another characteristic of non socially isolated communities is the presence of academically sound schools. Of the two elementary and one secondary public schools attended by Caroline residents, none was included on the list of academically troubled schools recently published in the city's newspaper. So the educational, spiritual and to some extent the food needs of Caroline residents are met within the community. The findings of this analysis suggest then that mainstream individuals do stabilize the institutions in Caroline, and this stability serves to buffer the poor from the concentration effects that typify predominantly poor communities. Therefore, with regard to access to institutional resources, the poor residents of Caroline are not socially isolated.

Summary

In terms of its variation in socioeconomic grouping, Caroline contains both blue collar and white collar workers, as well as a percentage (8%) of people receiving welfare in the form of medical care, public aid and/or food stamps. Youth programs both private and free of charge are available, and thereby serve to maintain social control of the youth while socializing them to America's culture. The generosity of church parishioners from the stable families in the community, enables the church to provide services that buffer the poor from the most extreme effects of poverty. Also the schools are academically sound. The presence therefore of mainstream individuals and institutions serves several key functions: to stabilize Caroline, to buffer the poor from flagrant lawlessness, widespread joblessness and low-achieving schools, and to facilitate the residents' assimilation into society by advancing the perception that education is meaningful, that family stability is the norm, and that work is an alternative to welfare.

This analysis has shown that residents of Caroline are not socially isolated. Understanding this, not only should the pro-

portion of poor Whites be small relative to the proportion of poor Blacks—as it is, but the lack of social isolation suggests that there are resources available to Whites that are not available to Blacks. These resources potentially serve to ameliorate the negative effects of poverty for Whites. The following section is a discussion of the resources available in Caroline, and how they influence the manner in which poor Whites “manage their lives” (Jarrett, 1994a). The findings suggest that these resources serve to insulate poor Whites from social dislocations such as homelessness, hunger and to some extent joblessness.

Community and Familial Resources

Jarrett writes that the social and economic conditions under which families live are influenced by neighborhood effects.

Coresidential or extraresidential extended kinship networks predominate in stable working class neighborhoods. (Jarrett, 1994b)

In other words, poor individuals who reside in stable working class communities such as Caroline have kinship networks with family and friends who live in or near their communities. In many cases these networks consist of individuals who are former residents of the community but have relocated to more well-to-do areas. In other cases they consist of individuals who still reside in the community but are better off socially and financially than those who are struggling to survive.

With access to such kin, poor individuals in stable communities are able in many ways to mitigate their social and economic circumstances. Borrowing money from family, performing odd jobs for neighbors, and purchasing a house through kin are some of the ways in which such networks are used. These mechanisms serve to ameliorate the effects of poverty for these individuals. The purpose of this section is to use Jarrett’s framework for network structure and dynamics to convey the extent to which poverty effects are mediated for Whites by the resources available in their communities. The two elements that comprise this framework are kinship ties and extended networks. With regard to kinship ties, Jarrett writes the following:

Membership in a socio—economically heterogeneous network provides emotional, social and childcare resources for poorer members.

Consequently economically insecure members are buffered from the full effects of their individual poverty. (Jarrett, 1994b)

Poor Whites have access to family members that help to meet some of their most basic needs. This segment discusses the differences these safety nets make in their lives.

During my time in Caroline I met several individuals who indicated that they would be unable to provide food for their children without the help they receive from family members. Grace depends upon the food pantry, but this alone is insufficient to meet the needs of her three adult children, a 16-year old son, and three grandchildren ages 11 to 13. After the death of her husband, she was forced to supplement her death benefit with food stamps and an intrafamilial arrangement with her adult children to assure their food needs were met. Every able member of the family needed to contribute by assuming responsibility for a bill or helping to pay for groceries.

Another example of intrafamilial assistance is provided by Rita. Rita's immediate family includes her husband and three children ages 9 to 16. When I asked of her biggest concern, she responded that it was food.

Food probably. It's mostly the food, because my kids always get hand-me-downs from my friends . . . It's just the food that I am concerned about.

Despite the groceries she receives monthly from the Saint Vincent DePaul food pantry, Rita is still unable to adequately meet her children's food needs. She says that her ability to do so diminished when the children began to eat meat as they grew older. Prior to this they ate vegetables and staples. The cost of meats added to the grocery bill reduced her ability to stretch her dollar. And while it embarrasses her to have family bring over food, she is forced to rely on their support to keep her children from going hungry.

. . . His (her husband's) dad brings food over every now and then you know. I feel kind of embarrassed because they bringing food over and I don't want everybody to know that we are low on food.

Rita also discusses how her in-laws' generosity allows her to secure housing for her family and jobs for her husband.

. . . if this house comes through that [my husband] father's going to buy, we're just going to rent to buy from him and we'll automatically move right in.

Yeah [my husband] has two jobs. Yeah he's working at . . . He works down there cause his uncle works there. He's a carpenter. He puts up show floors.

Rita's family insulates her from the tenuous effects of poverty. Her uncle facilitates employment by providing connections to jobs. Her father—in—law minimizes the chances of homelessness, and in turn increases their potential to move out of poverty through property ownership.

Jaime spoke of her father's role in obtaining a job for her at the steel mill. The job she held for eight years enabled her to purchase a home, but after the loss of the job to plant closure she found herself unable to continue the mortgage payments. Jaime describes the period in her life when she had run out of money and payments on her house were overdue.

I started by saying to my dad [that] I'm in a financial bind. I'm in some trouble and I need some help. I need to borrow some money, and he said okay.

Jaime's father loaned her \$2,000 to pay the mortgage, and she now owns the house free and clear. She added however that without the help of her father the loss of the house was not only inevitable, but it was imminent.

The ability of Whites to help family members has historical significance dating back to the second wave of immigration. Between 1880 and 1920 14 million immigrants from South, Central and Eastern Europe (SCE) came to America to work. They were pushed here by conditions of poverty brought on by famine in Ireland for example, and the inefficacy of the soil in other parts of Europe to induce growth. Although they were culturally different from Anglo—Americans, SCE Europeans encountered minimal resistance to obtaining factory jobs due to their physical similarities to the dominant group of English and German protestants, as well as America's need at that time for industrial laborers. Beyond this the immigrants formed unions to strengthen and solidify their positions within the factories.

Today the descendants of the immigrants find themselves in a quandary as America deindustrializes and moves toward a reliance on information management and processing. But while the ability of family members to provide connections to jobs has diminished due to factory closings and deskilling, the relative economic security of kin—which can be attributed to the past, serves to insulate many poor Whites today from hunger and homelessness.

Howell's 1973 study entitled *Hard Living on Clay Street* consists of the struggle of the Shackelford family, whose living the author characterizes as "unsettled" and "hard." They move quite frequently due to their inability to keep up with the rent payments. The husband Barry drinks heavily and is unable to maintain a steady job. The wife Bobbi Jean makes efforts to keep the family certified for welfare benefits, while she cares for her children and her diabetic uncle who lives with them. Despite her best efforts she is unable to maintain control over her young children as exemplified in their truancy from school and in the older son's failure notices received from his teacher. Unlike the families for this study, the Shackelfords lack familial and extended resources to insulate them from the tenuous effects of poverty. This is due in part because they came to the city from rural Appalachia where the families are very poor and therefore unable to provide assistance. Another explanation for the Shackelfords' predicament is their inability to get settled into a community.

Long—time residence in the community facilitates the development of exchange networks with neighbors who have learned to trust and rely on each other for various forms of support. Well—to—do neighbors provide informal work 'odd jobs' to those who are in need. Below are statements made by Michael with regard to the work he does for neighbors and family.

I didn't begin to do furnace work as a job. Somebody needed something done they'd tell so in so and so in so and then they'd all come down to me and 'would you go over and see what you can do for it.' I'll make a couple bucks here and there you know.

Since I was a jack of all trades, when [my sister] wants something done she calls me, you know, to do it for her.

The bonds formed by way of the stability of the community yield trusting and supporting relationships that serve to ease the social

effects of poverty for individuals who have fallen on hard times. In an effort to assure some level of financial security, individuals who have experienced hardship learn to do a number of practical and highly demanded tasks. I discovered Dan did car repairs on the side when he complained about his neighbor purchasing a wrong part.

I got the rack—and—pinion off and I opened up the box with the new part, and that's not the kind he needs . . . Now I got to go all the way out to [Barrington] now and get the part.

Vanessa explained that her boyfriend repairs televisions for extra money.

Vanessa: Dorothy's TV hasn't worked for six weeks because it needed a part and we finally got it in.

Interviewer: You know how to fix TVs?

Vanessa: No but my boyfriend does. We finally got her part. They kept sending us the wrong one, and they finally got it right.

Lawn mowing, car mechanics, plumbing, furnace and television repair constitute the variations of work performed for relatives and neighbors. For some individuals, their skills in these areas enable them to have some amount of money coming into the home when they fall on hard times. This money, although not substantial, allows them to keep groceries in the house, gas in the car, and at times extra spending money. The support offered by neighbors falls far short of a consistent income or an income sufficient enough to sustain a family. But it nonetheless serves to buffer individuals from some of the immediate effects of poverty such as poor cash flow. For others it serves to supplement their income. In short, the effects of poverty for Whites are mediated through kinship ties and extended networks. Such relationships facilitate the provision of work, money, housing and food.

With regard to declining communities such as those of poor Blacks, Jarrett writes that "families with unemployed or marginally employed male or female heads and those that rely on government assistance are found more frequently" (1994a). There are a number of explanations for this however as Lieberman so eloquently points out in his 1980 publication *A Piece of the Pie*. Not only were Black Americans disenfranchised due to Jim Crow

laws in the South, but they also arrived in the North after the good paying factory jobs were absorbed by the SCE groups. The racial preferences for Whites notwithstanding, Blacks fared better than in the South, but still a far cry from the Europeans. And with regard to the frequency of Blacks in unstable communities, Nicholas Lemann explains this phenomenon in the moving documentary *The Promised Land*, based on his book of the same name (1991). Through depictions of communities in Chicago and narrative by Morgan Freeman, Lemann explains that the densely populated poor communities are legacies of the migration of Blacks from the South to the North—specifically Chicago, in search of a better life.

In the 1940s America saw the start of a great migration that would change the nation forever. The migrants were Black. And they left the deep South where they had been tied to the land and denied equal rights . . . By the time the great migration was over, five million had stepped off the northbound trains . . . Like those before them, the newer migrants headed for the narrow strip of land on the south side. Its acreage hardly changed but the population multiplied. The result was an overcrowded slum. (Lemann, 1991)

When Blacks attempted to move into better housing and less crowded conditions in Chicago they encountered staunch and often violent resistance from Whites determined to keep them out of their communities. Black communities in turn grew more dense and isolated. Understanding this history, I can surmise that poor Blacks then and today lack extensive access to kinship networks similar to those of the White working class. Social and economic movement in Black communities is constrained due to the lack of resources that could at minimum help to lessen the strain of poverty, and at best promote socioeconomic mobility. The frequency of family members who are able to loan money or purchase property for relatives as a way of providing housing is relatively small. The frequency of individuals who are able to provide connections to jobs is relatively small. The frequency of neighbors who are able to compensate others for performing odd jobs is relatively small. While this situation is changing for Blacks in that the middle class for this group has grown, such families are still few and far between. The ability of even well-to-do Blacks to help less fortunate friends and family is constrained relative

to the ability and numbers of Whites to do the same. And the growing prevalence of homelessness among Blacks is indicative of this.

We now understand how poverty for Whites differs from that for Blacks. Moreover, through the examination of the individual circumstances of poor Whites, an appreciation has been gained for how access to certain resources serves to ameliorate the strain of poverty and in some cases increases the chance of socioeconomic mobility. However the extent to which the latter occurs today is rare, even with the help of familial and extended networks. It is also important to point out that while the social and spatial situations of poor Whites facilitate their access to mainstream representations and simultaneously buffer them from the most extreme effects of poverty, their socioeconomic mobility is still impeded in a number of ways. The proceeding discussion of **BARRIERS TO MOBILITY** addresses some of these impediments.

Barriers to Mobility

Besides the structural barriers of deskilling, the increasing professionalization of jobs, and the suburbanization of remaining factories, poverty is also influenced by other factors. In this segment I will discuss some of the additional barriers to mobility, among them the lack of affordable child care, and prejudice and discrimination.

The lack of affordable child-care serves as a barrier to both jobs and education for some individuals. Susan, a mother of four, explained her predicament.

I don't have my high school diploma. Every time I tried to get one I didn't have anybody to take care of my kids.

Finding child care is a difficult task regardless of the person's income or social class. But poor women in particular are limited in their choices due to their inability to pay. As a result, older siblings who are still minors and too young to handle the responsibility of small children are used as babysitters. Other individuals who are incapable or unfit to care for children are often used because no one else is available. Finally, leaving children home alone is another strategy used by women in the absence of affordable child-care. Despite the willingness or desire of women in particular to

pursue an education and participate in the labor force, the lack of quality child care prevents this aspiration from being realized. Of the child care centers available in Caroline, none was affordable for the community's low-income residents. Now I will discuss the roles of prejudice and discrimination in impeding the mobility of some individuals.

Caroline's community center offers job services for local residents. Tony, a representative of the city's Chamber of Commerce, runs the service which specializes in placing dislocated workers. Notification of the service is placed in the local newspaper which is distributed free of charge to Caroline and its surrounding communities. Tony sees people from Caroline and other areas nearby with regard to job opportunities, and he says they must have a high school diploma. But several statements he made along this line indicate that Tony is highly selective of the people he chooses to see.

I do not take walk-ins unless they are residents of [Caroline]. I prefer to see people by appointment.

If they do well on the [reading and math tests] I counsel them on appearance, interview technique like eye contact, communication, and the importance of showing they are a team player. Some of them are smart but they're not a team player.

Tony's assessment of the individual's likelihood of being a "team player" is a form of prejudice that is practiced by employers as well. It is an opinion based on little if any knowledge of the individual's work history or personality, and moreover it is unrelated to the person's ability to do a particular job well. Tony's strategy was to avoid the people he chose not to work with by putting them off or making them wait. I observed this repeatedly during my time at the community center, and it appeared to be directed at women more so than men. Donna's experience is just one example of this.

Donna arrived at the center for a 10:00 appointment with Tony. Over the next 30 minutes he called two men who were in the waiting area—one of whom arrived after Donna. At neither time did he acknowledge Donna's presence, and she became upset.

I have a 10:00 appointment to see him about a job. I have too many things to do today than to sit around waiting for him. I have to pick up my kids and take my dad somewhere.

She grew more angry and frustrated as time went on. When she left the reception area for a few minutes, someone mentioned to Tony that she was there. He responded curtly: "I know and I will be there in a minute." When he returned from his office he left an application on the table and said: "Have her fill this out." When Donna returned she was even angrier. She snatched the application from the table.

I'll fill this out at home and come back some other time. I have things to do.

The effects of Tony's methods are counter—productive to his objectives to help people become employed. And his inability to find qualified people to fill the "lot" of jobs he says he has available can at least in part be explained by his curious practices.

I have a lot of jobs . . . but I can't find anybody to fill them. To qualify for training on the job they have to show that they are at least capable of learning the trade.

Tony's actions in some respects are indicative of the economic situation we are in today. With the scarcity of jobs and the large pool of qualified people available to fill them, employers can be highly selective of those they hire. And the predicaments of Donna and others exemplify the effects of the various tactics used by employers to say 'no' to the job seekers they do not like.

Other barriers to mobility are dispositional in that they relate to the decisions people make to refuse service and assistance that are available to them. This amounts to a self—imposed constraint that serves to exacerbate their struggle. For example, with regard to getting to GED classes at a nearby college, Rita stated that she is "scared to death of traffic", so she will not drive. And she further added that public transportation is too expensive and she does not know her way around.

Right well see the bus, it costs to ride that and there's no way I'm going to get on there cause I don't know if I'm going to get on the right bus . . .

Eight of the twelve people I met had neither a high school diploma or a GED. In Rita's case, her fear of driving and concern for taking public transportation impede her ability to obtain one. But the most extreme case was that of 48 year old Michael.

Michael is a laborer who has held jobs with the park district, the steel mill, and an envelope manufacturing factory. Below he speaks of a job he had recently obtained at a steel mill.

. . . I can't read. I can operate the machines. I can set up the machines, change the size to whatever I can read on the micrometer. But the paperwork, I can't do the paperwork. So now they're gonna take me from that job and put me on an overhead crane, and I won't have to read as much. So hopefully that's gonna work out.

Although he cannot read, Michael says there are places where he can go to learn to do so.

Michael: Well they got more places for people like me to go you know to learn a better trade, to get the knowledge of how to read and stuff like that. Years ago they didn't have that. Schools, private tutors.

Interviewer: Do you use them?

Michael: The counselor found me a place to go to learn how to read . . . [Deer Gardens]. That's a black community but it's in a state of the same that (long pause) Cabrini—Green. It's about like that there. If you're white you don't go in there you know type deal. They're all in their little clan and somebody outside you know, even if you're black and you're an outsider and they know it you wouldn't want to be in there. So they sent me there to go to school. No way no way. So I never went.

Most Whites will not go into Black communities for fear of being hurt. These areas, particularly those that contain public housing projects, are believed to be havens of crime. But Frankenberg (1993) suggests that this fear needs careful analysis, writing that "the issue is not fear so much as maintaining a complex balance of association with differentiation from Black people." (1993, p. 52). In other words, the issue is not fear so much as it is racism. Avoidance of Blacks is simply a manifestation of this. Michael's racism keeps him from taking steps toward learning to read. This in effect constrains him socially and hurts him financially.

Michael is not unique in his perception of Blacks. Several individuals blamed racial minorities for their poverty, intimating reverse discrimination.

[My husband's] not prejudiced or anything because when we lived in Georgia we had a lot of black friends . . . Here they are so different than in Georgia . . . They try to run you over . . . I guess he's prejudiced up here because he said the blacks are out there to get what they can get and to hell with anybody else.

All of the city jobs go to minorities. The firemen are all black. The sewer workers are all hispanic. And the postal workers are all black. If you don't believe me I can take you around and show you.

I think the government is . . . bringing in a lot of people from overseas teaching them how to read english. But there was not that much for here, the persons that were already living here born here or whatever, they didn't have this. You know but they teach them. They give them houses. They give them jobs you know. The Mexicans that are trying to get over here . . . But that's . . . [making] us [an endangered] species.

Laws mandating preferential hiring are still in place in some states, but they pale in comparison to the practice of providing connections to jobs—a practice which Whites across socioeconomic class boundaries have enjoyed for many years. And while members of racial minority groups blame Whites for their impoverishment and their inability to obtain jobs, minorities—many of them of formerly colonized groups, have historically lacked social and economic empowerment in America. The difference between Whites and racial minorities lies in the fact that the Whites in Caroline represent a subset of the dominant group in America—at least in terms of race, and they therefore benefit from the social advantages that accompany being White. Conversely, Blacks, Mexicans and Hispanics represent subordinate groups. Poor Whites cannot attribute their condition to the racism that minorities in general and Blacks in particular have suffered in years past and present in the form of colonization, racial segregation, inferior schools and a litany of human and civil rights violations that have historically diminished their life chances. Poor Whites do however suffer other forms of prejudice and discrimination, and the style of management at the community center's employment office is exemplary of this.

During my time in Caroline, representatives from a local welfare advocacy group called Women for Economic Security (WES)

came to Caroline's community center to discuss reforms as well as the overall negative treatment of welfare recipients by social workers. Approximately twenty people attended the meeting, half of whom were individuals from Caroline who received some form of welfare assistance. WES representatives discussed their services which included GED classes and assistance with dealing with rude caseworkers. The meeting lasted approximately one hour and it was fairly interactive. Many complaints regarded the inadequacy of the welfare system.

My son needed glasses and it took six to eight weeks for him to get glasses when I would have had them in an hour if I could have paid for them.

My daughter was a teenage mother and she gave her baby up for adoption two years ago because she would have to go on my welfare claim. The system is terrible if you can't even keep your kids if you want.

Although the technical capability exists to make glasses in one hour, individuals who are poor are unable to realize the advantages of this because of the inherent notion of entitlement that surrounds America's social welfare system. The two-tiered system of privilege and non-privilege punishes members of the latter group for their impoverishment and rewards members of the former for their prosperity.

American culture fosters the idea that work and economic success are there for the taking. Those who do not work and/or have not achieved economic success are frowned upon by those who do and have respectively. And not only must poor families endure the economic struggles of poverty, they must also deal with the public opinion that their condition is their fault and they are therefore undeserving of America's riches. To emphasize this point, Christopher, a social services coordinator for the Comprehensive Economic Development Agency (CEDA) in a predominantly Black community, made the following statement to me during an interview about the CEDA program.

We want to encourage self-sufficiency; therefore we do not give out hand-outs, because people will feel that they are entitled to it . . . The majority of the clients do not have long term goals. They only

want what CEDA has to offer to ease the immediate hardship they are experiencing. I feel gratified when people use our resources to improve themselves, like get job training so they can become self-sufficient. The majority of the people don't use the programs in this way. They don't look at the long term.

Blaming the victim is fashionable in America, particularly when the victims are poor. But policymakers and conservatives ignore the structural influences that work to create poverty conditions in the first place. And by the time individuals reach the level of poverty, they are considered to be responsible for their own conditions—not the structural constraints.

With the declining industrial landscape where the number of factories that once employed upwards of 10,000 employees significantly diminished, working—class Whites find themselves living a reality that is far short of the American dream. And anyone who has experienced job loss realizes the tenuousness of any job today, as indicated in the following statement made by Vanessa.

You know you got President Clinton in there talking about well I'm going to help all these people and you know he's talking about welfare reform will get these people a job in two years. I know people who [have] a high school, college, you know master degrees [and] it ain't getting [them] nowhere. And you talking about having these people a job in two years or cutting all grants off. Come on you're not being, you're not being realistic. I mean you got jobs out there that are asking for high school diplomas, but of course they're paying shit. This guy right now brags because he's making 200 dollars a week. Well hey that's great, but if that job folds, what do you got? You got all the income that you made out of it. Big hairy deal. May work there this weekend and all of a sudden the place will close. (snaps fingers) Well you made 200 dollars, big deal.

Another individual, Jim, made a similar remark during the meeting at the community center with WES, stating that welfare reforms would just "put more people out on the street." The welfare reform law stands to significantly impact the lives of families in poverty. It requires that welfare benefits be withdrawn from able-bodied adults within two years of their initial benefits. The expectation of policymakers is that this will act as an in-

centive for individuals to obtain employment and become self-reliant. Unfortunately the law fails to adequately address the prerequisites to compete for the jobs available in the labor market. With manufacturing all but completely absent, individuals who are without educational credentials cannot compete for the new good—paying and benefit-laden jobs that remain in the professional white-collar sector. This leaves them to rely on the irregular economy and the service sector for employment—neither of which can provide the income or benefits necessary to sustain and secure a family. And with the exception of a fortunate few, the new welfare reforms all but assure that today's poor will become tomorrow's underclass. In the words of Wendy, a Black woman from a predominantly Black community: "A job is a hard thing to [obtain] when you got so many people out there trying to get the same thing you are." Wendy, Jim and Vanessa are not only fearful of welfare reforms, but they are also angry and exasperated at the prevalence of job instability and the increased competition for jobs today.

Many of the individuals I talked to certainly recognize the need to return to school in order to compete for the jobs available. Michelle is a single 24-year old Black woman with three children ages 1, 4 and 5. Currently she relies on her \$414 monthly welfare check to support her family. She does not live in Caroline but because her situation is similar, her perspective serves as a parallel to those in Caroline.

Michelle lives in a predominantly Black community just outside of the city. She stated that she was about to return to school to become a Certified Nurse's Assistant (CNA). When I asked why she was returning to school she stated with exasperation that she was "tired of being broke."

I'm tired. I get tired of being broke all of the time. I figure I'm going to stay broke if I don't get some other kind of income. I figure if I don't get into a training program and train to get a good chance, I won't do any better than I do working at a McDonald's or something like that.

Regardless of the factors that encourage people to return to school—whether it is job instability, fear of welfare reforms, or simple exasperation with their predicament, people have in one way or

another been motivated to reassess their situations to assure some economic security for their families.

There are several factors that impede social and economic mobility for Caroline's residents. First, dependable and affordable child care is absent in the community. Second, Tony's treatment of those who "are not a team player" and do not appear to be "capable of learning a trade" interferes with their efforts to get jobs. Third, many individuals impose constraints upon themselves by not exercising the choices available to them. Refusing to travel outside of the community on public transportation is a self-imposed limitation that restricts job and educational opportunities to resources that are available only in Caroline. Refusing to attend school in a Black community serves only to exacerbate the effects of illiteracy in terms of job stability and income. In these respects, some individuals, while they did not cause their economic condition, participate in their own subjugation to the policies and structures that create poverty. So while the institutions in White communities serve to mitigate the effects of poverty through community, educational and job services, prejudice, discrimination, self-imposed constraints, racism, and the lack of child-care all interfere with the ability of some to mobilize out of poverty.

Conclusion

Two findings of this research are preeminent. First, poor Whites are not socially isolated based on the criteria defined by Wilson. Secondly, their spatial and social situations insulate them from the most extreme effects of poverty. This differs from the circumstances of poor Blacks in that their communities lack such resources. Instead their strategies for survival include the formation of kinship networks (Stack, 1974), and living with friends and family during the difficult times. But the extent to which they are insulated from homelessness, joblessness and hunger is nonetheless limited compared to Whites.

A prominent distinction between the conditions for Blacks and Whites lies in the persistence and occurrence of intergenerational poverty for each group. The individuals in this study came from working or middle-class families. And because they do

not live in socially isolated conditions, their children and grandchildren have good chances of moving out of poverty. A similar future however is not as optimistic for Blacks. Because Blacks live in socially isolated communities, poverty is likely to persist beyond the current generation as it has for generations before them. Educational, social and economic resources are needed to increase the likelihood that the children in these communities will not remain in the poverty into which many of them are born. Even given what seems to be the imminent demise of Affirmative Action programs, the ability of Blacks to compete even on the unlevel playing field increases significantly with access to quality schools and other resources that promote mainstream assimilation and socioeconomic mobility.

It can be argued that the new welfare reforms offer opportunities for individuals to improve their situations. One of the programs developed is 'Workfare', which targets able-bodied adults with children ages 13 years and older. In short, it mandates that adults either find jobs within two years, or earn their welfare benefits through jobs that the program finds for them. On the one hand this employment can be viewed as an opportunity for individuals to learn a skill or gain expertise in some area. But on the other hand, Workfare can be viewed as a form of exploitation.

Early this summer the governor of Illinois signed the state's version of the welfare reform bill into law at a celebrated news conference held at Chicago's O'Hare airport. The airport was selected for the event as a way of thanking United Airlines for its plan to hire welfare recipients under the new Workfare program. The Airlines' plan exemplifies who the real beneficiaries of America's social welfare policies are. In addition to the ability to protect interest, dividends and pensions, the middle class and wealthy can now realize the tax advantages of hiring welfare recipients to whom they are only required to pay minimum wage. Rather than regular employees' salary and benefits, Workfare employees will earn substantially less and receive no benefits from the company since they work for government assistance. So the new welfare reform law effectively legitimates the exploitation of the poor, making it simply a transformed version of the same old ideology. In fact through Workfare, it is more likely that the informants for this study will be relegated to menial work in areas where the

potential for growth and advancement are slim. But in any case, this is certainly a matter to be addressed by researchers over the next five to seven years.

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