



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 43  
Issue 4 December

Article 10

---

2016

**Review of *Shared Prosperity in America's Communities*. Susan M. Wachter and Lei Ding. Reviewed by Cynthia Edmonds-Cady.**

Cynthia Edmonds-Cady  
Illinois State University, cedmond@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Edmonds-Cady, Cynthia (2016) "Review of *Shared Prosperity in America's Communities*. Susan M. Wachter and Lei Ding. Reviewed by Cynthia Edmonds-Cady.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol43/iss4/10>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

Susan M. Wachter and Lei Ding (Eds.), *Shared Prosperity in America's Communities*. University of Pennsylvania Press (2016), 274 pages, \$53.99 (hardcover).

As part of the University of Pennsylvania's City in the Twenty-First Century series, Wachter and Ding have created an edited volume that focuses on the geographic reality of income inequality in the United States and offer potential solutions. This book provides a critical analysis of how geography or "place" is increasingly implicated in whether or not a community has access to the resources of a rapidly globalizing economy. It is organized into twelve chapters covering three sections. The first section examines the evidence of decreasing economic mobility, especially as it pertains to specific geography, and illustrates the negative consequences of this place-based inequality in the U.S. The second section is comprised of essays that offer a variety of potential solutions embedded within local cities' housing, education, and labor policies. Lastly, the final section takes a wider lens, providing potential templates for equitable growth and development in American cities within the current post-industrial moment.

The issue of place-based inequality has gained some interest with researchers of late, with some startling statistics on the high unlikelihood of upward mobility for U.S. children born in low-income neighborhoods, even after they move to higher income communities. This collection provides a platform for a variety of scholars to demonstrate the impact that this growing disparity has on communities, in general, as well as the individual citizens who live there, and to offer potential solutions both within localized and state-level policy approaches.

The first chapter offers some stark and compelling evidence for the geographic inequity which is the theme of this book. Author Raj Chetty presents findings from his own study of upward mobility and geographic place, highlighting the fact that poor children born in the U.S. have a much lower likelihood of achieving upward economic mobility than children in countries such as Denmark or Canada. This makes it more likely that the "American Dream" of income mobility may actually be higher in other western nations. Chetty tracks several trends in income inequality and geography, examining levels

of intergenerational mobility for the cohorts of children born in the 1970s through the 1990s. He illustrates that while intergenerational mobility has remained stagnant overall, and growing income inequality has exacerbated the problem (meaning children's future mobility is now more greatly tied to parental income than for previous cohorts), there is a significant link to geography. While the author demonstrates some regional differences (much lower rates of upward income mobility in the Southeast and Rust Belt, higher levels in the Great Plains and West Coast), an interesting finding is that there is substantial variation across areas with similar sociodemographic characteristics.

The author posits that this variability is positive, in that it provides examples of communities where the likelihood of upward mobility for low-income children is fairly high. In other words, what can we learn from these communities? In examining these 'model communities,' while Chetty indicates that several factors are correlated with upward mobility, he cautions that these are simply correlates and thus their specific mechanism of influence needs further study. Race, level of income inequality, school quality, social capital, and family structure all seem to be related to levels of mobility within communities. Thus, legacies of racial segregation which limited access to resources for many African American communities (chapter two delves more deeply into the impact of racial and economic segregation), cities with a smaller middle class, areas with poor quality public schools, lower levels of civic participation, and areas with high numbers of single parent households all contribute to a lack of upward mobility for low-income children. Chetty concludes that "place-based" policy initiatives can offer the potential to ameliorate the effects of intergenerational poverty and to offer children born into low-income families a greater chance at upward mobility. A key conclusion offered early in this book is that focusing on local policies and those that impact children well before they enter the labor force are more likely to achieve desired results.

In the mid-section of the book, part II, various authors provide examples of solutions focused on housing, racial and class integration, education, and labor policies at both the local and federal levels. In chapter five, Margery Austin Turner

emphasizes fair, affordable housing and community development that considers "place-conscious" planning. She advocates an approach to solving neighborhood exclusion and distress that combines fair housing and community development policies, rather than implementing them separately. This gets to the heart of racial and economic discrimination through practices which aim to foster economic growth in the community while simultaneously addressing segregation.

In the final section of the book, the essays focus on the possibilities and benefits derived from more equitable "shared" economies. These chapters offer models from communities that are using regional approaches to resource sharing. In chapter twelve, authors Chris Benner and Manuel Pastor use the term "epistemic communities" to describe how diversity of thought, skills, and resources coming together at a regional level can create networks of possibility and opportunity in these enriched communities. Using several case studies, this chapter offers some justification for why we need to create more economically inclusive communities, as well as a thorough examination of the political aspects of doing so.

The case studies are informative, as they provide examples from exemplar communities where sustainable growth was combined with equity, as well as problematic communities where inequality and stagnated growth were present. The authors provide examples of cities in which diverse networks of private, public, economic, social justice, political, business, and civic actors connect and eventually transform the typical social processes involved in economic growth. These diverse networks form "epistemic communities" which work toward economic equality, not necessarily through policy prescriptions, but rather through fostering the development of a shared understanding of community needs that begins to take into account multiple facets of a problem.

This approach has achieved some success in communities such as San Antonio, Texas, where an increase in sales tax was agreed upon by a variety of community actors, in order to provide pre-K education to low-income children in an effort to develop the future workforce. Other examples include the city of Seattle's recent success in increasing the city's minimum wage to \$15.00 an hour. The authors point out that these

solutions to localized community problems came from long-term processes of connection, networking, and shared understanding that are embedded in the diverse "epistemic community" model. This is an interesting approach to solving place-based inequality, as it emphasizes the importance of creating a process and structure for shared understanding amongst community stakeholders, rather than simply offering generic policy solutions.

Overall, this collection provides a thorough description of what place-based inequality is, including several recent studies with important data points, and it offers a variety of examples of localized strategies for change. This is no small feat, given that this is a complex problem with multiple facets. However, more information on institutionalized racism would have been helpful. Several essays do mention race, and segregation more specifically, as being implicated in place-based inequality, but there is no in-depth analysis. Perhaps another volume in this series could be devoted wholeheartedly to such discussion. As race continues to be a factor in place-based inequality, it needs to be considered in place-conscious planning. Therefore, detailed descriptions of how racial exclusion and discrimination operate at both local and national levels to segregate and limit economic opportunities in communities would be a helpful addition. Further, including race-conscious solutions which are embedded within the model templates offered here through housing, education, and labor policies would also strengthen the book.

Despite this limitation, this collection is a valuable resource for graduate courses in community development, macro social work, social policy practice, or civic engagement, and an important tool for community/urban planners and economic development team members. As recent studies illustrate, the problem of income-inequality and its geographic variability is unfortunately only worsening in the U.S., making this collection on place-based inequality a timely and necessary addition to the scholarship of economic and community development.

*Cynthia Edmonds-Cady, Illinois State University*