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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Autumn 2011), pp. 164-188
Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/661647>
Accessed: 10/08/2015 11:21

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“Way Down in the Hole”: Systemic Urban Inequality and *The Wire*

Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson

The Wire is set in a modern American city shaped by economic restructuring and fundamental demographic change that led to widespread job loss and the depopulation of inner-city neighborhoods.¹ While the series can be viewed as an account of the systemic failure of political, economic, and social institutions in Baltimore in particular, the fundamental principles depicted in *The Wire* certainly parallel changing conditions in other cities, especially older industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest. Indeed, it is for this reason that *The Wire* captures the attention of social scientists concerned with a comprehensive understanding of urban inequality, poverty, and race in American cities.

In providing a sophisticated depiction of systemic urban inequality, *The Wire* investigates how key aspects of inequality are interrelated. It offers an in-depth examination of the decline of urban labor markets, crime and incarceration, the failure of the education system in low-income communities, and the inability of political institutions to serve the interests of the urban poor. A central theme of *The Wire* and a fundamental principle of scholarship on urban inequality is that political, social, and economic factors reinforce each other to produce profound disadvantage for the urban poor. By highlighting these connections, *The Wire* sheds light on the per-

The authors greatly benefited from enlightening discussions with the students in our seminar on “Urban Inequality and *The Wire*” at Harvard University. This article particularly benefited from the valuable insights of Brandon Asberry, Tony Bator, Christen Brown, Dylan Matthews, and Zoe Weinberg.

1. See David Simon, *The Wire: The Complete Series*, DVD, 23 discs (2002–8).

Critical Inquiry 38 (Autumn 2011)

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sistence and durability of concentrated disadvantage, which is reproduced across generations.²

Through the characters of *The Wire*, viewers can clearly see that various institutions work together to limit opportunities for the urban poor and that the actions, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals are shaped by their context. While scholars of inequality often take these ideas as basic assumptions, Americans remain strongly disposed to the idea that individuals are largely responsible for their own economic situations. In a recent survey of American attitudes, “fully two-thirds of those interviewed (67%) say blacks in this country who can’t get ahead ‘are mostly responsibly for their own condition’ while only 18% say discrimination is mainly at fault.” Nearly three-quarters of US whites (70 percent), a large majority of Hispanics (69 percent), and even a slight majority of blacks (52 percent) believe that “blacks who can’t get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition.”³ In the face of a dominant belief system emphasizing personal inadequacies as the cause of poverty, *The Wire* effectively undermines such views by showing how the decisions people make are profoundly influenced by their environment or social circumstances.

Unlike conventional cop or crime dramas, *The Wire* develops complex characters on each side of the law who cannot be placed in unambiguous moral categories—neither castigated for criminal pathologies and the absence of mainstream values toward work nor valorized as one-dimensional hapless victims of society’s cruelty who should command endless liberal sympathy.

To be sure, *The Wire* is fictional, not a documentary, though it takes inspiration from real-life events. It draws on the experiences of its creator David Simon, a former reporter at the *Baltimore Sun*, and his cowriter, Ed Burns, a former police detective and public school teacher in Baltimore. It

2. See Robert J. Sampson, “Racial Stratification and the Durable Tangle of Neighborhood Inequality,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (Jan. 2009): 260–80, and Patrick Sharkey, “The Intergenerational Transmission of Context,” *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (Jan. 2008): 931–69.

3. Pew Research Center, “A Year after Obama’s Election: Blacks Upbeat about Black Progress, Prospects” (Washington, DC, 2010), p. 41, pewresearch.org/pubs/1459/year-after-obama-election-black-public-opinion

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is part of a long line of literary works that are often able to capture the complexity of urban life in ways that have eluded many social scientists. One need only consider works by Richard Wright, Italo Calvino, Ben Okri, and Charles Dickens, among many others, as examples.⁴

As a work of fiction, *The Wire* does not replace rigorous academic scholarship on the problems of urban inequality and poverty. But, more than making these issues accessible to a broader audience, the show demonstrates the interconnectedness of systemic urban inequality in a way that can be very difficult to illustrate in academic works. Due to the structure of academic research, scholarly works tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation.

A number of excellent studies analyze the impacts of deindustrialization, crime and incarceration, and the education system on urban inequality. It is often implicitly understood among scholars that these are deeply intertwined, but an in-depth analysis of any one of these topics requires such focused attention that other important factors necessarily receive less discussion. With the freedom of artistic expression, *The Wire* is able to deftly weave together the range of forces that shape the circumstances of the urban poor while exposing deep inequality as a fundamental feature of broader social and economic arrangements.

The idea that cities function as systems in which residents, neighborhoods, and institutions are integrated into a broader ecological unit is central to the paradigmatic Chicago school of urban sociology, led by Robert Park and his colleagues in the 1920s. Emphasizing *The Wire's* sociological value, Nicholas Lemann argues that it “was about as complete a realization of Park’s dream of capturing the full richness and complexity of the city as anyone has ever accomplished. One of *The Wire's* virtues was that, without denying any of its characters an iota of humanity, it resolutely kept its attention focused on Baltimore as a total system, in which every neighborhood and every institution exist in some relation to every other and people behave according to the incentives and choices they find set before them, more than according to whether they are good guys or bad guys.”⁵

4. See Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1940); Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York, 1974); Ben Okri, *Dangerous Love* (London, 1996); and Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London, 1859).

5. Nicholas Lemann, “Charm City, USA.” *New York Review of Books*, 30 Sept. 2010, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/sep/30/charm-city-usa/?pagination=false

Crime and Incarceration

The first season of *The Wire* follows the activities of the Barksdale drug gang and the police unit that set out to bring down the criminal organization. The show casts a critical eye on the war on drugs, which it convincingly depicts as an ill-conceived undertaking whose primary outcome has been the mass jailing of nonviolent offenders. Street-level police officers patrol the neighborhoods where the Barksdale gang operates, and they repeatedly arrest dealers on the corners. Wee-Bey, Cutty, and the gang leader Avon Barksdale are in and out of prison throughout the series. Despite intensive policing, arrests, and jail sentences for many of the key players, the community does not seem safer. The dealers' regular customers, like Bubbles, continue to struggle with addiction, and the drug trade has hardly been curtailed.

This localized drama takes place against the backdrop of an unprecedented scale of imprisonment in the United States, where more than 2.3 million people are incarcerated.⁶ The current penal regime is marked by both its magnitude and its rapid expansion in the past decades. While the incarceration rate remained relatively stable from the 1920s to the mid-1970s, it has more than tripled since 1980.⁷ The US far outpaces other countries with advanced economies. The incarceration rate is five times higher than that of England, which has the highest rate in Western Europe.⁸ The US outranks all other democracies, with an incarceration rate that significantly exceeds that of Russia and South Africa.⁹

Imprisonment, however, is not spread evenly across society; it varies tremendously by race, class, and spatial location. Just less than 1 percent of the national population is incarcerated. By comparison, one in fifteen African Americans are currently in prison or jail, with even higher rates for black men under the age of thirty-five. Considering the disproportionate severity across social groups, some scholars describe the phenomenon as "racialized mass incarceration."¹⁰ About 10 percent of young African Americans who did not complete high school were in prison or jail in 1980;

6. See Matthew Cooper, William J. Sabol, and Heather C. West, "Prisoners in 2008," 8 Dec. 2009, bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/po8.pdf

7. See Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, "Incarceration and Social Inequality," *Daedalus* 139 (Summer 2010): 8–19.

8. See Nicola Lacey, "American Imprisonment in Comparative Perspective," *Daedalus* 139 (Summer 2010): 102–14.

9. See Marc Mauer, "Comparative International Rates of Incarceration: An Examination of Causes and Trends" (2003), www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/inc_comparative_intl.pdf

10. See Lawrence D. Bobo and Victor Thompson, "Racialized Mass Incarceration: Poverty, Prejudice, and Punishment," in *Doing Race: Twenty-One Essays for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya (New York, 2010), pp. 322–55.

by 2008, the rate had increased to 37 percent. These men, therefore, are nearly fifty times more likely to be incarcerated than the average American. Indeed, research suggests that going to prison “has become a normal life event for African American men who have dropped out of high school.”¹¹ Among the cohort of African American men now in their early thirties, 68 percent of those who dropped out of high school have spent some time in prison.

In terms of spatial location, it should not be surprising that residents of some neighborhoods are more likely to be incarcerated than others, since crime rates also vary across neighborhoods. Robert Sampson and Charles Loeffler, however, find that even among neighborhoods with comparable levels of crime, the incarceration rate is substantially higher for residents in neighborhoods with higher levels of concentrated disadvantage.¹² Taken together, this research makes clear that the incarceration boom in recent decades has been concentrated among certain social groups.

Beyond the unprecedented magnitude of the prison population, the social implications of mass incarceration extend beyond the individuals currently behind bars. Each inmate is tied to a number of people in the general population, with relationships to spouses, children, other family members, and friends in their communities. Given the disparities in incarceration, social exposure to the phenomenon of large-scale imprisonment is also felt most sharply by some sections of society. In a survey conducted in 2001–2 cited by Lawrence Bobo and Victor Thompson, one in ten whites reported having a close friend or relative who was incarcerated.¹³ By comparison, half of African Americans had a friend or relative in prison. Class is also an important factor in who goes to prison and therefore who has social exposure to incarceration. Among high school dropouts with incomes below \$25,000, one in five whites and nearly three in five blacks had a close relationship with someone behind bars. At higher-class positions, among college-educated respondents making at least \$60,000, less than 5 percent of whites were tied to someone in prison. Among comparable African Americans, nearly one in three had a friend or relative in prison. While the higher end of the class hierarchy has less exposure to the incarcerated population in general, “the impact of racialized mass incarceration reaches across boundaries of class in black America.”¹⁴ In fact, the highest

11. Western and Pettit, “Incarceration and Social Inequality,” p. 11.

12. See Sampson and Charles Loeffler, “Punishment’s Place: The Local Concentration of Mass Incarceration,” *Daedalus* 139 (Summer 2010): 20–31.

13. See Bobo and Thompson, “Racialized Mass Incarceration.”

14. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

status African Americans were substantially more likely to have a close friend or relative in prison than whites at much lower class positions.

In addition to disparities in who is incarcerated and the social exposure to friends and relatives in prison, mass incarceration also has the effect of exacerbating existing social inequality. The standard economic measures mask the devastating impact on poor black communities, in particular. Official statistics reveal that joblessness and unemployment are regularly more than twice as high for blacks as for whites. Since inmates are excluded from employment statistics, however, these troubling figures do not even fully capture the economic conditions of black communities.¹⁵ Spending time in prison significantly hinders the future prospects of ex-offenders, which compounds disadvantages they faced before their incarceration. Using longitudinal data to isolate the impact of serving time in prison, Bruce Western and Becky Pettit find that incarceration is associated with 40 percent lower earnings and higher unemployment, corroborating similar findings by other researchers.¹⁶

A fundamental feature of the era of mass imprisonment is that incarceration has effectively been decoupled from crime. The dramatic expansion in the prison population is not accompanied by a corresponding increase in crime. Western shows that the incarceration rate has grown consistently since 1970, while official measures of crime increased in the 1970s and declined in 1990s.¹⁷ At the level of individual offenders, one might expect a direct link between crime and punishment, so that an increase in incarceration should be the result of greater crime. At the macro level, however, political shifts since the 1960s have created the climate for a more punitive approach to crime, so much so that incarceration has increased independently of trends in actual crime. Indeed, the chances of an arrest resulting in prison time and the average time served by violent offenders have risen over time despite a decline in the level of violent crime.¹⁸

Recent research on mass incarceration explicitly draws attention to the role of state policy in generating and exacerbating key dimensions of urban inequality. Current sociological research generally emphasizes how economic and labor market processes have combined with demographic factors to produce enduring racial inequality and poverty in American cities.

15. See Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York, 2006).

16. See Western and Pettit, "Incarceration and Social Inequality," and Harry J. Holzer, "Collateral Costs: Effects of Incarceration on Employment and Earnings among Young Workers," in *Do Prisons Make Us Safer? The Benefits and Costs of the Prison Boom*, ed. Steven Raphael and Michael A. Stoll (New York, 2009), pp. 239–69.

17. See Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*.

18. See *ibid.*

Through direct state action, the boom in incarceration interacts in critical ways with deindustrialization, joblessness, and other threats to family stability and the social organization of poor inner-city neighborhoods, including the significant decline in social provision through traditional social policy.¹⁹

Several scenes in *The Wire* connect this macrolevel analysis of mass incarceration in academic research to key processes that produce these outcomes at the micro level. Perceptions of crime and the lack of safety have been consistent challenges for political leaders throughout the era of urban decline. Elected officials place pressure on their local police departments to produce measureable results in fighting crime and typically track progress with statistics. This approach was made famous by the CompStat system of the New York Police Department and was subsequently adopted by local police around the country.

Faced with the expectation of producing numbers, police departments are encouraged to focus on poor, inner city neighborhoods to provide a greater number of arrests, especially by targeting the open-air drug trade. Much police activity in *The Wire* is intended to “joke the stats,” as the officers describe it. With media attention on crime and the pursuit of measurable results, greater public pressure makes more intense policing a political necessity. Since imprisonment directly constrains the economic opportunities of ex-offenders and has deleterious consequences for their families, the social conditions of inner-city communities deteriorate even further. In cities across the country, mass incarceration has an enduring effect on the concentration of disadvantage.

Gangs and Street Culture

In his ethnographic research on the social order of an inner-city community, Elijah Anderson argues that activity and behavior in the neighborhood are characterized by one of two codes.²⁰ The street code places the highest value on interpersonal respect and makes the regular use of the threat of physical violence a means of self-assertion. While outsiders commonly stereotype all inner-city residents as acting in accordance with this code, Anderson argues that many residents in fact follow the decent code, which affirms middle-class values, personal responsibility, and participation in the mainstream economy. Subsequent ethnographic research has challenged this framework as overly simplistic and inadequate in explain-

19. See Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, N.C., 2009).

20. See Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York, 2009).

ing how the social organization of inner-city neighborhoods corresponds to greater violence.²¹

In the first two seasons of *The Wire*, viewers see the tension between D'Angelo's active participation in the worst aspects of the drug trade and his desire to pursue a different life path. As he develops sympathy for the victims of violent conflicts, he is unable to convince the gang leaders to change their approach. D'Angelo never reconciles these inner tensions, and, as he takes the fall for the gang's activities at the same time that he charts out a decent life for himself, he cannot be placed in either moral category. Wallace, a teenager who takes orders from D'Angelo, similarly undermines this street-decent dichotomy. While he pursues a life in the drug trade and seeks to prove his street orientation to the gang leaders, he simultaneously oversees a household of several young neighborhood children. He feeds them in the mornings, gets them ready for school, and helps with their homework. Wallace is deeply troubled by the gang's killing of a perceived adversary and doubts whether he is suited to continue in the drug trade. Unable to find an exit from that trajectory, Wallace is himself killed when the gang's leaders question his loyalty to their enterprise. The moral dichotomy is perhaps most significantly undermined by Omar, a stick-up artist who regularly robs drug dealers but follows a personal code that prevents him from harming any resident not involved with the drug trade.

D'Angelo and Wallace are not able to freely act on their personal misgivings because they are both situated within the Barksdale gang. The organization of the gang is generally in line with the "business" model of street gangs described by Sudhir Venkatesh and Steven Levitt.²² It has a well-developed internal hierarchy with high-level executives like Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell, managers like D'Angelo, and lower-level corner dealers like Bodie and Poot. To a significant degree, the structure of the Barksdale gang parallels that of other organizations in *The Wire*, including the police department and the dockworkers union. Internal hierarchy is central to the operations of these organizations, as reflected by the entrenched norm of following the chain of command in the police department. Each organization demands unwavering loyalty from its members, although tensions inevitably arise among those at the low end, who are

21. See David J. Harding, *The Living Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-City Boys* (Chicago, 2010), and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

22. See Venkatesh and Steven D. Levitt, "'Are We a Family or a Business?' History and Disjuncture in the Urban American Street Gang," *Theory and Society* 29 (Aug. 2000): 427–62.

expected to implement the decisions made by leaders at the top, who are removed from the day-to-day reality on the ground.

Viewing the drug gang as an organization with specific objectives—in this case, maximizing profit from the sale of drugs—helps to explain many of the actions by gang members. Some of their violent acts are rooted in the organization's objectives, such as protecting its segment of the drug market from competitors and punishing those who cooperate with police efforts to obstruct its operations in the drug trade. These motivations are distinct from psychological, emotional, or cultural sources of violence. Some of the murders carried out by the Barksdale gang are not motivated by anger or a vague personal desire for respect on the street. To the extent that an analysis fails to distinguish a gang's institutional objectives from personal and individual-level factors, explanations of social organization and inner-city violence will necessarily be incomplete.

Joblessness and Work

The Wire also examines the declining economic prospects of Baltimore and many of its residents. Cities like Baltimore were economically devastated by deindustrialization in the 1970s and 1980s. Manufacturing jobs had been a source of decent wages, and the strong demand for labor had attracted migration to these cities in earlier decades. However, in the last quarter of the twentieth century federal transportation and highway policies made it easier for industries to relocate to cheaper labor production areas in the suburbs. And the out-migration of industries was accompanied by the out-migration of higher income families to the suburbs, aided by mortgage interest tax exemptions and home mortgages for veterans.

Improved transportation and the suburbanization of employment accelerated the out-migration of central city manufacturing. With manufacturing jobs no longer readily available in central-city and inner-city areas, the Great Migration wave of blacks from the South to northern urban areas abruptly ended around 1970. With the cessation of migration from the South and the out-migration of higher income families, many poor, black, densely populated inner-city neighborhoods were physically transformed by depopulation, as abandoned homes and storefronts became common markers of the visual landscape. By 2000, there were 60,000 abandoned buildings in Philadelphia, 40,000 in Detroit, and 20,000 in Baltimore.²³

23. See Radhika K. Fox, Sarah Treuhaft, and Regan Douglass, *Shared Prosperity, Stronger Regions: An Agenda for Rebuilding America's Older Core Cities* (2006), www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35afo%7D/SHAREDPROSPERITY-CORECITES-FINAL.PDF

The depopulated inner city is the visible backdrop for much of the action in *The Wire*.

In addition, the end of the Great Migration from the South and the out-migration of higher income families resulted in inner-city ghettos with a much larger proportion of poor families and significantly higher levels of joblessness. These developments were in part due to the following: (1) the exodus of higher income families who were more likely to be employed, including black middle- and working-class families whose departure was also aided by antidiscrimination measures in housing; (2) the decline of industrial employment in the inner city; and (3) the decline of local businesses that depend on the resources of higher income groups, many of whom had departed.

In previous years—prior to the cessation of the Great Migration, massive industry relocation from central city neighborhoods, and the civil rights revolution—poor, working-class, and middle-class blacks had generally lived in the same section of the city, as reflected in the classic research on race and the city during this time.²⁴ This class heterogeneity in black neighborhoods was rooted in the intense residential segregation whereby even black families with greater resources were confined to black neighborhoods by direct discrimination in the real estate markets: redlining practices by banks that denied home loans to black applicants and restrictive covenants that prevented the sale of designated property to black buyers.²⁵ However, with the gradual exodus of higher income blacks, poor blacks were left behind in neighborhoods hardest hit by the disappearance of jobs.²⁶

The unprecedented concentration of poverty produced the profound social isolation of poor blacks in the inner city.²⁷ They had little meaningful employment nearby, inadequate schools and training opportunities for higher-skill jobs, and spatial barriers to employers that had relocated to the suburbs. As joblessness climbed, formal organizations that had depended on the support of middle-class residents were weakened, thus undermining social organization in the inner city, including important institutions such as churches, schools, businesses, and civic clubs. As a greater percentage of the residents were jobless, they had fewer social ties to individuals

24. See St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York, 1945).

25. See Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

26. See William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York, 1996).

27. See Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987).

employed in the formal labor market who could provide information on and access to job opportunities. With all of these developments occurring simultaneously, urban sociologists developed the concept of concentration effects to signify that the various processes associated with concentrated poverty work together to produce uniquely severe disadvantage for residents of these neighborhoods.²⁸

One of the greatest strengths of *The Wire* is that it captures this analytic perspective. The Barksdale gang dominates the drug trade on Baltimore's West Side, where economic decline and the failure of political institutions have had harmful social consequences that work together to constrain the opportunities of residents. As a result of the disappearance of work, there are few economic opportunities in the mainstream economy for neighborhood residents. Many poor black residents live in public housing projects where they are generally confined to interactions with their neighbors and remain socially isolated from the rest of the city. Other than the police, there are almost never visitors from other neighborhoods.

The loss of jobs was not exclusively a problem for black workers, though. White workers were also hit by the wave of factory closings across the Northeast and Midwest during this period. Deindustrialization and the decline of manufacturing fundamentally altered the economic prospects of the white working class, especially men who had not gone to college. With labor unions in decline, workers were unable to resist the downward pressure on their wages brought about by these structural economic shifts and competition through international trade.²⁹ These economic factors have had important social implications for white working-class communities, as shown in ethnographic research on the impact of plant closings in white towns.³⁰

The Wire examines the declining fortunes of white workers through the storyline of the dockworkers in the second season of the series. The ports had long been a source of stable jobs for the white working class, who loaded and unloaded cargo from the ships that had docked in Baltimore. With the decline in production at the steel mills, a local manifestation of the nationwide deindustrialization, activity at the ports had dropped dramatically. The stevedores depicted in *The Wire* go day to day without

28. See *ibid.*

29. See Richard B. Freeman, "How Much Has De-Unionization Contributed to the Rise in Male Earnings Inequality?" in *Uneven Tides: Rising Inequality in America*, ed. Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk (New York, 1993), pp. 133–63, and Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York, 1988).

30. See Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago, 1994).

knowing whether they will have any work. And much of the work still remaining at the port is quickly being mechanized through technological innovation. Faced with limited economic prospects, they eventually turn to illicit activities to earn money. The union itself colludes with a smuggling ring, which delivers payments in exchange for the union's assistance in moving contraband through the port. Some individual workers also look for opportunities to make money in the local drug trade.

In many ways, the experiences of the dockworkers parallel those of the black poor depicted in *The Wire*, as both groups struggle with the disappearance of work in the formal economy. In the absence of stable employment opportunities, both the white dockworkers and black residents in the show are drawn to illicit activities to provide income. There are also clear similarities in their lack of trust in mainstream institutions and the sense that they have been abandoned in the face of economic hardship. In an economy that places a much greater premium on high levels of education and credentials than on manual skills, both the white working class and inner-city black residents sense that they have been made superfluous by deindustrialization. Bodie, a teenager who works in the drug trade, likens himself to a sacrificial pawn on a chessboard.³¹ Lamenting the loss of reliable employment, the leader of the dockworkers union, Frank Sobotka, complains, "we used to make shit in this country."³² The parallel trajectories of these two groups point to important similarities based on their class position with regard to the impact of economic restructuring.

While recognizing these similarities, we need to pay special attention to the sharp impact of rising joblessness on African American communities. Indeed black workers have borne the brunt of deindustrialization. John Bound and Harry Holzer estimate that the shift away from manufacturing accounts for nearly half of the decline in employment for less-educated young black men in the 1970s.³³ The social implications of high joblessness for many African Americans, including those formerly in manufacturing jobs, are unique because the concentration of disadvantage in black neighborhoods creates fundamentally different contexts than those in urban white neighborhoods.

In an analysis of Chicago neighborhoods, Sampson found that even the poorest white neighborhood has an income level higher than that of the median black neighborhood. This stark inequality leads him to conclude that "the bottom-line result is that residents in not one white community

31. See Simon, "The Buys," dir. Peter Medak, 2002, *The Wire*, season 1, episode 3.

32. Simon, "Bad Dreams," dir. Ernest Dickerson, 2003, *The Wire*, season 2, episode 11.

33. See John Bound and Harry Holzer, "Industrial Shifts, Skills Levels, and the Labor Market for White and Black Males," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 75 (Aug. 1993): 387–96.

experience what is most typical for those residing in segregated black areas with respect to the basics of income. . . . Trying to estimate the effect of concentrated disadvantage on whites is thus tantamount to estimating a phantom reality.”³⁴

An analysis of Baltimore neighborhoods reveals an identical pattern. Figure 1 plots Baltimore neighborhoods by their per capita income. Among black neighborhoods (that is, those in which at least 75 percent of residents are black), the median neighborhood has a per capita income of \$12,588 (in 2000). The lowest per capita income of any white neighborhood is \$13,550. As in Chicago, there is not a single white neighborhood in Baltimore that faces the economic conditions that characterize the typical black neighborhood (fig. 1).

When considering the neighborhood contexts of poor families, it is clear that the black poor face even greater disadvantage than poor white families in Baltimore. Among all families below the poverty line, the average poor white family lives in a neighborhood that has a poverty rate of 22.7 percent. By comparison, the average poor black family lives in a neighborhood in which 32.5 percent of the families are below the poverty line. More than a quarter of poor black families (27.7 percent) live in neighborhoods in which more than 40 percent of the residents are living below the poverty line; 6.8 percent of poor white families live in neighborhoods with such high levels of poverty. Thus, the neighborhood context differs for even poor white and poor black families. The absence of stable employment opportunities in poor black neighborhoods exacerbates this concentration of disadvantage, thereby presenting uniquely difficult challenges for its residents.

The disparate neighborhood context is not the only factor that takes us beyond the apparent similarities between the black poor and the white dockworkers in *The Wire*. The different social implications of economic hardship for the two groups are also evident. While the status of employment on the docks is certainly in decline, the stevedores maintain an attachment to jobs and are ready to report whenever work does materialize. However unpredictable their actual employment, this attachment to a job and the community of fellow union members are significant buffers against the social isolation that has accompanied economic decline in the inner city.

The union members have meaningful ties in a well-developed social network and are less isolated from mainstream institutions. The leaders of

34. Sampson, “Racial Stratification and the Durable Tangle of Neighborhood Inequality,” p. 265.

Income Distributions in Neighborhoods with 75%+ Black and White Population
Baltimore 2000

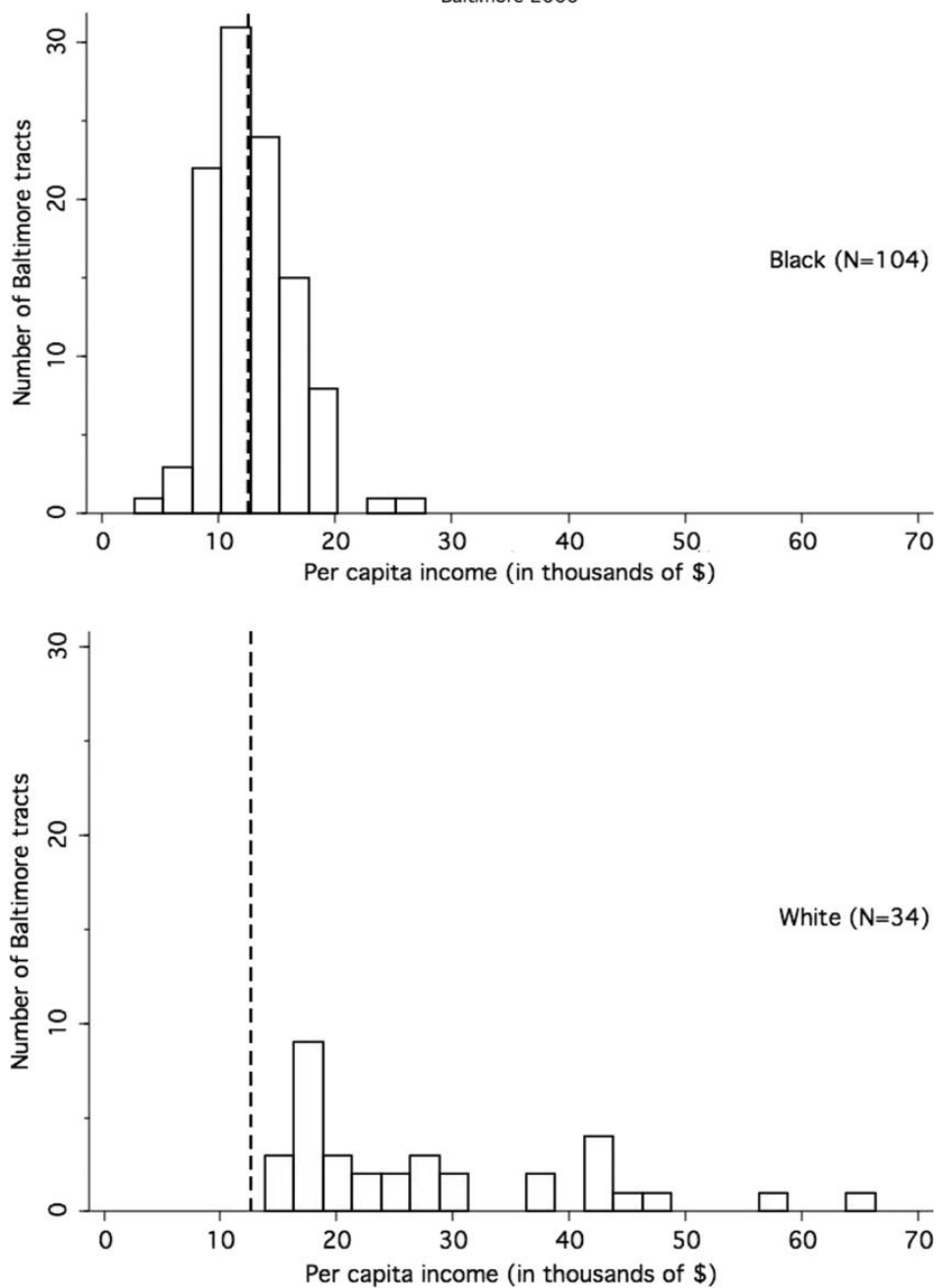


FIGURE 1. Baltimore neighborhoods by per capita income and racial composition. Note: the dashed line represents the per capita income of the median black neighborhood (\$12,588).

the union maintain access to political leaders in local and state government, although their political influence has diminished with their declining economic prospects. By comparison, political institutions have not been vehicles for pursuing meaningful improvements in the conditions of the black urban poor, even when black officials have been elected to office.³⁵ In short, whites with diminishing employment prospects still maintain fundamental advantages in social capital and access to political institutions that are not similarly available to their African American counterparts.

Politics and Urban Policy

While economic factors are central to the urban social problems examined in *The Wire*, the political context of urban decline must also be incorporated in an analysis of systemic urban inequality. As jobs were leaving urban centers in the 1980s, the Reagan administration aggressively pursued its political project of New Federalism through which the federal government dramatically reduced fiscal support for city governments and spending on programs that mainly targeted urban residents. In 1977, federal aid accounted for 17.5 percent of local government revenues in cities; by 1990, that share had dropped to a mere 5.0 percent.³⁶ Without this support, cities were stripped of the capacity to deal with the serious challenges presented by the crack epidemic, public health crises, and widespread homelessness in the 1980s.³⁷ The economic decline that accompanied deindustrialization weakened revenues for city governments, which inevitably reduced services and programs for those in need. The drastic cuts in federal aid to cities were not restored during the Clinton administration; federal support comprised 5.4 percent of city budgets in 2000.³⁸

The federal abandonment of cities at the same time that joblessness became widespread in the inner city exacerbated the problems of urban decline. This political context is essential for understanding the subsequent course of urban policy and the contemporary nature of urban inequality several decades later.

In this same period, federal urban policy underwent a fundamental shift toward an explicit emphasis on the market as the preferred source of social

35. See Thompson, *Double Trouble: Black Mayors, Black Communities, and the Call for a Deep Democracy* (New York, 2005).

36. See Bruce A. Wallin, *Budgeting for Basics: The Changing Landscape of City Finances* (Washington, DC, 2005).

37. See Demetrios Caraley, "Washington Abandons the Cities," *Political Science Quarterly* 107 (Spring 1992): 1–30.

38. See Wallin, *Budgeting for Basics*.

welfare in distressed neighborhoods. Initiated by the Carter administration in the late 1970s, the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program promoted public-private coordination of local urban development and required that local authorities work with private developers in attempts to revitalize poor neighborhoods. This market-based approach was extended through the Reagan and Clinton administrations, most notably through enterprise zones that provided tax incentives to attract developers and private firms to invest in profitable opportunities in the inner city.³⁹

This marked a significant break from previous federal policy. Whereas the earlier state-sponsored antipoverty programs were essentially countercyclical, the new emphasis on economic development meant that urban policy had become fundamentally procyclical. With the focus of urban policy shifting to economic development through a supply-side approach, inner-city neighborhoods would be dependent on the private sector rather than the state and therefore even more vulnerable to structural economic shifts. As this explicit turn to the private sector and a market-based approach to urban policy took place in the late 1970s, inner-city neighborhoods became particularly vulnerable to the widespread problems of joblessness, which are typically viewed as an economic process.

With the decline of their industrial sectors and federal support, cities turned to urban economic development as a source of revenues to make up for their budget deficits. These strategies increasingly emphasized commercial and housing development to generate revenues from sales and property taxes. Many cities sought to develop major projects to attract revenue from outside investors and tourists.⁴⁰ With limited capacity for redistributive policy, local governments sought to attract middle-class residents through high-end residential development that could provide increased property taxes, while giving little attention to the conditions of low-income residents.⁴¹

Along with the strategy to attract middle-class residents, many cities also sought to deconcentrate poverty in the 1990s—mainly through the demolition of high-rise public housing projects. In cities like Baltimore

39. See Deirdre Oakley and Hui-Shien Tsao, "A New Way of Revitalizing Distressed Urban Communities? Assessing the Impact of the Federal Empowerment Zone Program," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28 (Dec. 2006): 443–71, and Michael E. Porter, "The Competitive Advantage of the Inner City," *Harvard Business Review* 73 (May-June 1995): 55–71.

40. See *Cities and Visitors: Regulating People, Markets, and City Space*, ed. Lily M. Hoffman, Susan S. Fainstein, and Dennis R. Judd (Malden, Mass., 2003).

41. See Kathe Newman, "Newark, Decline and Avoidance, Renaissance and Desire: From Disinvestment to Reinvestment," *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Sciences* 594 (Jul. 2004): 34–48.

and Chicago, these buildings were home to thousands of poor residents living in highly concentrated poverty. The physical structures were often in disrepair, and high rates of crime and violence threatened the safety of public housing residents. The demolition of public housing projects was supported by federal assistance, including the HOPE VI program that replaced the buildings with mixed-income developments. Local officials typically promoted the demolition of housing projects by highlighting the problems of concentrated poverty and the need to improve conditions for poor residents. Indeed, in the opening scene of the third season of *The Wire*, the mayor of Baltimore addresses residents and the media just before the high-rise projects are demolished. With local developers at his side, he emphasizes the detrimental social conditions of poor families as the basis for tearing down the buildings.⁴²

Understood in the context of the pressures on local governments to generate sufficient revenue after the federal disinvestment from cities, the demolition of public housing projects was linked to urban economic development strategies. Many of the buildings were located near redeveloped downtown areas, which could attract middle-class residents who, unlike public housing residents, would pay property taxes on market-rate housing. In Chicago, for example, the infamous Cabrini-Green housing projects were located less than one mile from downtown; they were demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing. Considering that many former residents of public housing in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, St. Louis, and Atlanta had not been relocated to other areas several years after their public housing projects were demolished, they were apt to question whether the discourse of deconcentrating poverty had been cynically employed to promote high-end real estate development instead.⁴³ As the mayor in *The Wire* announces the demolition of the housing projects with great fanfare, three teenagers debate the costs and benefits of losing the towers.⁴⁴ Beyond the problems posed by the restructured labor market and broader economic forces, political institutions have also failed to improve the conditions of the urban poor.

The period of urban decline also coincided with the ascent of an urban black political elite, as black mayors were elected in many large cities for the first time. However, this apparent political empowerment has not seemed to produce meaningful improvements in the conditions of the

42. See Simon, "Time after Time," dir. Ed Bianchi, 2004, *The Wire*, season 3, episode 1.

43. See Jeff Crump, "Deconcentration by Demolition: Public Housing, Poverty, and Urban Policy," *Environment and Planning D* 20, no. 2 (2002): 581–96, and Edward G. Goetz, *Clearing the Way: Deconcentrating the Poor in Urban America* (Washington, DC, 2003).

44. See Simon, "Time after Time."

urban black poor. In a detailed study of urban politics in postwar Atlanta, Clarence Stone describes a long-running alliance between the white business elite and black middle class that has shaped local policymaking and constrained the policy options available to elected officials.⁴⁵ This alliance has negotiated a compromise through which the white business elite benefits from pro-growth policy while the black middle class has reaped gains in minority business opportunities. Even when Maynard Jackson was elected in 1973 with the support of progressive, neighborhood-based voters, he was unable to implement redistributive policies that would have benefited poor black residents. Stone emphasizes the distinction between an electoral coalition and a governing coalition; although they may be significant in their electoral power, residents of poor, black neighborhoods cannot contribute much in governing capacity, and elected mayors are consistently dependent on the entrenched regime for governing authority.

In the fictional depiction of Baltimore politics in *The Wire*, the incumbent black mayor, Clarence Royce, makes symbolic appeals to black voters when he is threatened by an electoral challenge from a white candidate. While in office, however, Mayor Royce never prioritized policies that would benefit the black poor. The influence of governing coalitions on local policies points to the significance of political processes and shows that macroeconomic forces do not solely determine urban inequality. In analyzing the waves of black mayors in recent decades, Thompson also emphasizes the divide between the black political elite and the urban poor.⁴⁶ While the black political elite depend on low-income black voters to get elected, once in office they actually demobilize the black poor by building coalitions with business interests and the middle class; and consequently they prevent the black poor from effectively demanding policies that improve their conditions.

Even in cities with a substantial share of low-income black residents, elected officials have tended to cater to middle-class residents and business interests that can provide valuable governing capacity and economic resources that are crucial in local politics. Nonetheless, while political institutions have not effectively improved the conditions of the urban poor, the magnitude of the underlying structural problems may in fact be beyond the capacity of local government to address. Deindustrialization has devastated the economic base of many large cities, and federal disinvestment from the cities further weakened the ability of local governments to ad-

45. See Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988* (Lawrence, Kans., 1989).

46. See Thompson, *Double Trouble*.

dress urgent problems. The combined impact of these changes—declining economic and social institutions and the failure of political institutions—on the residents of poor inner-city neighborhoods is fully captured in *The Wire*'s portrayal of systemic urban inequality.

Education and Youth

In his classic 1965 text on the conditions of the black poor in inner-city ghettos, Kenneth Clark devotes a chapter to “ghetto schools” and the unequal educational achievement of black and white students.⁴⁷ More than four decades later, much of his analysis applies to present-day urban schools, which are examined in the fourth season of *The Wire*. Clark points to the de facto segregation of schools as the fundamental factor at the root of educational inequality. He strongly criticizes popular arguments that emphasize cultural deprivation as the cause of lower black achievement. In his view institutional practices of schools and the structure of the education system are much more significant in explaining educational inequality than cultural explanations. As schools develop lower expectations for black students, he argues, these become self-fulfilling prophecies as black students then inevitably underachieve.

The public school depicted in *The Wire* lacks the necessary resources to truly educate students and help them develop skills that prepare them for jobs that would pay decent wages. Even before the students reach high school, their trajectories are seriously constrained by the poor quality of the elementary and middle schools and the limited economic opportunities available to them. The students themselves seem aware of their likely outcomes, and the teachers are often resigned to accept their fate. In a comment that describes the antagonistic dynamics in the school, one teacher in the show reflects, “no one wins. One side just loses more slowly.”⁴⁸ The students also recognize that even if they were able to learn skills in their schools, they would be thwarted by the absence of well-paying jobs in the surrounding area.

At a systemic level, economic factors and educational institutions work together to shape this dimension of urban inequality. Although some students might overcome these obstacles and attain some upward mobility, the broad pattern of social stratification is reproduced and remains durable. The school essentially prepares the students for the social positions they occupy. For students who are already involved in the drug trade, the

47. See Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York, 1965).

48. Simon, “Refugees,” dir. Jim McKay, 2006, *The Wire*, season 4, episode 4.

school is actually a site of learning the *habitus* of disobeying rules and dealing with authority.

Through an in-depth historical analysis of inner-city education, Kathryn Neckerman emphasizes that the problems of inner-city schools are fundamentally linked to policy choices made by the school system throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁹ Using the case study of inner-city schools in Chicago, she highlights the inadequate response to de facto segregation in the school system, the implementation of vocational education that relegated black students to a lower tier of skills training, and the failure of schools to provide adequate remedial education for low-achieving students. Her analysis makes clear that the problems of inner-city schools were not necessarily and inevitably determined by the concentration of disadvantage in the surrounding communities; instead, these institutions pursued specific policies that had detrimental impacts on the achievement of black students. While urban decline was an important condition that contributed to failing schools, the practices of educational institutions resulted in even greater inequality.

This focus on institutional practices effectively challenges alternative explanations that overemphasize the role of individual actors, especially those that attribute low achievement to the behavior or attitudes of teachers, families, or students. A common view is that, in the context of racial segregation and social isolation, black students have developed an oppositional culture toward schools and teachers. According to this explanation, the cultural perspective of black students entails a devaluing of education, which is presumed to be a significant factor in their low achievement. A specific version of this explanation holds that black students stigmatize educational success as acting white; rather than accept the social penalty that supposedly comes with educational achievement, black students are hypothesized to favor social acceptance over education.⁵⁰ While there may be evidence of oppositional or antagonistic relationships between some students and the schools, these explanations do not adequately explain racial disparities in educational achievement.⁵¹

An overemphasis on attractive but inadequate cultural explanations mistakenly draws attention away from structural, institutional, and environmental factors that are fundamental to understanding educational in-

49. See Kathryn M. Neckerman, *Schools Betrayed: Roots of Failure in Inner-City Education* (Chicago, 2007).

50. See Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of 'Acting White,'" *Urban Review* 18 (Sept. 1986): 176–206.

51. See Roland G. Fryer, "'Acting White': The Social Price Paid by the Best and Brightest Minority Students," *Education Next* 6 (Winter 2006): 53–59.

equality. Prudence Carter connects the cultural orientations of students to institutional practices of schools by demonstrating that the schools and teachers actually link cultural patterns of students to their educational outcomes. She distinguishes between “dominant” and “non-dominant” forms of cultural capital and argues that teachers mistakenly interpret the “non-dominant” cultural capital of inner-city students as evidence of lower academic ability.⁵² This profoundly shapes the expectations that teachers hold, which then constrain the academic performance of poor, black students. Even if a student does value education and is committed to succeeding in an inner-city school, the structural barriers in the education system as depicted in *The Wire* present tremendous obstacles.

Outside of the schools, the neighborhood context is also an important factor in the cognitive and educational development of students. As an illustration of the impact of the neighborhood environment, researchers analyzed longitudinal data on 750 black students in Chicago and found that “residing in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood cumulatively impedes the development of academically relevant verbal ability in children.”⁵³ An important finding in this research is that the negative effects of concentrated disadvantage on the cognitive development of the students persisted even for those who had moved out of these neighborhoods.

In addition to the economic and demographic components of neighborhood disadvantage, the high levels of violence characteristic of many poor urban neighborhoods may also adversely affect students. In a recent study, Patrick Sharkey finds that performance on cognitive assessments were significantly lower for students who lived in areas in which a homicide had occurred in the week before they were given the test.⁵⁴ This study estimates only the effect of a very recent murder near a student’s home on his or her cognitive performance. The long-term effects of cumulative exposure to high levels of violence may also have significant implications for the development of children in poor urban neighborhoods.

Beyond these acute effects of violence on student achievement, the prevalence of violent conflicts has important implications for the social organization of these neighborhoods, especially for youth. Based on ethnographic research in inner-city neighborhoods, David Harding shows

52. See Prudence L. Carter, “‘Black’ Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth,” *Social Problems* 50 (Feb. 2003): 136–55.

53. Sampson, Patrick Sharkey, and Stephen W. Raudenbush, “Durable Effects of Concentrated Disadvantage on Verbal Ability among African-American Children,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 23 Jan. 2008, p. 846.

54. See Sharkey, “The Acute Effect of Local Homicide on Children’s Cognitive Performance,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 26 June 2010, pp. 11733–38.

that the perceived threat of violence leads poor youth to seek protection by developing more neighborhood-based bonds among youth of different ages. Whereas young people in other neighborhoods tend to create relationships with peers of their same age, youth in poor neighborhoods are more likely to develop social ties with people who are a few years older. These bonds facilitate the “cross-cohort socialization” that Harding argues is an important mechanism for the transmission of certain worldviews about education and the labor market.⁵⁵

In a notable scene in *The Wire*, two teenage drug dealers marvel at the ingenuity of their boneless Chicken McNuggets and imagine that they must have made their inventor extremely wealthy. An older dealer, D’Angelo, derides their naïveté. “The man who invented them things, just some sad ass down at the basement of McDonald’s thinking up some shit to make money for the real players,” he tells them. Disillusioned with a formal labor market comprised mainly of low-wage jobs, D’Angelo rejects it as fundamentally unfair since people are not rewarded according to their true worth. In his view, powerful institutions regularly exploit those with less power, and social inequality is the inevitable result. His understanding of how society works shapes his approach to how one should operate in such a world. When a younger dealer objects to the inadequate compensation of the McNuggets inventor, D’Angelo teaches them, “it ain’t about right. It’s about money.” In this way, D’Angelo transmits his view of how the world works to the dealers who are several years younger.⁵⁶

Given the scale of mass imprisonment, poor urban youth are also exposed to family members and older friends who are or have been incarcerated. Christopher Wildeman estimates that 25 percent of black children born in 1990 had a parent in prison by the time they reached the age of fourteen; by comparison, approximately 4 percent of white children had a parent in prison.⁵⁷ For black children born to parents who had not completed high school, more than 50 percent had a father in prison. The risk of having a parent or family member who is incarcerated therefore is especially concentrated among low-income black youth. Having an incarcerated parent has detrimental, long-term impacts on these children, who already confront other forms of disadvantage.⁵⁸ In *The Wire*, the young character Namond is shown visiting his incarcerated father, Wee-Bey, who

55. Harding, *The Living Drama*, p. 4.

56. Simon, “The Detail,” dir. Clark Johnson, 2002, *The Wire*, season 1, episode 2.

57. See Christopher Wildeman, “Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage,” *Demography* 46 (May 2008): 265–80.

58. See Megan Comfort, “Punishment beyond the Legal Offender,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3 (2007): 271–96.

had been active in the drug trade. Namond is identified by the school as a particularly troubled student and soon thereafter enters the drug trade himself as a street-level dealer.⁵⁹

The low educational achievement of poor urban youth can be traced to the social dimensions of their neighborhood context, the economic factors underlying urban decline, the institutional practices of the school system, and the reliance on mass imprisonment in the criminal justice system. This set of factors undermines the “achievement ideology” that promotes a belief in the equality of opportunity and assumes that schooling itself can provide a route for upward mobility. In this framework, education is regarded as the solution to social inequality. With an understanding of how unequal education reproduces social inequality, acceptance of the “achievement ideology” is a key mechanism through which existing inequality is legitimated.⁶⁰ The entangled connections among these institutions are at the core of systemic, multigenerational urban inequality.

Urban Inequality beyond *The Wire*

By placing crime and the drug trade at the center of its depiction of urban inequality, *The Wire* runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypical depictions of the urban poor. Some writers have maintained that the show promotes biased views of poor African Americans as dependent on welfare, lazy, criminal, and immoral.⁶¹ A degree of caution about the broader implications of how the black poor is represented is certainly well founded. These negative perceptions have dominated popular discourse on urban inequality, and they, too, often influence decisions about who is deemed worthy of assistance through social policy.⁶²

A careful assessment, however, reveals that *The Wire* actually powerfully undermines these dangerous stereotypes. By examining the institutions that shape the characters, it convincingly demonstrates that the outcomes of the lives of the black poor are not the result of individual predispositions for violence, group traits, or cultural deficits. Through a scrupulous exploration of the inner workings of drug-dealing gangs, the

59. See Simon, “Soft Eyes,” dir. Christine Moore, 2008, *The Wire*, season 5, episode 2.

60. See Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* (Boulder, Colo., 1987).

61. See Mark Bowen, “The Angriest Man in Television,” *Atlantic Monthly* 301 (Jan.-Feb. 2008): 50–57, and Ishmael Reed, “Should Harvard Teach ‘The Wire’? No, It Relies on Clichés about Blacks and Drugs,” *Boston Globe*, 30 Sept. 2010, www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2010/09/30/no_it_relies_on_clichs_about_blacks_and_drugs/

62. See Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago, 1999), and Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York, 1989).

police, politicians, unions, and public schools, *The Wire* shows that individuals' decisions and behavior are often shaped by—and indeed limited by—social, political, and economic forces beyond their control.

To be sure, *The Wire* does not provide a comprehensive portrayal of the various complex dimensions of life in the inner city. As one example, the influx of immigrants in recent decades has reshaped urban America. A thorough understanding of contemporary urban inequality needs to include an examination of how recent immigration continues to transform American cities. The racial landscape of urban inequality is far more complex than an exclusive focus on poor black ghettos. In its depiction of the poorest of the poor, the series does not provide an in-depth portrayal of the challenges faced by those who do hold jobs in the formal economy and who may be above the poverty line but nevertheless struggle in the context of deep urban inequality. As others have noted, many residents of these neighborhoods are actively engaged in political efforts to improve their conditions; rather than adapt to their circumstances, they work to improve the opportunities that should be available to residents.⁶³

In fact, metropolitan poverty itself is no longer a fundamentally inner-city phenomenon. In recent years, the share of the nation's poor living in the suburbs has actually surpassed that of the cities. Of the 39.1 million people below the poverty line in 2008, 31.9 percent were in the suburbs, 28.0 percent lived in "primary cities," and the rest were in small metropolitan and rural areas.⁶⁴ In portraying the lives of the urban poor, *The Wire* also gives relatively little attention to families and parents, which have long been the subject of considerable research on urban poverty.

There are undoubtedly several substantive topics that are relevant to urban poverty but receive less attention in the series. That said, we must not lose sight of an important recurring theme in the series: given a limited set of available opportunities, there is often no exit from the predetermined life trajectories of residents in poor urban neighborhoods. This is vividly illustrated in the lives of D'Angelo, Wallace, and many other characters. By the end of the series, the problems remain unsolved, and the cycle repeats itself. Disadvantages become more deeply entrenched over time and across generations.

A fundamental objective of social scientists is to generate explanations of social conditions. Outside of academia, ordinary people also form ex-

63. See John Atlas and Peter Dreier, "Is *The Wire* Too Cynical?" *Dissent* 55 (Summer 2008): 79–82.

64. See Elizabeth Kneebone and Emily Garr, *The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008* (Washington, DC, 2010).

planations about their conditions and how the world works, and *The Wire* takes their explanations seriously.

A key lesson from the series is that people's circumstances are shaped by the institutions that govern their lives—despite their best efforts to demonstrate individual autonomy, distinctiveness, and moral and material worth. Accordingly, the conditions of the urban poor cannot be understood as somehow existing outside the political and economic arrangements of the broader society. By depicting the interrelationship of social, political, and economic institutions that work together to constrain the lives of the urban poor, *The Wire* effectively illustrates the fundamental nature of systemic urban inequality.