Quarantined: An Autobiographical Look at Concentrated Poverty in Northampton County NC

Introduction

“Isolation is the enemy of improvement.”

-Tony Wagner

“There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”¹

-Warren Buffet

I was never the wealthiest child; in fact, my family was quite poor. I grew up in the rural enclaves of Northampton County, North Carolina, which is on the border of Virginia positioned along Interstate 95 in the eastern part of the state. When I tell people that I grew up poor, I usually feel the need to add further explanation to such a statement. Poor is certainly relative. There are indeed varying levels of poor. One could envision anything from a child with a swollen stomach resulting from malnutrition to a family that may have trouble paying the car note once a year. But even within the same context poor has such a subjective quality that it renders the term deceptively vague. What do I mean by poor? How am I interpreting this word? In my experience, poor was a lifestyle. It went beyond the occasional financial hardship. It was pressed, desperate, and disparaging in nature. And what’s more is that I had an incomplete understanding of it until I left for college. Why is that? One of the things that makes poverty have those cyclical, generational, imprisoning and ostracizing qualities is the community element. While I certainly recognized that I was poor, a complete understanding requires comparison. But my classmates were poor. My neighbors were poor. My entire community was poor. In fact, I knew of no one personally who even classified as middle class. I grew up in an area of concentrated and persistent poverty. We were the quarantined, and the abandoned.

I remember my classmates in grade school, bartering for leftover cafeteria food to take home for the weekends. Every Friday like clockwork, the same few would scour the lunchroom, looking for anyone that appeared to be eating slowly, or had an abnormally abundant tray. “Man, you don’t even want that!” They’d eagerly pull up an empty chair, waiting for a response from the leisurely eater. Sometimes it was easy, sometimes it required a bit more creativity, but they were always able to walk away with some degree of fare wrapped tightly in stolen toilet paper. They’d grin as they skipped happily away to the next person. “I’m saying, waste not. Folks are starving in Africa right?” We’d all laugh hysterically at the parental reference and spit out a playful retort like, “Ya’ll are just some hungry fools”, all while completely ignoring the irony that folks are starving a lot closer than Africa.

I recall watching church leaders gather grocery lists from the elderly with the intention of ensuring they would have food another week. Full service grocery stores were scarce around these parts, which made vehicle ownership a necessity. There were a fortunate few who could walk the couple of miles down a sidewalk-absent, country road, with hopefully dry ditches for their week’s groceries. But for most, it was an impossibility to cover the distance on foot. This was especially true with any kind of physical disability or health related burdens, which ran rampant through our entire community as it were.

I recall watching my friends drop out of school one by one to raise children, sell drugs, or in some cases, simply to ease the confrontation of hopelessness.

We knew we were poor, but how do you measure the rest?

The poverty threshold for a two person household in the US is currently $15,930. When we measure poverty in the U.S., it tends to be against this absolute threshold. We are then able to make quick assumptions. “$15,930 is our poverty line. If you are below this line, we assume

---

you are not able to afford basic necessities like housing, food, etc.” There is indeed some rhetoric questioning whether the calculation of the threshold should be improved.³ But even aside from the fact that the threshold itself is not a good indicator, I would also submit that the method itself is not representative of the dynamic nature of poverty.

This absolute threshold does not specify that 48% of all kids in Northampton County live in poverty and are far more likely to go hungry than their counterparts in Union County for example.⁴ It also doesn’t indicate that these areas of concentration are more likely to be food deserts.⁵ An audience will not readily be able to connect this $15,930 indicator to the parallel fact that high schools with majority low-income students are far less likely to be able to graduate even half of their original class.⁶ In short, this measuring standard does not represent the associated and correlating factors of poverty that we all experienced simultaneously and in near uniformity. It is therefore insufficient to access the needs of the poor.

Poverty is not simply the lack of financial wherewithal. One cannot measure poverty comprehensively by assessing the absence of capital or funds. Poverty also has everything to do with place. The two are inextricably linked.

Purpose

The measure of concentrated poverty refers to the number of people below the poverty threshold living within the same geographical area. Areas of extreme or high-poverty, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, are characterized by at least 40% of the population living below the federal poverty threshold.⁷ In this paper I submit that there is a substantial

⁴ Poor Kids in North Carolina,
⁵ Id.
difference in the experience of individuals who are poor but reside in economically diverse areas and individuals who are poor and also reside in poor communities. Concentrated poverty is effectively economic segregation and carries with it significant and unique challenges. Simply residing in these areas places additional burdens on the poor beyond what they might otherwise experience due to their individual financial condition.

Concentrated poverty in the United States overall is increasing. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods doubled. Although there seemed to be some brief progress as is expressed by the decline in concentrated poverty during the 1990’s, it was short-lived. High-poverty areas came back with a vengeance over the next decade, increasing by nearly a third and has been on the rise since. There was also an increase in the number of census tracts considered to be high-poverty. In 1970 these areas totaled around 1,100 in number, but rose substantially to 3,100 in 2010.

As uncomfortable as it may be to admit, North Carolina is one of the states of most concern, leading the way in terms of the increase in concentrated poverty. From 2000 to 2006-2010, North Carolina’s concentrated poverty rate has more than doubled. The number of these neighborhoods has also nearly tripled in North Carolina during this same time. Lastly, to make matters worse, the number of people living in these areas has more than tripled.

---

13 Id.
14 Id.
This poverty has also been persistent: Two-thirds of the census tracts defined as high-poverty in 1970, were still high-poverty areas in 2010. Another 25% of these neighborhoods escaped the high-poverty status, but remained poorer than the national average, which is about 15% of population living below the federal poverty level. In fact, the sad truth is that few high-poverty neighborhoods ever escape poverty. Only about 9 percent of the census tracts that were high-poverty in 1970 recovered to levels of poverty at or below the national average in 2010.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight several of the unique challenges faced by residents of these areas. This discussion is not exhaustive, rather it will merely touch upon factors of particular interest in explaining the dangers of concentrated poverty. In doing so, I will include autobiographical accounts of my own personal experiences of sprouting from such a place. While these accounts are indeed anecdotal, they are also definitive and in some ways representative of a common narrative of folks residing in these areas. My tiny home town is part of a larger area of concentrated poverty that encompasses a large amount of Northampton County. For this reason, I will be presenting a profile of indicators specific to that county and in some respects comparing it with indicators from Wake County NC, which is the county in which the state capital is located. My intention is not to criticize residents from either county nor to criticize the county itself. I only wish to highlight the challenges in hopes that these conditions may be improved.

I have broken this paper down into three large sections. The first will discuss the challenges of living in an area of concentrated poverty and the characteristics that likely to be inherent in these areas. The second will discuss difficulties in economic mobility by way of

---

16 Id.
17 Id.
relocation. The third section will discuss proposed solutions and recommendations for a better outcome.

Identifying the Political-Economic Void

Although each one is unique, there are a few running themes amongst these geographical poverty pockets. These characteristics are common and more likely to be present in areas of uniform poverty than in more economically diverse locations. I specifically wish to highlight a few of the more dangerous traits: racial segregation, subpar educational institutions, and stale housing markets. It’s important to note here that there are countless other features that are commonly attributed to these communities as symptoms of blight and deprivation that I do not address here, but they should be included in the larger discussion of mitigation and remedies that may be effectively applied to these areas.

Racial Segregation

“The rigid segregation of neighborhoods means that the black child will be raised in a residential environment, with higher poverty, fewer resources, poor schools and more violence than that of the white child. These differences have an important impact on children’s opportunities as they move toward adulthood.”

-Patrick Sharkley

My high school class was 97% black, and we were all poor. In fact, the entire school was approximately 98% black. We thought nothing of it. It was merely a representation of the neighborhoods we lived in. There simply were no other races in the area, therefore, there were no other students that could racially diversify our school. That seemed to be a perfectly innocuous argument of demand versus availability. However, the racial distribution of my high school was only a symptom of a much larger social ill that is more commonly present in high-poverty communities.

Nationwide these areas of concentrated poverty tend to be disproportionately represented by minority populations. Black and American Indian (and in some cases Hispanics), are also far more likely to reside in these areas. North Carolina certainly follows this trend of inequality in economic hardship. In North Carolina, black people who are poor are 3.5 times more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty than poor white people. Poor black people are also 2.7 times more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty than poor Latino people.

Northampton County is no different. Broken down by census tract, the areas with the highest black populations also make up the areas with the highest percentage of concentrated poverty. In fact, the tracts based on both of these indicators are nearly congruous.

20 Id.
22 Id.
As for me, I grew up on a farm somewhere in the middle of this broken mass of segregation. It was a small family farm; it didn’t produce enough quantity to bring in any sufficient income, but it was large enough to sustain our immediate family of 5. We ate what we could grow. Bad crop seasons meant really rough times ahead, but we always made due. My family has been here for generations. My mother grew up here, and her father before her. In fact, my grandfather’s father was a sharecropper on this very land. Throughout this series of inheritance, however, our family was still quite poor, and remained poor in this very spot, leading up to my childhood. 4 adults and myself, living in a tiny, 3 bedroom house on a hill, at the end of a dirt path, on a quaint family farm, on the land that time forgot.

I’ve found this to be significant for two reasons. The first is that poverty is persistent, not only generally speaking, but specifically for African Americans. Studies show that 70% of black people who live in concentrated poverty are the children and grandchildren of the black people living in concentrated poverty in 1970.\(^23\) That is to say that over two-thirds of black children who were raised in the poorest quarter of U.S. neighborhoods a generation ago now raise their own children in the same poor neighborhoods.\(^24\)

Additionally, following the trend of disproportion, approximately half of all black families have lived in the poorest neighborhoods over the last two generations, compared to just 7 percent of white families.\(^25\) Taken together, these statistics not only reveal that the racial divide is perhaps more pronounced than we might otherwise assume, but that these conditions are specifically attached to geographical space. Concentrated poverty is multigenerational in this way, and has a disparate impact on minority communities.


\(^{24}\) Id.

\(^{25}\) Id.
While white families in America do experience life in poor neighborhoods, there is an additional burden that comes with duration of exposure. Patrick Sharkley, a researcher and sociologist specializing in concentrated poverty, has attributed much of the severity of the negative impacts associated with concentrated poverty to this multigenerational aspect over long periods of time. He states that “it’s the cumulative exposure in the neighborhood poverty experienced by one generation, which then lingers on to affect several different aspects of life from childhood to adulthood, and then experienced by the next generation as well [that] makes neighborhood inequalities so severe.”

The second reason that these racial and multigenerational indicators are so significant is that it has larger implications for these populations when taking into consideration the stale housing market that is common in areas of concentrated poverty.

**Housing Market**

Homeownership in America has naturally become an incorporated piece of the “American Dream” rhetoric. By way of mortgage debt guarantees, and various tax deductions, homeownership has been promoted as government policy. As a result, it is the primary avenue that has been sourced by a majority of Americans to attain wealth accumulation. So, how important is home ownership to wealth accumulation? Even after taking into consideration the decline of wealth due to The Great Recession, the net worth of homeowners over time has substantially outperformed that of renters, who collectively accumulate little if any wealth at all.

---


27 Id.

28 Id.

According to a recent report by the American Civil Liberties Union, in 2007, median wealth excluding home equity was $14,200 for blacks as compared with over six times that amount, $92,950, for whites. Home equity, therefore, made up 51 percent of total wealth for the typical white homeowner in 2007. For the typical black homeowner this same year, on the other hand, home equity constituted a far larger 71 percent of total wealth.\(^{30}\)

Since the property values in these areas increase at a much slower rate, it's very difficult to accumulate wealth in that way, especially with the cost of repairs. In Northampton County, compared to Wake County, the increase in housing values were subpar. After accounting for inflation, the housing value for Northampton County only increased 28% over the past 20 years, compared to Wake County’s 42%. This is a significant difference considering there was already a substantial gap in value beginning in 1990, and assuming the trend will continue along this trajectory.

Lastly, there's the matter of liquidity. Due to many of the negative characteristics that are mentioned throughout this paper, these areas are usually not among the highest coveted to

own property. This leads to such a limited buyer pool that it becomes quite difficult to sell any property. In essence, as a resident, your largest, and in many cases only, asset is not practically accessible. If you wanted to turn it into cash, it would be much more difficult to do so here than in an economically diverse area.

Education

“Education is a capital to the poor man and an interest to the rich man.”

-Horace Mann

“We don’t yet have books for this class this year, but I’m told they are working on it.” A hushed cheer spread across the classroom paired with grins and sighs of relief from typically lazy high school sophomores. Our new, noticeably inexperienced math teacher seemed discombobulated and unsure of exactly how to manage a classroom without books. He had a teacher’s edition, but for whatever reason, there were no student books to match. The ultimate solution he finally came to was to write the assignments on the board. We’d then copy them down on our own paper to complete for homework. Days turned into weeks and we eventually stopped anticipating the books that never came. We refined our classroom system. Students who were absent were able to “borrow” the teacher’s edition for a limited amount of time after school if they were willing (or able) to put in the effort. No one, however, was allowed to take it home for any reason. It was our only resource, too precious to be risked for the cause of learning.

My high school was a high-poverty school. High-poverty schools are characterized by 76% or more of students being eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Low-poverty schools are those where less than 25% of students are eligible. Because of the sheer lack of economic dilution amongst the population, areas of concentrated poverty are more likely to have high-

33 Id.
poverty schools. 82% of students in public schools in Northampton County are low income, compared to 34% in Wake County.

This class was specifically math taught by a new teacher. However, generally speaking, across subjects, and regardless of teacher credentials, teachers in high-poverty schools more often report working with outdated textbooks in short supply, outdated computers and other technology, and inadequate or nonexistent science equipment, materials and labs.\textsuperscript{34}

Additionally, the amount and variety of courses offered for the purpose of college-preparatory or advanced placement trails far behind that of schools in more economically diverse or wealthy areas.\textsuperscript{35} In short, the education system in these areas are more commonly subpar. Unsurprisingly, scarce supplies and material deficiencies can diminish both student engagement and student achievement.\textsuperscript{36} Physical and tangible conditions and academic engagement and achievement are so closely related that the former has been used as an indicator to predict the latter.\textsuperscript{37} High-poverty schools have become sites of developmental hazards for low-income students, rather than the competent assets for which they were intended.

“[T]he education that poor... students in public schools receive is demonstrably insufficient to make them competitive with their more advantaged, middle and upper income peers.”\textsuperscript{38} STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) industries have recently emerged as one of the most promising career pathways for generations entering the workforce now and into the foreseeable future. These opportunities, however, have been cut short for students in high-poverty schools. Math classes in these schools are twice as likely to be taught by a teacher with a credential other than mathematics, than math classes at low-poverty schools.\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{id}Id.
\bibitem{id}Id.
\bibitem{id}Id.
\bibitem{id}Id.
\bibitem{id}Id.
\bibitem{id}Id.
\end{thebibliography}
similarly, is three times more likely to be taught by a teacher with credentials other than science, as science classes in low-poverty schools.\textsuperscript{40}

One glaring, contributing factor that is impossible to ignore, is the issue of unequal funding of public schools. A report from the U.S. Department of Education documents that schools serving low-income students are being shortchanged because school districts across the country are inequitably distributing their state and local funds.\textsuperscript{41} 2008-09 school-level expenditures shows that many high-poverty schools receive less than their fair share of state and local funding, leaving students in high-poverty schools with fewer resources than schools attended by their wealthier peers.\textsuperscript{42}

Title I is a federal program that provides funds to local school districts in an effort to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students, specifically in high-poverty schools. Although the law requires a degree of “comparability of services” from state and local funds for schools that have been designated as a Title I school, the data from the Department of Education revealed a different picture. More than 40% of schools that receive federal Title I money to serve disadvantaged students spent less state and local money on teachers and other personnel than schools that don’t receive Title I money at the same grade level in the same district.\textsuperscript{43} This is especially significant because 44% of school spending in the U.S. is attributable to state funds.\textsuperscript{44} And, unsurprisingly, studies have shown that school funding and student performance are strongly related.\textsuperscript{45} U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has said of this tragic inequality of funding, "Educators across the country understand that low-income students need extra support and resources to succeed, but in far too many places policies for

\textsuperscript{40}Id.


\textsuperscript{42}Id.

\textsuperscript{43}Id.

\textsuperscript{44}Education Week, “Poverty and School Funding: Why Low-Income Students Often Suffer”, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/education_futures/2014/10/poverty_and_school_funding_why_low-income_students_often_suffer.html (last visited Nov. 27, 2015)

\textsuperscript{45}Id.
assigning teachers and allocating resources are perpetuating the problem rather than solving it.”

Resources were indeed scarce, however, teacher scarcity is arguably a more pressing matter. Those of us who continued on into junior year of high school were faced with obstacles anew. Each of us were presented with math books, a partial recovery from the previous year. In many ways, we were relieved to return to some degree of normalcy. Our expectation was cut short, however, by an announcement from the principal. The school had not yet been able to secure a teacher for our class. A familiar substitute teacher made herself comfortable at the large desk in front of the class. The principal gave an unnecessary introduction to our substitute and informed us that she would be with us until we were assigned a permanent math teacher for this class. That assignment never came, and the substitute teacher was replaced multiple times over with other substitute teachers on a rolling basis. And those were the days in which we were fortunate enough to have a substitute. Many days there wasn’t a substitute available. We’d pack our things and be forced to migrate to the gymnasium. It was the only space in the school large enough to accommodate our entire class as extras. The basketball coach would reluctantly provide semi-supervision. Eventually we perfected the ability to produce legible handwriting on bleachers, so we could complete an inconsistent series of homework assignments that no one ever checked. Math class became the black hole of the day when we didn’t know what to expect. We hated math.

Areas of concentrated poverty are much more likely to have a difficult time retaining teachers. Besides inequitable funding practices, another contributing factor that is rarely considered is that these areas are not attractive to young professionals or newcomers. In addition to the unfavorable characteristics aforementioned, Northampton County is rural and remote, which fosters other features that make it even more unappealing to newcomers. One example of this is that there is a lack of traditional multi-family housing that is common to

renters. In the entire county, a span of over 550 miles, there are only 3 apartment complexes listed.\textsuperscript{47}

Yet another contributing factor to the teacher retention issue that these areas experience is that they are also target areas for teaching scholarship programs such as Teach for America and Teaching Fellows, that recruit bright college students and require for the purposes of the program that they teach in low-income or high risk communities for a short period of time.

Although they provide a crucial service, these programs are not designed to facilitate longevity or stability in the schools and teaching profession in these areas. In fact, 56.4\% of Teach For America teachers leave their initial assignment location at the end of their 2 year commitment, and by their fifth year, only 14.8\% of TFA teachers continue to teach in the low-income school to which they were originally assigned. \textsuperscript{48}

The teacher retention issue presents a larger problem for school stability in that most teachers become adequate and improve their communication, classroom management and overall teaching ability with tenure. The students in these poor communities are largely robbed of that benefit.

Teacher retention, especially in high-poverty schools, such as those in which Teach for America teachers are assigned, is critically important. The declining number of teachers, which is already high across the nation, especially among new teachers, has its greatest impact in high-poverty, high-minority schools. \textsuperscript{49} Studies show that 21\% of teachers at high-poverty schools leave their schools annually, compared to 14\% of their counterparts in low-poverty schools.

\textsuperscript{47} Data derived from Costar, \url{http://property.costar.com/Property/Results/PropertyResults.aspx} (last visited Nov. 27, 2015)

\textsuperscript{48} Education Week, “TFA Teachers: How Long Do They Teach? Why Do They Leave?”, \url{http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/04/kappan_donaldson.html} (last visited Nov. 27, 2015)

\textsuperscript{49} Id.
settings. Even as teachers transfer within the same district, they typically leave schools that higher percentages of low-income students and enter schools with higher-income students.\textsuperscript{50} This revolving-door effect leaves the very schools that need the most stability and consistently constantly searching for new teachers to replace those who leave. Additionally, when teachers leave their schools after only a few years, those schools incur substantial costs.\textsuperscript{51} Most importantly, students are likely to suffer.

Because teachers tend to improve their overall teaching ability with tenure, the lack of stability poor teacher retention fosters presents other consequential effects. Novices typically fill the vacancies exiting teachers of high-poverty schools leave behind. “As a result, students are taught by a stream of first-year teachers who are, on average, less effective than their more experienced counterparts.”\textsuperscript{52}

There is also the matter of student resources. Many students use past teachers as a resource for recommendations and other career-oriented support. These teachers move on so quickly that they are gone by the time students need them for these services. They are unavailable for this type of support and it's difficult to find current information for their whereabouts so those resources are nonexistent. This ends up being a large contributing factor to the lack of competitiveness poor students have with regard to college placements, scholarships, or other career opportunities.

The Poor Shall Inherit the Ghetto

“If you’re born poor, that’s not your mistake. But if you die poor, that’s your mistake.”

- Bill Gates

\textsuperscript{50} Id.
\textsuperscript{51} Id.
\textsuperscript{52} Id.
Economic mobility is essentially the measurement of one’s ability to be born poor or otherwise disadvantages and gain wealth or other success. This indicator is arguably the most important factor when measuring the effects of areas of concentrated poverty, because at its core it is measuring one’s ability to escape. To what degree are these places traps?

Studies show that there is a strong relationship between economic segregation and economic mobility; the more segregated an area is, the less opportunity for economic mobility across generations. In other words, children raised in overwhelmingly affluent neighborhoods, grow up to be affluent adults; children raised in poor neighborhoods, isolated from the more economically advantaged, have just the opposite outcome.

Perhaps such statistics are to be expected. I can’t say I found this data remarkable. This data simply articulates what seems to be intuitive. I have, however, found that these studies are unable to capture the essence of the countless contributing factors involved in such a result. Concentrated poverty is defeating in a multitude of ways that make it not only likely that one will remain poor, but that one will remain poor in the same area. I have made an effort to recount the snares in chronological order, but even such an extensive list is not exhaustive. It is merely meant to reveal the level of difficulty maneuvering a pathway out of these areas can reach.

My guidance counselor called me into her office a few months before my high school graduation. I was academically at the top of my class and expected to graduate valedictorian. My class had voted me most likely to succeed. I was one of the most promising. She revealed that I had been offered a scholarship. I took a seat on the other side of her desk. I was thrilled. Until this point, I had been completely ignoring the well-known fact that my parents could not afford to send me to college. I only knew I planned to go in spite of that, because that was my ticket out of poverty. As we ventured further into the conversation, she informed me that it was a teaching scholarship. To accept it I would have to major in education and serve 4 years as a teacher in a low-income North Carolina school directly after receiving my degree. I hadn’t yet
formed an absolute opinion about my career options, but I knew the last position I wanted to take was that of a teacher in a low-income school in North Carolina. For many reasons, I declined, but a larger take-away is that this was the only scholarship offered to me, and I was one of the few offered any at all. One of my classmates was able to secure a partial football scholarship, and another accepted a teaching scholarship. No other offers were made. This first hurdle was enough for many to halt the journey of economic mobility.

Federal data show that poor families who are most in need of private scholarships are actually less likely to get them than higher-income families. According to this data collected by the Department of Education, nearly 13% of students from families that make more than $106,000 a year get private scholarships, compared with about 9% of those whose families earn less than $30,000. White students also have a higher chance of getting private scholarships than black or Hispanic students.

This disparity has a variety of roots. Arguably the most prominent is an informational divide. A survey revealed that while nearly 70% of parents with incomes of $75,000 or more could name scholarships as potential sources of financial aid, only one in four parents with income under $25,000 a year could do the same. Similarly, white parents were also more likely than black or Hispanic parents to know about scholarships.

That informational divide is also fueled by large disparities in college counselors. Yet another study showed that wealthier students are more likely to go to private or well-funded suburban high schools with knowledgeable college counselors, or to be able to afford to hire private college consultants. Students at private and low-poverty schools are significantly more likely to have spoken with a college counselor than students at high-poverty schools.

54 Id.
55 Id.
56 Id.
Additionally, due to a lack of school resources, as well as the remote location of Northampton County, we didn’t have the exposure to participate in many of the activities that would qualify us for the widest range of scholarships. Scholarships based on golfing, swimming, science, or technology were almost completely out of the question for us. There were no golf courses, or other similar sports facilities within a commutable distance. There was no lab equipment to speak of. The subject areas and activities which required the most resources to master, rendered us inept in our ability to compete for private funding.

There were 100 among my high school graduating class, and I know them all by name. Out of the entire class, only around 35% of us went to college. I practically bolted from the doors of my high school graduation in my eagerness to leave Northampton County, vowing never again to return. Such was the common rhetoric around those parts. Everyone, couldn’t wait to leave, and swore Northampton County would never see their face again, with the exception of infrequent visitation. Admittedly, a portion of this response can be attributed to the vigor of youth. However, youth wasn’t the sole cause or even the primary driving force behind these ideals. As poor children, the majority of us were never lacking in our allegiance to the same mainstream values America promotes. We all wanted the American dream; to come from nothing, yet be successful. We desperately wanted this concept of economic mobility to hold true for us. Yet, we could see, as anyone could, that Northampton County was in jarring contrast. We were never able to quite articulate why everyone around us was poor, but we deemed the place a wasteland. Poverty had plagued the entire area, and the best chance to overcome such odds was physical escape. So, those of us who had the opportunity seized it. We left in pursuit of happiness.

However, unbeknownst to us at the time, the initial sprint toward higher education was only the beginning of what would be a persistent struggle to break free of concentrated poverty. My college career began with a rough start. There were, of course, some challenges I faced that were just inherent to being poor, like the inability to afford laundry, books, etc. I had been working part-time since I was 14, saving what I could to prepare for college, and little I was able to save just didn’t seem to be enough. Even aside from direct financial troubles,
however, I struggled academically. In fact, my entire freshman year amounted to one long effort to catch up. There is one particular moment I recall as being the most definitive. I was unaware of what a syllabus was. My freshman English professor didn’t bother to explain it. I’d heard the word before, but never as something that would be of direct concern to a student. I’d never had a teacher actually pass out a calendared schedule of assignments at the beginning of the year that would dictate our actions throughout the course. There was certainly a rubric, but the rubric was for the teacher. Never a syllabus, until now. Not only was there a syllabus, but it was posted online, while I was still struggling to get a laptop. I’d never even previously been consistently successful or available by email. I was experiencing a certain level of culture shock that bled into my academic world. I didn’t realize the homework and the readings were posted on the syllabus until about halfway through the semester. And I wasn’t the only one. It turns out that most of my class that had recently fled Northampton County also experienced similar episodes of culture shock and academic challenges that threatened their success. Some of them were much more severe than others.

Out of the 35 of us that pursued college, only 21 actually received their degree. That amounts to a success rate of about 60%. Despite valiant efforts, we once again became a statistic. College completion rates for students with low-income backgrounds have remained all but stagnant over the past 40 years. However, quite the opposite is true for wealthy students whose success rates have soared, leaving a gaping disparity in educational attainment between the rich and poor. The larger implications of such a chasm affect long-term aggravation of the poverty cycle and widens the economic divide.

According to a report from the University of Pennsylvania’s Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy and the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, in 2013, 77% of adults from families in the top income quartile earned at least

---


58 Id.
bachelor’s degrees by the time they turned 24. This was a 40% increase from the number of degrees earned by that population in 1970.\textsuperscript{59} Meanwhile, the number of college graduates in the lowest income bracket has barely budged. Only 9% earned bachelor’s degrees by 24; only up from 6% in 1970.\textsuperscript{60}

One interesting and slightly hopeful fact is that more poor students are both applying for college and enrolling. 45% of students from families earning $34,160 or less enrolled in college in 2012. This is up by 17% from where they were in 1970.\textsuperscript{61} While this is an increase worthy of celebration, these numbers still pale in comparison to that of their wealthier peers. College enrollment for the highest income students, which are from families with incomes of $108,650 or more, have also increased to 81%; up from 74% in 1970.\textsuperscript{62}

These statistics means that well over half of low-income students enrolling in college area not making it all the way to graduation. In fact, the success rate equals out to approximately 1 in 5. Compared to the success rate of high-income students, which is about 99%, the disparity here is disturbing. It becomes obvious that there is an underlying common trend among low-income students that amount to nearly insurmountable challenges in completing their degree even after they’ve enrolled in college.

Some studies have attributed a significant portion of these difficulties to educational disparities at the high school level and even prior. Academically, a high-poverty high school is less likely to have sufficiently prepared students for the rigors of a college course load, than low-poverty schools, or private schools.\textsuperscript{63}

Advanced Placement, or AP, is a program created by the College Board that offers college level courses and companion examinations to high school students. Colleges and Universities

\textsuperscript{59} Id.
\textsuperscript{60} Id.
\textsuperscript{61} Id.
\textsuperscript{62} Id.
\textsuperscript{63} Id.
then academically place students and offer course credits to students that score a certain high percentage on the exam. Low-income high-school students, especially those who enter high-school academically underprepared, are also less likely to take these courses that prepare them for college. The share of high school seniors taking an AP exam rose substantially from just 2% in 1977 to 34 percent in 2007. In 2012, more than 25% of the high school graduates who took at least one AP examination were low-income. While these are excellent participation rates for the examination, hundreds of thousands of students still do not participate in AP courses. A substantial factor is due to the “the lower availability of a variety of AP courses in schools with higher numbers of low-income and traditionally underserved minority students.” The ACT (American College Testing) is a college readiness assessment used to measure high-school achievement and the determination of college admissions. Among low-income high school graduates who have taken the ACT, those who took at least a core curriculum of four years of English and 3 years each of math, science, and social studies were more likely to meet ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks. This is especially true for math. However, low-income students are less likely to complete a core curriculum than students from higher-income families. In every subject area, students from low-income families are less likely to meet performance benchmarks.

The disproportionate academic experience, however, does not completely explain the disparity in college graduations. Even after controlling for ability, the gap in college graduation rates persist between the rich and poor. Low-income students who scored between 1200 and 1600 on their SATs were still half as likely to finish college, than their counterparts in the top 25% of the income distribution. Other studies have attributed this gap to sheer financial

65 Id.
66 Id.
67 Id.
68 Id.
burden. Economic distress can dim a student’s chances by forcing them to take on part-time jobs or reduce their course load to help out at home.\textsuperscript{70} One report summarizes this effectively by simply stating, “[i]n short, the afflictions of poverty don’t just disappear after a student gets into college.”\textsuperscript{71}

Lastly, while many low-income students may arrive on campus academically prepared, they are still more likely than their wealthier peers to require remediation.\textsuperscript{72} College remediation courses may fail to provide the necessary support for low-income students to successfully register into college-level work.

Despite the many difficulties faced by low income students in the pursuit of higher education, 21 people from our class were successful. However, even with the backing of a college degree, there is a transitional period to becoming a financially stable, self-sufficient adult. This is especially true since the Great Recession. Studies show that 26% of young adults (aged 18-34) live in their parents’ home, and that number is increasing. A separate study shows that 60% of parents provide financial support to their adult children who are no longer in school.

If this support is a necessary piece to becoming secure and eventually successful and self-sufficient, where then, does this support come from for young adults who are from an economically disadvantaged background? The simplest answer is that it doesn’t. Students from poor backgrounds are not likely to have financial support available remotely. It is crucial, however, to have support of some kind during this transition, especially if you were already lacking resources and poor to begin with. The only support that poor families are able to

\textsuperscript{70} Id.


provide is likely to be a place to sleep in their homes. This is an unfortunate circumstance if your family resides in an area of concentrated poverty. This becomes yet another factor that contributes to the cyclical nature of these areas. Therein lies one of the many hardships for isolated areas of concentrated poverty. For many young adults, a social support network only exists in these areas, and it becomes essentially a cyclical trap for generations to come.

I graduated college in the heart of the Great Recession, with 3 degrees and no employment prospects to speak of. I’d been putting in hundreds of applications for months with no success. I was desperate to speed the transition period to stability. I knew the stakes. Ultimately, I failed in this mission and after holding out for as long as possible, I was eventually faced with the impossible decision to return to Northampton County to which I vehemently refused. I actively chose homelessness over returning to concentrated poverty. I relied on food banks, temporary jobs, and any other means at my disposal to prevent a detrimental homecoming. This action, although perhaps extreme, begs the question of what it takes to escape concentrated poverty. This is an impossible choice. What are the implications of asking this of poor people?

My decision, although extreme, was warranted to avoid what I knew would come next for me if I were forced to return. For those that must return to these areas of concentrated poverty it becomes even more difficult to leave or gain opportunity. One of the largest impacts is attributable to minimal employment aspects. Part of the blight that characterizes these areas is lack of economic investment. Specifically in Northampton County, there is a disproportionate amount of low wage work available, even for those with a degree. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the highest percentage of employment in Northampton County falls within the retail and trade sectors, which is one of the lowest paid industries. This industry accounts for a staggering 42% of the job market in the area. These numbers are especially telling when compared to the employment percentages of Wake County. Retail and trade employment percentages in Wake County only amount to about 18%, and although the sectors are more

---

evenly distributed, the largest location quotient for Wake County falls within the professional and business services sector. These employment opportunities, or lack thereof, have a large, long-term influence on the economic mobility of these areas, the ability to accumulate wealth, and the overall severity of concentrated poverty.

The number of people from my high school class that now reside back in Northampton County exceeds 70%, and nearly all of them perform low wage work. Specifically among those with degrees, the range of employment encompasses Team Leader at Wal-Mart, Sales Associate at JCPenney, Kindergarten Teacher, and Secretary.

If employment opportunities are lacking in the area, a quite logical solution would be to look elsewhere. However, attempting to secure employment outside of this area is also a challenge within itself for a multitude of reasons. The first, and arguably most pressing, is the lack of internet access. Another reason is lack of dependable or affordable transportation.

A lack of internet access is actually a common problem among poor people. Studies show that about half of people who below the poverty line do not have internet access at home. This is of particular concern to areas of concentrated poverty. While this deficiency is certainly due in part to price barriers, in that many people do not have enough discretionary money to afford a computer, let alone the monthly fee of accompanying internet services, a larger issue for areas of concentrated poverty is whether the service is offered at all. Broadband services are not even widely available in Northampton County, the same goes for cable and cell phone service. In fact, my mother still doesn’t have internet service.

With no internet service at home, local residents naturally turn to the local public library to fill the absence. The Northampton County Public Library does offer internet services on its computers on site. However, there are many conditions that make this a much less effective route. The library closes at 6 pm during the week and is only open for a total of 3 hours on the

weekend. Therein lies an inherent scheduling difficulty. If you work during the day, share a vehicle, or have other obligations, the library will be difficult to schedule sufficient time for within its operating hours.

Another condition that negatively impacts the level of efficiency, specifically of the Northampton County library is that it’s likely to be quite far from your place of residence, and it’s the only library to serve the whole county. From my house, it was only a 20 minute drive, but for others it was a good deal further.

Lastly the library only allows the use of its computers in 30 minute time slots. If the library is the only place you have access to the internet for the purposes of not only searching for positions, but applying for positions as well, 30 minute time slots, accompanied by short operating hours and long commutes may be grossly insufficient to serve your purpose.

This is especially unfortunate because 80% of Fortune 500 companies now only accept applications online.75 Not only do they only accept applications online, but employers also have a growing expectation for the applicant to have an online presence. Some of them have grown more apt to look at professional networking sites like LinkedIn, and so forth. Others are keen on live remote video interviews using web camera calling software like Skype. These expectations are either quite difficult or downright impossible to maintain in your local library.

Yet another barrier must be crossed if you are fortunate enough to be selected for an interview. It is unlikely that you have access to reliable or affordable transportation. If you are poor and have moved back to Northampton County, it is likely that you share a vehicle with others who live in the same house. A vehicle is necessary. There is no public transit in this area. Additionally, there is at least a 2 hour commute away in either direction to the closest vibrant economic center. It is also 2 hours away from any bus or train station. Even if you wanted to

take advantage of some of the most famously affordable transportation options, such as Mega Bus, it's still a 2 hour drive to get to a station. A personal vehicle is necessary.

Even with a vehicle, because it is quite far out, you'd not only have to coordinate your schedule with that of other users of the vehicle, but you'd also have to front the cost of gas and other travel expenses which can add up to be quite hefty depending on how far out you have to go. This is a repeating scenario every time you have an interview outside of the area. Even if employers start out with an initial phone interview, they are oftentimes just a screening technique. You are, therefore dependent on the employer to provide transportation or finance your travels to the interview location.

Yet another barrier is that if you happen to be lucky enough to have jumped all these hurdles and be adequately taking care of yourself in a different location, it is a ticking time bomb to determine whether or not you will still have to return. If you are responsible for the care of your family, and you have not become stable or wealthy enough for them to relocate and move in with you by the time they need care, the rest of your options will cost money you may not have. If you have not amassed enough income to hire nurses or other in house caretakers or pay the monthly or yearly fee to place them in a care facility, perhaps your only option will be to move back to care for them yourself, leaving all you have amassed behind. Because of the lack of internet service, it is unlikely that you will be able to work remotely, even if your employer allows it.

The Uncomfortable Luxury of Hope

“[P]overty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.”76

-Nelson Mandela

One of the most prominent proposed solutions to this social ill of concentrated poverty are housing vouchers in which the residents of these areas are given the opportunity to move to areas which are more economically diverse. There are a few notable examples of these residential mobility programs that offer families the chance to escape areas of concentrated poverty and to make permanent moves into communities with lower poverty levels. These new communities usually offer goods that the program participants would not otherwise receive such as higher quality schools, better employment opportunities, and more social amenities. The Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program was conducted in the 1970s in Chicago and is one of the first and most well-known of these residential mobility programs. There are, however, current programs being implemented in Baltimore and Dallas that are providing poor families with the opportunity to improve their lives by moving out of the area and making permanent changes in their environment.

These housing voucher programs, however, are an imperfect solution at best and are flawed in major ways. Most of them are not implemented in ways that provide counseling and other support that is oftentimes necessary for these families to integrate themselves into their new community. Recipients of these vouchers are likely not familiar with the area, the school system, and will not be able to sustain this lifestyle outside of the program due to an inability to find homes. By moving them into these communities and away from their former communities, they are effectively stripped of their social support network, and that gap needs to be replaced with incorporated resources in the programs.

Another significant downfall of this solution is that it assumes the environment introduced to the participants is stationary, when in fact, it is not. In fact, many recipients of housing vouchers of this sort are not welcomed by landlords or neighbors. Residential discrimination has a large impact on this solution. Oftentimes, residents from these areas of concentrated poverty experience change in their environment when they settled into an

---

78 Id.
area that is more economically integrated. These areas undergo both white flight as well as black middle class flight. The outcome of the recipients of this program is largely dependent of the decisions of those around them. The provision of housing alone is not enough support to expect success of these families in their new environment.  

Another prominent and perhaps more commonly proposed solution is that of reinvestment. Although it has been the subject of much controversy, gentrification at its base level is used as a general term to describe the phenomenon of change to an existing urban area in specific ways, including the arrival of a wealthier population, extreme or significant conversion involving cultural or aesthetic transformation, and a sudden subsequent increase in property values beyond the scope of inflation.

A degree of gentrification can begin to break up the uniformity of poverty of neighborhoods in ways that can be good for all residents. New wealthier residents are likely to demand improvements in schools, crime control, and other beneficial amenities. Retail offerings and services may improve for all residents. New employment opportunities will be introduced to the area. Gentrification can change communities in ways that begin to counteract the effects of homogenous and persistent poverty.

This complex and contradictory phenomenon is often, however, associated with the unfortunate displacement of poor communities and disproportionately negative impacts on established residents. Gentrification can, indeed harm low income households by disrupting the social fabric of these neighborhoods and potentially pricing out poor families. An example of this displacement effect can be seen by looking at the gentrification efforts in the Washington

---

81 Id.
82 Id.
D.C. metro area. In 1970, the city was 77 percent African American. Today, it’s just 49 percent... In short, in the past decade, approximately 50,000 young, white Millennials have moved into the city while 35,000 African Americans have left.\(^{83}\)

This solution, although perhaps potentially more effective than residential mobility programs, is also imperfect, and for it to be successful and beneficial for the established residents, it must not reach the point of triggering the negative effects of gentrification, such as, displacement and outpricing. Whether gentrification benefits the poor depends in part on the nature of the process. Gentrification is not all the same.\(^{84}\) Gentrification can mean gated communities for the wealthy, but it can also mean the restoration and use of dilapidated buildings, which can have positive spillover effects throughout the community.\(^{85}\)

The implementation of this solution has also had its challenges. While every community relies in some way on state investment to thrive, we return to the realization that these funds are disproportionately allocated between the rich and the poor. Patrick Sharkley has stated, “High-poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods have not received the types of consistent, sustained investments in schools, child care centers, public safety, housing, transportation and infrastructure that are taken for granted in most American communities.”\(^{86}\) There is, however, strong evidence to indicate that if these investments were made in minority communities and communities of concentrated poverty, then growing up in a poor or racially segregated neighborhood would not have such severe consequences.\(^{87}\)


\(^{84}\) Id.


\(^{87}\) Id.