

# Critical Analysis 3: The New Urban Ghetto

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## **Abstract**

How does Wilson describe the changes that have gone on in inner city neighbourhoods from the 1960's to the present. What impact have these changes had on the people who live in the inner city. What is the relationship between race and class as variables as they have gone into forming an urban underclass? How have these forces influenced the way employers and residents think about race?

## **Introduction**

William Wilson in his book *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* takes a look at the plight and stigma of the much misunderstood urban underclass. Wilson states that there are structural issues to be dealt with that goes far beyond just racism (although it is a factor not to be forgotten, it is but one of many factors.) Inner-city joblessness is one of the main problems facing the very "social life of the city at large." His point is that joblessness in a neighbourhood has much more of a devastating effect on social cohesion than does high poverty. In all we have to concentrate on the structural factors for understanding joblessness and many of the experiences of the inner-city poor.

Wilson makes the point that there are *structural* and *economic* forces at work when dealing with the “ghetto” poor. It’s more than just the “culture of poverty.” He points towards an underclass which has been created by a changing global economy. The elimination of unskilled labour has led to an increase in the number of unemployed poor members in ghetto community in American metropolises.

The high unemployment caused by the departure of work has caused an increase in racial tensions (as well as violence) in the inner-city. This has caused the city to evolve from a “once lively place” to a “bombed out warzone.” [I, p. 5]

## Urban Transition

Between the 1960’s and the 1990’s there have been major changes in the urban demographic. It has gone from a one-third poverty rate to containing 1/2 of the nation’s poor. Most of these poor are African-American. [I, p. 11] Of census tracts from the top 100 central cities in America, one-seventh are *at least* 40% poor. This has nearly doubled since 1970. The 1970’s and 1980’s witnessed a growth in the number of tracts identified as ghetto poverty areas with a positive correlation of the concentration of racial minorities. Although similarities can be drawn between the 1930’s poverty areas, and modern day poverty areas, there is a major difference: joblessness.

Wilson most importantly stresses two major points: [I, p. 53-54]

1. The inner-city ghetto was *not* always plagued by low levels of employment and related problems. In the 1950’s people were poor, but they were not jobless; they were still working.
2. Changes in the class, racial and demographic composition of inner-city neighbourhoods contributed to the high percentage of *jobless* adults who continue to live there.

As a response to global factors, the United States now needs less low-skilled workers. In fact, the low skilled workers who are employed, oft times are in dead end jobs. With no opportunity for employment advancement, pay raises &c, they are left to try to “make ends meet.” *Social reproduction* comes to a halt; in other words, the general acknowledgement that someone’s child will do better or as well as their parents stops.

With the decline of need of low-skilled labour and mass production, has come an increase in the service sector jobs. Manufacturing jobs have decreased from 3/8 to 1/5 between 1973 and 1987. Where as the service sector has increased seven percent. Most alarmingly, however, wages have decreased by 25% to 30%<sup>1</sup> in the shift from the labour industry to service sectors.

Where are these service sectors appearing, if not in the inner city ghettos? Many of these jobs have shifted outside of the ghetto areas, and to the emerging fringe cities (towns that are within the metropolitan area of the central city.) In order for one to work in these service sector jobs, an inner city ghetto resident must be able to commute to work. Many without cars, are taking unreliable, and expensive, public transportation. If getting to work is an issue, imagine *seeking* work in these fringe areas, especially without an informal employee referral network.

### **Social Organisation**

As a result of high joblessness, you have a decrease in *social organisation*. In the 1960's you may have had a building that was middle class or lower class, but there weren't actual *areas*. This resulted in the people of the community going to school together, going to work together, shopping in the same places &c. All of this leads towards a greater social organisation. Wilson defines social organisation as:

1. The prevalence, strength and interdependence of social networks
2. The extent of collective supervision, and the degree of responsibility taken on by individuals for communal problems.
3. The rate of resident participation in voluntary and formal organisations.

Wilson argues that all of these things are lacking in neighbourhoods plagued by high levels of joblessness. Most importantly, however, although levels of joblessness is negatively correlated with levels of social organisation, poverty is not. Poverty in a community, while its members are working, does not bring about low levels of social organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Already fixed for inflation

## Race and Class

Wilson argues that the issue of race in the labour market cannot simply be reduced to the presence of discrimination. Although blacks experience increased problems in the labour market, the reasons are rooted in an intricate set of interrelated factors (some of which are race-neutral.) In times of economic hardships, employers can be more selective in recruiting and prerequisites for employment.

The *culture of poverty* argument is knocked down by the assessment that many of the inner city poor espouse the *same* value system as those of higher economic status. “They verbally reinforce, rather than undermine, the basic American values pertaining to individual initiative.” [I, p. 67] Many black respondents to the UPFLS (Urban Poverty and Family Life Study) survey stated that plain hard work is necessary for getting ahead. However, given the constraints and limited opportunities facing those living in the inner-city neighbourhoods, it’s not to unreasonable to assume that they might find it difficult to live up to those ideals.

Situations generally taken for granted by the middle class society, like fringe benefits, are major obstacles for the “underclass.” Wilson quotes a guy at length, Clifford, who has been working for years as a dishwasher for different employers. He currently earns \$4.85 an hour and cannot take a day off under warning from his boss that if he misses a day, he’s fired. He needed to borrow money to pay for a tooth extraction, but could not call out sick. Individuals like Clifford, Wilson states, exist in abundance; “struggle against odds at great individual sacrifice to live up to mainstream norms and ideas of acceptability.”

These individuals go counter the general *belief*<sup>2</sup> of the blacks, and ghetto-poor’s lack of work ethic. Many employers count lack of dependability, honesty, attitude, and interpersonal skills and attribute them to blacks (especially among the unskilled labour.) However, these same unskilled labourers were the ones holding manufacturing jobs *when there were some*. Wilson argues that “the success of black men in obtaining manufacturing jobs in previous years *suggests that these views have emerged only recently*” (emphasis added.) [I, p. 126]

Another structural condition for the joblessness of the inner-city poor,

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<sup>2</sup>It’s important to note that these beliefs are held, not only by employers, but also by the prospective employees. And that inner city firms are much harsher on their *beliefs*. In addition, these beliefs are held by both white, and black members of the firm.

and the emergence of the ghetto is in obtaining a job. The use of skills test helps even out the grounds for the urban underclass. Those who apply skills tests tend to have a higher average proportion of black works in entry-level jobs. This would be fine except that many employers usually engage in recruitment practices that block out many prospective inner-city candidates. The employment firm attributes its selective recruitment to efficiency<sup>3</sup> and practicality. It's cheaper to rely on an informal referral network rather than paying for costly advertising and spending time interviewing candidates. Wilson says that over 40% of the firms did not publish advertisements in papers.

Along the lines of obtaining jobs, schooling and home addresses have a high degree of influence on the employer. There was a high correlation between those whom did not recruit from overwhelmingly black schools and recruitment from welfare programs or state employment agencies. In addition, some inner-city residents are denied employment simply because of their addresses.

## Strawman

Wilson argues that joblessness is the reason for the inner-city ghettos. The cause of this joblessness is the changing global economy. There is being more of an emphasis on educational or skilled labour. The irony of the economic boom in America is the biforkation of the amount of work being done by the skilled and unskilled labourer. The skilled, college educated, labourer is working *more* hours each day, while the unskilled labourer is finding it hard to locate, and keep work.

This, by all means, is not a summation of all of the arguments (and supporting detail) of this book. There are social policies which are discussed in the latter half that involve major socio-economic changes. Among these changes he stresses centralised education, and technological education. A shift away from rich vs. poor schools, to a national school system. In addition to universal pre-school, child-support and parental leave programs. An easier school to work transition for high school graduates, cheap public transportation to link the suburbs and the urban centres, city and suburb co-operation (not separation or integration) and many more *radically* different changes. But these must be made, Wilson states, if we are to "halt the precipitous

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<sup>3</sup>Many things have been done in the name of *efficiency* which has dulled our social world. I go into detail on Efficiency, Calculability, Control, and Predictiveness in a brief essay on the McDonaldization Of Society published on the Internet.

decline in density, and ultimately enhance the quality of race relations in urban areas.”

## References

- [1] Wilson, William. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. Vintage Books: 1997.