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## *Critical Response*

### *IV*

## *The Wire's Impact: A Rejoinder*

Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson

Linda Williams's and Patrick Jagoda's essays clearly reveal the ways in which *The Wire* stimulates responses and reflections among scholars of diverse academic backgrounds. We welcome these thoughtful essays as supplements to our essay, but given space constraints we devote our attention in this response to Kenneth W. Warren's critical comments on our piece. Warren contends that we have produced a "depoliticized account of poverty." He recognizes that such an unlikely criticism will "require some explanation chiefly because Chaddha and Wilson devote one section of their article to politics and policy" (p. 201). Nevertheless, his attempt to substantiate such an overstatement is unconvincing.

In our essay, we emphasize the political context of urban decline, lest readers attribute the problems of urban inequality solely to economic factors, like deindustrialization and globalization. We examine the dramatic decline in federal support for cities during the Reagan administration at the same moment that they were hit by severe job loss, especially in manufacturing. These financial cuts weakened the ability of city governments to deal with a host of housing, health, and other social challenges during the 1980s. The federal support for cities was never restored during the subsequent years of economic expansion, even with a Democratic administration.

By that time, federal urban policy had been fundamentally reoriented away from government support toward market-based strategies, like urban redevelopment, that depended on partnerships between lo-

cal government and the private sector. While such programs as enterprise zones and empowerment zones have created business opportunities for private developers and investors, they have had a limited impact on conditions for residents of low-income neighborhoods. Beyond federal-level neglect, we also highlight the inability or unwillingness of local governments and big-city mayors to address these concerns. Our discussion makes clear that political institutions at all levels have consistently failed the urban poor.

Given that we explicitly identify specific policy decisions as well as fundamental institutional aspects of urban politics that marginalize the urban poor from decision making and agenda setting, Warren's description of our discussion as "depoliticized" is puzzling. Indeed, it is disingenuous to suggest that our account somehow does not incorporate political context, interests, or state policies. Rather, it seems that Warren's objection is that our essay does not advance his preferred view of how politics figures in urban poverty and inequality.

In his view, class is the key dimension of the political conflict underlying urban poverty and inequality. In "sketching . . . a conclusion" that "can only be suggestive," he relies on David Harvey's description of how business interests have dominated the Republican Party and effectively utilized it to represent business-class interests against government intervention and the welfare state. Right-wing attacks, he continues, coincided "with a crescendoing refrain from within academia that class inadequately explained inequality" to weaken "the appeal of working-class interests as an alternative to this power grab by capitalist interests" (p. 205). It is remarkable that Warren criticizes our discussion as "unnecessarily opaque" before introducing this stylized account of the past forty years of US politics, which features "capitalist interests," attacks from the Right, and influential analytical orientations "from within academia" (p. 205).

At a very general level, this summary can be useful in understanding the overall rightward shift in government policy in the economic sphere. It does not, however, adequately explain the political context of urban poverty and inequality. In our essay, we make clear that the failure to improve conditions for the urban poor has been bipartisan. Indeed, consistent with Warren's argument, empirical evidence indicates that overall income in-

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equality has increased more under Republican than Democratic administrations.<sup>1</sup> That said, there is more to the story than the class interests represented by one party. As one example, *The Wire* takes place against the backdrop of a dramatic increase in incarceration in recent decades. The disproportionate imprisonment of nonwhite men, especially those with less than a college degree, has had significant implications for low-income families and communities.<sup>2</sup> The turn toward mass imprisonment may be rooted in the law-and-order platform of Republican candidates in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, the sharp increase in the nation's prison population continued throughout the 1990s under the Democratic Clinton administration.

The one specific policy discussed at any length by Warren—the demolition of public housing projects—was carried out through the HOPE VI program, a centerpiece of Clinton's urban policy. The federal policy was implemented in partnership with local governments—practically all of which in major US cities were led by Democrats. In many cities dealing with the problems of urban poverty, Republicans have barely maintained relevance in local politics over the past few decades.

Scholars of urban politics help to explain how the institutional arrangements of local politics have prevented even a wave of big-city black mayors from improving the conditions of the urban poor. Although these candidates often rely on the support of low-income communities to get elected, once in office they often forge governing coalitions with the local business community and white political elite.<sup>3</sup> To protect their political power, black elected officials may even actively demobilize the low-income communities that were key to their election.<sup>4</sup> In our view, understanding the policy actions of both parties and the institutional features of urban politics—not only the class interests motivating the Republican Party—are key to an analysis of the political context of urban inequality.

Warren also faults us for drawing distinctions between the dockworkers depicted in season 2 of *The Wire* and the black poor who live in West Baltimore, the site of battles among rival drug gangs. In our piece, we discuss how deindustrialization hurt workers across racial lines, especially

1. See Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, N.J., 2008).

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

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

4. See J. Phillip Thompson, *Double Trouble: Black Mayors, Black Communities, and the Call for a Deep Democracy* (New York, 2006).

those without a college degree, by eliminating manufacturing jobs and driving down wages for the blue-collar jobs that remained. We recount how both the dockworkers and the black poor are drawn to illicit activity in the underground economy and how they both lose trust in mainstream institutions. Further, we specifically describe these as “important similarities based on their class position with regard to the impact of economic restructuring” (p. 175).

We also consciously avoid making the simplistic argument that, because of similarities in their trajectories, the unionized workers and the black poor are in essentially the same position. To that end, we highlight the particularly sharp impact of joblessness on African American communities, which were especially reliant on manufacturing jobs in northern industrial cities. As an important illustration of the differences between whites and blacks after deindustrialization, we use data to show that black residents of Baltimore are much more likely to live in neighborhoods with lower incomes, higher poverty, and higher joblessness than their white counterparts. Our point here is the rather uncontroversial view that social context is critical to understanding urban inequality. While any poor family clearly faces difficult challenges, being poor in a neighborhood where one’s neighbors have steady employment is different from being poor in a neighborhood in which most of one’s neighbors are also in poverty and without jobs.

Some differences are evident in the depiction of the dockworkers and the black poor in *The Wire*. While there is less activity at the docks, the workers do maintain an attachment to their jobs and are ready to work on the days when they are needed. There is a strong social network among union members, and we point out that the union has more access to political institutions than do poor communities in West Baltimore.

Warren discounts these differences and suggests that the position of the union members is not so far from that of the black poor. Since the union is also drawn to illegal income-generating opportunities and some members end up dead or in jail, Warren argues that “it is the similarities between the stevedores and the drug gangs and not their differences that are most on display here” (p. 203). In our view, both these similarities and important differences are apparent in the depiction of the dockworkers and the black poor. Warren does not convince us that these differences deserve less attention than we give them.

To be sure, the challenges facing the dockworkers and the black poor are largely driven by the same set of structural economic shifts. Since the 1970s, it has become much more difficult for workers without a college degree to find well-paying jobs. The deindustrialization of

northern cities that eviscerated the supply of jobs in the inner city also slowed activity at the docks, which decreased the demand for the labor of unionized dockworkers. Communities like West Baltimore were transformed by the loss of jobs in the inner city and the out-migration of middle-class residents long before *The Wire* begins. In the absence of meaningful economic opportunities, the drug trade has been firmly established, and the community is marginalized from political institutions. A great strength of the second season is that through the narrative of the dockworkers the show is able to illustrate how economic restructuring threatens the livelihood of the workers, leads some to seek opportunities in the underground economy, and strips them of political power. Viewers can watch these processes unfold in the lives of the dockworkers, whereas depictions of gang and police activity in West Baltimore cannot as easily show how the similar problems of economic restructuring played out in the inner city several years before. The conditions facing the black poor and the dockworkers may have similar roots, but it is inaccurate to disregard important differences in their circumstances.

Warren's critique of coauthor William Julius Wilson's work further reveals his sloppy scholarship. He relies mainly on misinterpretations and misrepresentations that take Wilson's work out of context. For example, he quotes from Stephen Steinberg's most recent diatribe, which asserts that Wilson "routinely violates his own axiom about the integral relationship between culture and social structure" (p. 207). Anyone who takes the time to read the entire transcript of the 2010 congressional briefing on culture and poverty, to which Steinberg and Warren refer, will see that Wilson clearly discusses the integral relation between social structure and culture, including the impact of structural factors on culture. To only focus on Wilson's statements about the significant role of culture without reference to this broader structural-cultural framework, as he outlines it in the congressional briefing, is disingenuous.

Warren's misrepresentation of Wilson's work is even more startling when he directly associates Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) with the policies that resulted in the dislocation of the poor following the destruction of public housing projects. Warren states: "The crucial point here is that Wilson's 'analytic perspective' is not just a window onto how the urban poor were dislocated during the late twentieth century. Rather, Wilson's sociology was also part of that process of dislocation" (p. 205). This is a gross distortion. Wilson sought to explain

what causes the distinct phenomenon of concentrated poverty.<sup>5</sup> His argument about the structural (political and economic) causes of concentrated poverty does not imply that these neighborhoods should be deconcentrated by displacing poor residents.

In fact, one need not speculate about the policy implications of the research in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, since Wilson explicitly suggests a series of policy responses to the problems of concentrated poverty in that book itself. Nowhere does Wilson suggest the forced relocation of the urban poor from housing projects or other centers of concentrated poverty as a policy option. On the contrary, his extended discussion of policy options, which flows from his analysis of the social transformation of the inner city, highlights macroeconomic policy to generate economic growth and tight labor markets; fiscal and monetary policies to stimulate noninflationary growth and increase the competitiveness of American goods on both the domestic and international markets; and a national labor market strategy to make the labor force, including the black labor force, more adaptable to changing economic opportunities. He also advocated a family allowance program, a child support assurance program, and a childcare strategy.

These policies, Wilson maintained, would address the problems of concentrated poverty by providing poor inner-city residents with resources that promote social mobility. He pointed out that social mobility often leads to geographic mobility. And geographic mobility would be enhanced if efforts to improve the economic and educational resources of inner-city residents were accompanied by legal action to effectively eliminate both the historic discriminatory government policies that routinely locate public housing for disadvantaged people of color in poor segregated neighborhoods and the manipulation of zoning laws and discriminatory land use controls or site selection policies that thwart the construction of affordable housing for low-income families and severely restrict their residence in communities that provide desirable services.

The point to be emphasized is that Wilson proposed the creation of macroeconomic policy, labor market policy, and family policy that would enable poor inner-city families to develop the resources they need to make their own mobility decisions, and he advocated the removal of the historic discriminatory obstacles that would curtail the poor's social and geographic mobility. Given this comprehensive pol-

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

icy discussion, Warren's statement that Wilson's sociology is part of the process of dislocation generated by real estate developers is not only irresponsible but also ludicrous.

Warren seems interested in a critical reflection about the role of social research in policy formation. There are, indeed, important questions to consider about the interplay between social science research and public policy, especially with regard to issues of inequality and poverty. Others have produced more thorough accounts based on careful research rather than speculation and logical leaps.<sup>6</sup>

6. See Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, N.J., 2001).