DEFINING POOR NEIGHBORHOODS: RESEARCH STRATEGIES AND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF URBAN PLACES

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the ways in which research strategies have influenced our perceptions of poor urban places. It looks at the distribution and characteristics of poor persons in the 100 largest urban areas in the United States. Then, focussing on the urbanized area of Knoxville, Tennessee, it identifies several different methods of defining poor neighborhoods and outlines the description of urban poverty yielded by each research strategy. This preliminary analysis suggests that conventional methods of defining poor neighborhoods may foster misleading conclusions about urban poverty in many cities. Detailed examination of the urbanized area of Knoxville indicates that poor neighborhoods are located throughout the city's urbanized area, not just within the inner city. Likewise, this study suggests that census tract level studies may underestimate the percentage of white persons living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In Knoxville, many enclaves of poor whites are embedded in largely suburban census tracts.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about urban poverty in the past decade. Although the literature is diverse, many recent researchers have concluded that urban poverty in the United States is an inner city phenomenon, that poor neighborhoods are characterized by high rates of welfare dependency, female-headship, unemployment and crime, and that most people who live in poor neighborhoods are not white. This portrayal has been particularly noticeable in the recent flurry of underclass research, which has been embraced by a wide variety of social scientists and the popular media (see Auletta, 1982; Murray, 1984; Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988; Zinn, 1989).

However, this literature overlooks many of the types of poor neighborhoods present in cities in the United States today. For example, Knoxville, Tennessee (a medium-sized, Appalachian city) is predominated by poor neighborhoods populated by employed whites (Remaley, 1992). Other Appalachian cities, and many smaller Western cities also have many poor neighborhoods unlike the conventional image of urban poverty.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the biases present in urban poverty research and suggest ways to alleviate them. As such, it is not a unique statistical investigation, but an extended and critical literature review.

THE LITERATURE

Regional Bias

Most of the research on poor urban neighborhoods has been conducted in large cities in the Northeast and Midwest. From the work of the Chicago School to that of the underclass contingent, large Rustbelt cities have captured a disproportionate share of academia's attention. Examples include William J. Wilson's "The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy" (Wilson, 1987), and Nicholas Lemann's "Origins of the Underclass" (Lemann, 1986). Both works were highly influential and based mostly on research conducted in Chicago.

Northeastern and midwestern cities can not serve as archetypes for all cities. There are regional differences in population, landscape, and (as underclass theory points out) economic health. Thus it is reasonable to expect that there may be regional differences in the processes that shape poor neighborhoods.

For example, much research suggests that poor neighborhoods are occupied largely by persons of color. However, examination of statistics on urban poverty indicates that many cities are predominated by poor white neighborhoods. The 1985 Census document, "Poverty Areas in Large Cities" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985) aggregates data for poverty areas (defined as census tracts in which 20% or more or the population is below the poverty level) for the 100 largest urban areas and the metropolitan areas that surround them. If poverty areas are used as a proxy for poor neighborhoods, then most residents of poor neighborhoods are non-white, but by a very narrow margin. On average, only 53% of the residents of poverty areas in these metropolitan areas are non-white. There is a large range in the data- from a low of 9% in Spokane, to a high of 88% in Charlotte-Gastonia. Furthermore, there are regional differences in the racial structure of poor neighborhoods. Figure 1 shows the percent nonwhite in poverty areas for the metropolitan areas listed in "Poverty Areas in Large Cities." As would be expected given the general distribution of persons of color in the US, there are notably high non-white concentrations in the poverty areas in southern cities, and in the heavily studied large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. However, there are notably low concentrations of non-whites in poor neighborhoods in western and Appalachian cities. Note also that Chicago's poverty areas, the laboratories for many urban theorists, have a much higher proportion of non-whites than most other urban poverty areas in the US.

Female headship, another trait frequently associated with poor neighborhoods, shows similar regional contrasts. Figure 2 shows the proportion of families headed by females in poverty areas. On average, only about 1/4 of the households in poverty areas are headed by single females. No metropolitan area has a rate above 40% (the high is 39% in Charlotte-Gastonia), and rates are as low as 10% (in Anaheim-Santa Ana-Garden Grove) and 8% (in Madison, Wisconsin). Note that with the exception of Charlotte-Gastonia, the highest rates of female-headship are found in large northeastern and midwestern metropolitan areas, like Newark, Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Chicago.

Other characteristics generally associated with poor neighborhoods- like high unemployment rates or reliance on public assistance, show similar regional differentiation.

Areal Unit Bias

A second trend that has influenced our notions of urban poverty is the tendency to study poor neighborhoods by using census tracts as units of analysis. Rather that studying the poor in an aspatial way, most researchers agree that studies of poverty need to be geographic. The idea is that in order to

fully understand lifestyles of the poor, we need to understand poor neighborhoods: the places in which large numbers of poor persons live.

The problem here stems from the fact that the term neighborhood is poorly defined. Most geographers agree that a neighborhood is an area united by some set of characteristics- perhaps its housing units are similar, or it has an ethnic identity, or it is separated from other neighborhoods by some physical feature, like a set of railroad tracts. Whatever the case, theory implies that the urban poor are affected by their neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987). Therefore, neighborhoods are areas in which people spend time and interact- either by choice or by force- with fellow residents.

Although most previous poverty research recognizes that space is important, the idea of how much space is important is seldom questioned. If poverty research is conceptually grounded, then census tract boundaries and neighborhood boundaries should coincide. However, although census tracts are (according to the Census) "relatively homogeneous with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions," they are also quite large. A typical tract contains between 2,500 and 8,000 residents and as many as 100 blocks (Postma, 1982). Clearly, such size allows for a lot of intra-tract diversity, and is probably larger than the amount of space or number of people an individual human being can call his or her community.

The Census aggregates data at a level that is more appropriate for neighborhood studies. Block groups are about 1/5 the size of census tracts, so they usually contain between 500 and 1,600 people, or about 20 blocks. Research at the block group level has been virtually unknown, however, as up until recently the Census did not map block groups, and data was available only on summary tape files.

Table 1, a summary of selected characteristics in Knoxville's census tract 7, illustrates how block groups can give a more precise portrayal or urban poverty. Census tract 7 is an inner city tract. Looking only at the tract summary, one would conclude that this is a racially mixed neighborhood in which about half the population is poor and there are average rates of female headship. However, census tract 7 consists of 4 block groups. Two of the block groups are largely residential and the other two are mostly industrial. The two residential neighborhoods are quite different. Block group 1 actually has many of the characteristics described by underclass theorists- it has extremely high poverty rates (over 80%), is almost entirely black, and has rates of female headship that are more than double the norm for poverty areas. In contrast block group 3 is a mostly white neighborhood, with moderate poverty rates, and extremely low rates of female headship. The extreme poverty in block group 1 and the predominantly white neighborhood existing in block group three are masked by census tract studies. Intra-tract variation like this is found throughout Knoxville.

DEFINING POOR NEIGHBORHOODS

Percent Nonwhite* in Metropolitan Poverty Areas, 1980

Persons of Spanish origin may be of any race.

O < 35.00%
⊖ 35.00 to 49.99%
▣ 50.00 to 64.99%
▤ 65.00 to 79.99%
■ > 79.99%
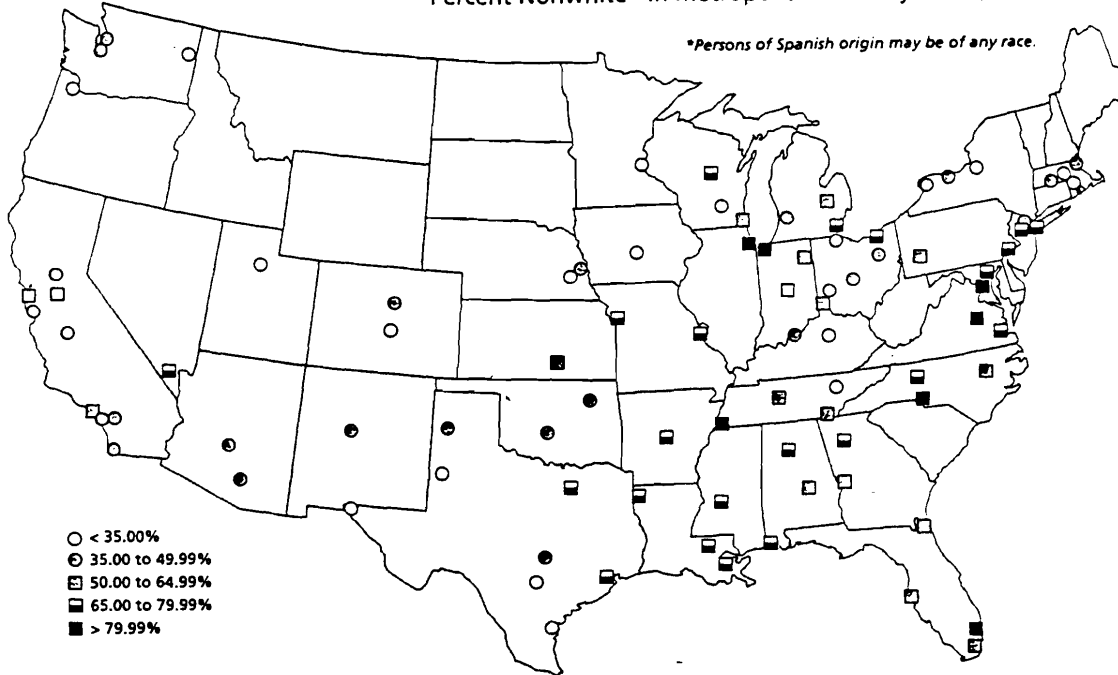
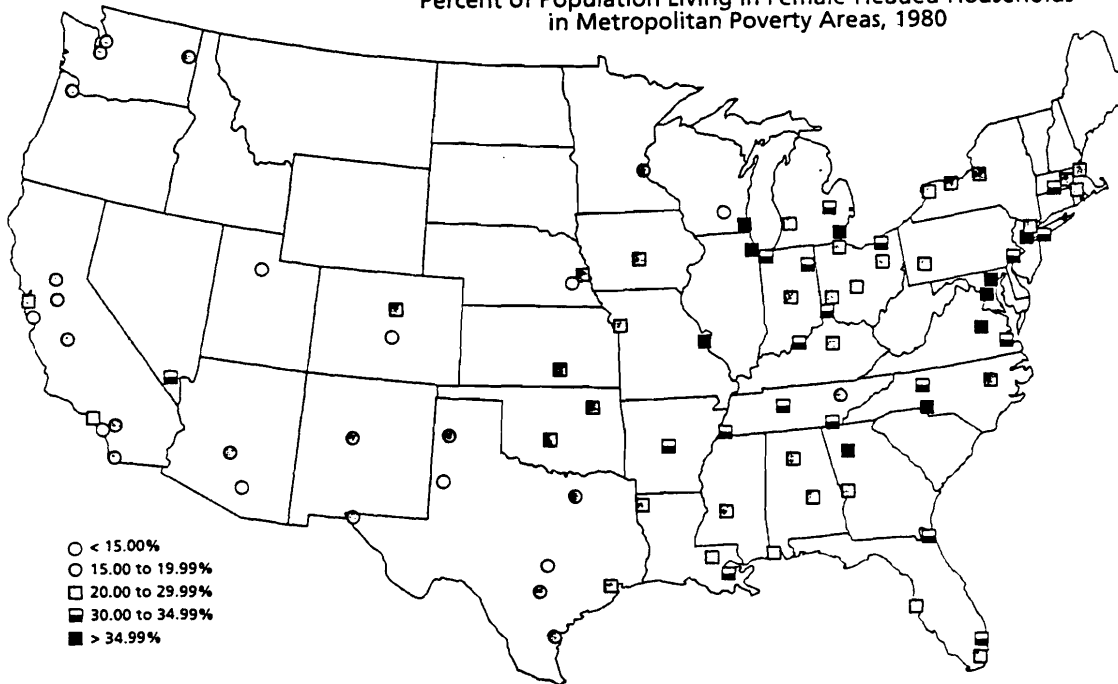## Percent of Population Living in Female-Headed Households in Metropolitan Poverty Areas, 1980

O < 15.00%
O 15.00 to 19.99%
☐ 20.00 to 29.99%
▤ 30.00 to 34.99%
■ > 34.99%

TABLE 1
CENSUS TRACT 7
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

	Total Persons	% Poor	% Non-White	% Female Headed Households
Tract 7	1,936	55.70	49.02	21.26
Block Group 1	788	83.25	99.49	61.28
Block Group 2	10	0.00	100.00	40.00
Block Group 3	1,138	32.69	13.62	5.33
Block Group 4	0	-	-	-

In fact, my explorations of Knoxville show that using block groups to define poor neighborhoods produces a different picture of the distribution of urban poverty than the use of census tracts does. Figure 3 shows poor neighborhoods as outlined by the census tract method (defined as census tracts in which 20% or more the population is below poverty line) and those that are poor using block groups rather than census tracts (i.e. calling block groups poor if at least 20% of block group population is below poverty level).

The picture of urban poverty produced by the census tract method shows most poor neighborhoods located within the inner city (as research states). Likewise, by this method the inner city appears to be blanketed with poor neighborhoods. In contrast, the block group method produces a much more refined picture. Not all of the inner city is poor, and not all poor neighborhoods are found in the inner city. In contrast, many poor neighborhoods are located in largely suburban tracts.

There are 22 block groups missed by the census tract method, containing over 14,000 people, 3,717 of whom are poor. As such, over 10% of the poor persons in Knoxville's urbanized area live in these poor neighborhoods missed by the census tract method of defining poor neighborhoods. Furthermore, the characteristics of the block groups missed by the census tract method are very different from those described by existing theory. Block group 5 in tract 15 is a good example (Table 2). It is 100% white, and most of its residents are homeowners, and long-term unemployment rates are low.

TABLE 2
CENSUS TRACT 15, BLOCK GROUP 5
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Total Persons	861
% Non-White	0.00
% Households Female Headed	15.86
% Owner Occupied	65.72
% Unemployed 15+ weeks	1.00
% Receiving Public Assistance	9.35

DEFINING POOR NEIGHBORHOODS
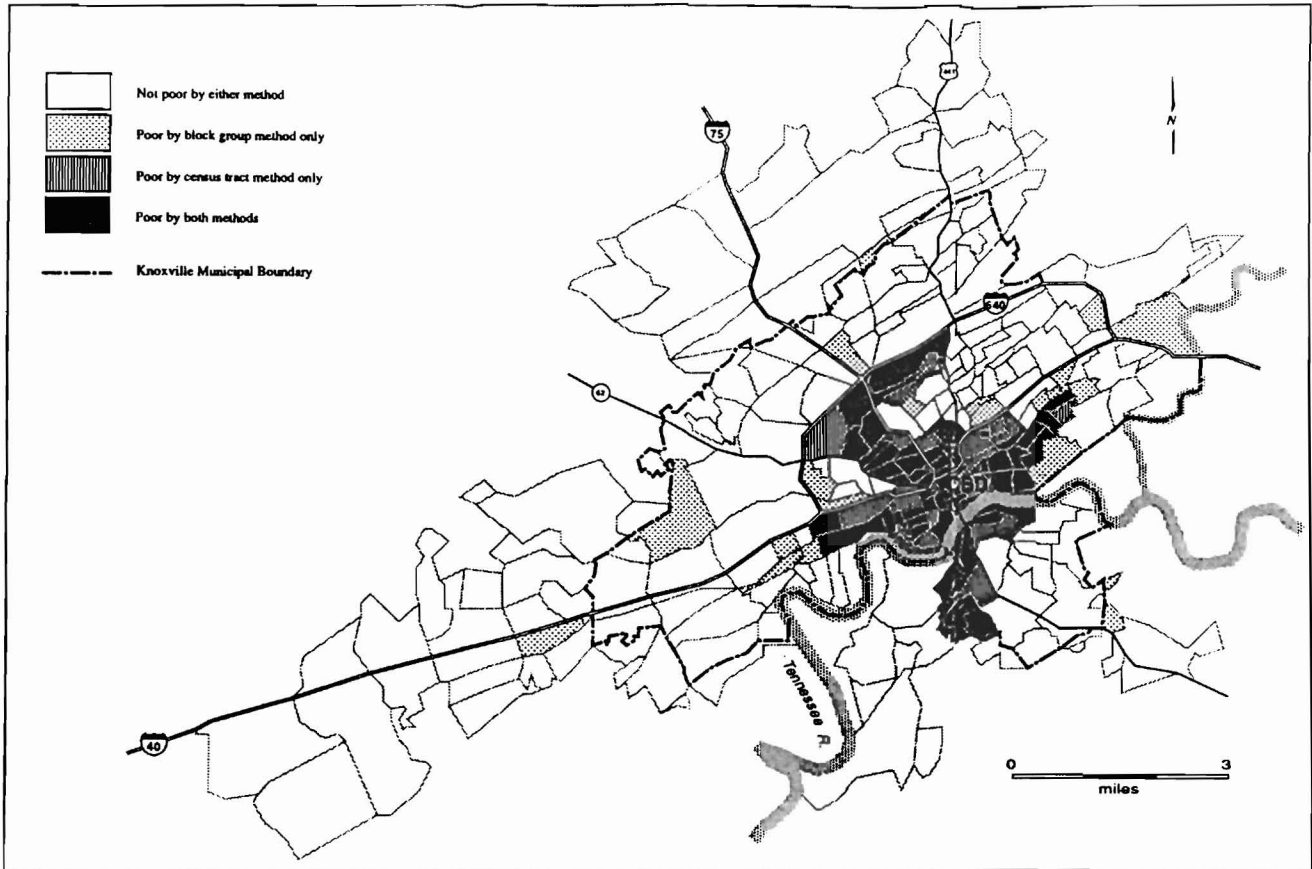
CONCLUSIONS

Existing poverty research overlooks the type of neighborhoods present in Knoxville in two ways: by looking mostly at large, Rustbelt cities, and by utilizing census tracts as units of analysis. Because Knoxville is a medium-sized, Appalachian city, it's poor neighborhoods were shaped by a different set of processes than those that molded poor neighborhoods in other places and larger cities. Most of Knoxville's poor neighborhoods developed around textile mills, lumber yards, and marble processing plants. These industries attracted large numbers of rural Appalachians willing to work for very low wages. Many of Knoxville's neighborhoods still display their connection to Knoxville's Appalachian hinterland. Most residents are children of original migrants, most neighborhoods are populated by extended families, and kinship networks are strong. Many of the neighborhood landscapes are very rural- with lots being large, often having much untended vegetation, and supporting farm animals.

However although the neighborhoods are predominated by working families, in two-parent households there are still many problems. Education levels are extremely low, alcoholism is prevalent, and crime rates are quite high (Remaley, 1992).

In conclusion, the fact that Knoxville's poor neighborhoods were especially influenced by the city's hinterland and the existence of low-wage manufacturing jobs does not mean that it is an aberration. Knoxville stands as a glaring example of the fact that there are different kinds of urban poverty in the United States, and different kinds of poor neighborhoods. Certainly, other small or non-Rustbelt cities will have poor neighborhoods characterized by their own traits, different from northeastern, midwestern, or Appalachian cities. Similarly, this investigation does not indicate that underclass theory is not valid or that underclass neighborhoods do not exist. It simply suggests that there are many different kinds of poor neighborhoods and that underclass neighborhoods are one type, probably more manifest in some regions than others.

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