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GETTING AHEAD:
Social Mobility among the Urban Poor

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ABSTRACT: One of the most dramatic findings of the contemporary
scholarship on the urban poor has been the extent to which this population
has been affected by the departure of manufacturing, and industrial, employment
from inner city areas. The effects of this have included the sharp rise in
unemployment and the increase in the number of individuals on welfare rolls.
Although writers such as Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead have argued
that with the growth, and entrenchment, of welfare an attitude of "dependency"
has arisen, more recent empirical research does not substantiate these claims
of dependency and "shiftlessness" among the urban poor; these latter studies
have raised more general questions concerning individual employment histories
including attempts to reenter positions of stable and meaningful employment.
The article addresses such questions by examining the responses of 27 black
males, the majority of whom were out of work and/or receiving public assistance,
to open-ended questions concerning their experiences in the labor force and their
assesments of the contemporary structure of social mobility . In brief, the
conclusions reached in the examination of these interviews point to the
numerous forces—racial, spatial, and political as well as strictly economic—
which have come into play in shaping their past and present.

A series of studies have recently emerged that rethink the position of the urban
poor in America (Peterson and Jencks 1991; Wilson 1987, 1989). Much of this work
has been in response to a decade of conservative governance and scholarship
that focused attention on the values, "deviant" practices, and impoverished
culture of the poor. In contrast to conservative approaches, the attempt has been
made to situate the urban poor within an historical dynamic, elucidating the
economic, racial, and political forces which reinforce their disadvantaged social
status and which plague their attempts at social advancement. One of the most
dramatic findings has been the extent to which the urban minority population
has been affected by the departure of manufacturing and industrial employment
from inner-city areas (Krogh 1991a:11). The most immediate effects of this

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transformation have been the sharp rise in unemployment and the increase in the number of individuals on welfare rolls; the long-term results have been the almost complete social and economic decimation of inner-city communities (Wilson 1987).

Conservatives have argued that with the growth and entrenchment of welfare an attitude of dependency has arisen whereby individuals receiving social assistance are discouraged from working and from making meaningful efforts to find employment (Mead 1989; Murray 1984). However, more recent empirical research does not substantiate these claims of dependency and "shiftlessness" amongst the urban poor (Tienda and Stier 1991): welfare checks and food stamps do not provide enough money and must be supplemented by various forms of unreported income—for example, drug dealing, prostitution, work in unreported jobs, or employment in legitimate jobs with false social security cards. In addition to juggling several jobs and obtaining additional support from family, friends, and local churches, care must be taken to keep such "illegal" monies hidden from welfare officials as such income will be deducted from monthly welfare checks (Edin 1991). Thus, it can be seen that, far from being dependent and lazy, welfare recipients must often make extraordinary efforts simply to meet daily expenses.

In demonstrating the diverse means by which the urban poor "make ends meet," these studies raise more general questions concerning individual employment histories, including attempts to reenter positions of stable, meaningful employment. The following essay addresses such questions by examining the responses of 27 black males to open-ended questions concerning their experiences in the labor force and their assessments of the contemporary structure of social mobility . The majority of this sample are either receiving public assistance, out of work, or involved in jobs that pay menial wages; while a few individuals have been fortunate to obtain full-time and well-paying jobs, all at one time or another have been without work, on the unemployment line, or on welfare rolls. The first line of inquiry in this study is to examine their experiences in the labor force. I then examine their efforts to improve their socioeconomic status, paying particular attention to obstacles they perceive to be hindering their progress.

I argue that numerous forces—racial, spatial, and political, as well as strictly economic—come into play in shaping the urban poor's present social mobility opportunities. Attributing their present position at the "bottom" of the socioeconomic ladder to a lack of jobs would be only partially accurate: the jobs which exist are not in their neighborhoods; many are not easily accessible by public transportation (Wilson 1987); employment opportunities which *have* emerged in urban areas either demand exceedingly high levels of education and credentials (Kasarda 1989) or are menial and are not a viable option to public assistance packages. To say that those who are not in the labor force are simply half-hearted in their job search efforts would again be too simplistic: often, there is inadequate advertising of employment opportunities in their neighborhoods (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991); there is a dearth of information centers and employment agencies; when applicants are lucky enough to obtain an interview, they either

find that preferential treatment is given to particular ethnic or racial groups, or experience explicit discrimination.

The interviews examined in this article supplement a growing body of quantitative studies which have employed primarily demographic and social-structural data in documenting the recent transformation of urban America and its effects on different urban populations. The interviews inform our understanding of America's urban transformation from the perspective of those who were most directly affected. They empirically validate many of the existing hypotheses concerning the macrosocial forces which affect the urban poor's social mobility. These factors are often singled out in quantitative analyses; in the interviews, however, they become intertwined in the respondents' rich descriptions of their employment histories and job search efforts. Consequently, the respondents' testimonies reveal the complex ways in which macrosocial forces actually condition everyday experience. However, in order to provide an historical context for the interview data, I briefly address the contemporary urban poverty scholarship. Then, the interview data is examined, not only to assess the congruence between sociological explanations and the accounts of individuals who have lived through this period of social and economic change but also to understand the efforts which displaced inner-city residents are making to reproduce a meaningful life.

Data

The interviews analyzed in this article are part of a series of interviews with Mexican, Puerto Rican, and non-Hispanic white and black, males and females living in "poor" census tracts in Chicago. These interviews were conducted in 1987 and were part of a broader research project that was then underway (Krogh 1991b). This latter project had as its centerpiece a social survey of 2490 males and females of different races living in poor and middle-class census tracts in Chicago. From this sample set, 167 individuals were reinterviewed as part of the Social Opportunity Survey (S.O.S.). The 27 black males living in poor census tracts were selected for the analysis in this article.

The S.O.S. contained a series of open-ended questions which allowed respondents to elaborate on issues of social mobility which they had answered in the main fixed-choice survey. "Questions in the Social Opportunity Survey were grouped under the following topics: opportunity and mobility, education and expectations for their children, work experience and opinions, finances, social classes, household composition, and interviewer observations" (Krogh 1991b:23). For purposes of this article, I have focused on those questions that relate directly to experiences in the work force and to the structure of social mobility.

CHICAGO'S URBAN DECLINE

The transformation of Chicago's inner city within the last three decades exemplifies the shifts which have occurred to nearly all of the major Northeastern industrial centers in America. At the core of these changes has been economic restructuring:

metropolitan economies, once anchored in the production of standardized industrial goods, shifted their concentration to financial, corporate, and service sector growth (Wacquant and Wilson 1989). After 1960, urban industrial operations began leaving the Northwest to areas where taxes were lower, unions and collective worker organization were minimal, and labor costs were markedly less. This process of deindustrialization witnessed "the transfer of millions of jobs from central cities to the suburbs and exurbs as well as to "right-to-work" states in the Sunbelt or overseas, the polarization of labor demand, and the persisting racial segmentation of the low-wage labor market" (Wacquant 1992a:1). Blacks were disproportionately affected by these economic shifts because a significant number had migrated to large Northeastern cities throughout the twentieth century to work as blue-collar industrial laborers (Drake and Cayton 1945). The eventual result was steadily increasing unemployment within the urban black community. For example, in 1950 the South Side of Chicago (home to nearly all of the respondents in our interview sample) had over half of its adult residents gainfully employed, the majority working in blue-collar jobs. At the time, this rate equaled that of the city as a whole. However, "by 1980, the number of working residents had dropped by a staggering 77% so that nearly three of every four persons over the age of sixteen were jobless" (Wacquant, 1992b:6).[1]

Though large-scale *industrial* capital was exiting Chicago for suburban, exurban, and overseas locations, *corporate* capital continued to pour into the city. A polarized metropolitan labor market formed, centered around finance and service sectors and characterized by the availability of high-wage, relatively secure jobs, and low-paying positions offering few benefits or career mobility. Chicago's inner-city blacks were unable to take advantage of either opportunity. The higher-paying jobs demanded post-secondary school training and in some cases a college degree (Kasarda 1989), "and [were] therefore beyond the reach of inner-city residents poorly trained by the crumbling public school system" (Wacquant 1992b:12). They were filled by a predominantly white, commuting population with access to effective educational institutions and employment training programs. For the *low-wage* metropolitan jobs which were emerging, inner-city blacks had to compete with a growing female labor pool as well as an increasing immigrant population— legal and illegal (Sassen 1989). The growing competition for low-wage employment, employers' preferences for Hispanic and female workers as opposed to blacks (Krogh 1991b), and employers' disdain for workers with inner-city addresses (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991) resulted in the sporadic placement of inner-city blacks in low-wage service sector jobs.

In addition to rising unemployment and industrial outmigration, the institutional fabric of Chicago's inner-city communities also experienced dramatic transformation. For most of the early and mid-twentieth century, blacks of all social classes had little choice but to reside alongside one another in areas such as Chicago's South Side (Hirsch 1983). They experienced restrictions on residential mobility due to the discriminatory practices of real estate agents and commercial developers, the construction of public housing in predominantly nonwhite areas

by city legislatures, and the vehement protests and violent demonstrations by residents of white communities. Despite their collective segregation, they had access to various public and private institutions which supplied basic goods and services and helped to alleviate economic subordination and, social and political marginality (Spear 1967):

> The proliferation of institutions that made "Bronzeville," as its residents used to call it, the capital of black America enabled it to duplicate (although at a markedly inferior level) the organizational structure of the wider white society and to provide limited but real avenues of mobility within its own internal order... The organizational infrastructure—the black press and the church, the lodges and social clubs, the businesses and professional services, and the "policy racket ... gave the classical ghetto of the 1950s its communal character and strength, and ... served as an instrument of collective solidarity and mobilization (Wacquant 1992b:7).

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, as a greater number of blacks moved into the middle and upper social classes, they began moving out of the South Side and into suburban and outlying metropolitan neighborhoods previously inaccessible due to restricted residential covenants. Left in their wake were politically powerless inner-city communities unable to influence city, state, or federal decision-making (Caraley 1992). The gradual withering of the South Side's institutional sector followed. The Nixon administration ushered in drastic cutbacks in public housing funds and other social programs for urban communities. The Reagan/Bush administration's policy of "New Federalism" continued the policy of welfare state retrenchment, accelerating the ghetto's decline with dramatic cutbacks in, and elimination of, social programs designed ostensibly for the poor and needy (Caraley 1992).[2] Concomitantly, the development of downtown areas designed to attract financial institutions and provide for middle- and upper-class needs took priority over investment in ghetto areas. Investment in public services such as health, education, and community development for inner-city communities fell by the wayside.

The twin processes of economic decline and institutional decimation have had a significant impact on the ten community areas in which the respondents in our sample reside—seven of which are on the South Side, and three of which are predominantly black and poor areas on the city's West Side. For example, the following passage is an historical description of North Lawndale, one of the communities represented in our sample. Its description is emblematic of the changes which have occurred to the ten community areas in our sample.

> Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1950s, blacks had begun to replace the Jews.... While the new residents were confined to the northern section of the community, the influx of blacks seemingly enhanced the ethnic diversity of North Lawndale. This led a local newspaper to proclaim in 1955 that in North Lawndale "new people are mingling with the old. The melting pot is bubbling again."

The new residents of North Lawndale encountered economic difficulties....
It is estimated that the effects of the riots, coupled with the racial turnover in
North Lawndale between 1960 and 1970, have resulted in the loss of 75% of
the business establishments and 25% of the jobs in the community area. North
Lawndale suffered another severe blow when the International Harvester
Company tractor works closed in 1969, with the loss of an estimated 3,400 jobs.
The depressed economic conditions have lingered; according to the 1980
Census, more than one-fifth of the labor force was unemployed and North
Lawndale's median family income was among the 10 lowest of Chicago's 77
community areas (*Local Community Fact Book* 1984:82).

Currently, 18% of the city's residents live in the ten community areas in our
sample. Since 1970, the population size in these ten areas has been steadily
decreasing. Nine of the ten areas have experienced population decreases of at least
15% of their residents since 1980—the greatest loss (33.2%) occurring in Grand
Boulevard—and five of the ten lost at least 27% of their residents from 1970 to 1980.
As indicated above, the majority of households that left these ten areas were black
and belonged to the working and middle classes. This pattern of middle-class
"flight," combined with rising unemployment for those who remained, has
transformed most of these ten communities into areas of extreme poverty
concentration and high welfare recipiency. That is, in absolute numbers these
communities contain far fewer residents today than in the 1960s. However, the
number of people out of the labor force, unemployed, or receiving public assistance
now comprise a far greater proportion of the overall residential population. For
example, whereas in 1970 not one area reported double-digit unemployment, all
ten communities currently have at least a 15% unemployment rate, with the figure
exceeding 20% in seven of the ten communities. Though containing only 18% of
Chicago's residents, these ten areas combine to house 40% of all public assistance
recipients in Chicago. Finally, in the last twenty years, five of the ten communities
experienced slight increases in the number of households living below the poverty
line and the other five areas lost such "poor" households—although these
reductions were minimal both relative to the number of poor households in the
area and the total number of households. In addition to high *household* poverty
rates, the percentage of *individual* residents living below the poverty line has
increased dramatically in all ten communities since 1970. Three communities—
Grand Boulevard, Near West Side, and North Lawndale—report a poverty rate in
excess of 50% (see Table 1).

Wilson argues that as a result of rising unemployment, growing poverty
concentration, and increased welfare dependency, persons living in the ghettos
of Chicago and northern industrialized cities in general have grown increasingly
"socially isolated," that is, experiencing "a lack of contact or ... [a lack of] sustained
interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society"
(1987:60). Not only has their lack of contact with mainstream institutions become
a source of difficulty in and of itself, but the high poverty concentration of their

TABLE 1
Poverty Rates (persons living below the poverty line as a percentage of the total population)

Community Area	1970	1980	1990
1. Grand Blvd.	44.4	60.9	63.6
2. Near West Side	34.7	48.9	52.3
3. North Lawndale	30.0	39.9	52.3
4. E. Garfield Park	32.4	40.3	45.6
5. Englewood	24.3	35.8	39.7
6. W. Garfield Park	24.5	37.2	35.7
7. New City	10.2	21.9	31.9
8. W. Englewood	12.0	29.4	27.6
9. South Shore	7.8	20.8	25.3
10. Austin	8.1	21.8	23.5

Source: United States Bureau of the Census (as cited in *Local Community Fact Book* 1984).

neighborhoods acts quasi-independently to compound their difficulties. In addition to a lack of viable employment opportunities, inadequate educational institutions and training programs, and so forth, their neighborhoods and communities present an additional series of obstacles to upward social mobility.

> Social isolation ... not only implies that contact between groups of different class and/or racial backgrounds is either lacking or has become increasingly intermittent but that the nature of this contact enhances the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area. These concentration effects include ... the kinds of ecological niches that the residents of these neighborhoods occupy in terms of access to jobs and job networks, availability of marriageable partners, involvement in quality schools, and exposure to conventional role models (Wilson 1987:61).

Recent survey research has validated Wilson's arguments concerning the concentration effects of poor neighborhoods and the social isolation of its residential population (Fernandez and Harris 1992). Employing discrete variables and sophisticated quantitative methods, this research has pointed to individual and neighborhood factors which are significant in affecting the social mobility opportunities for those residing in extremely poor urban areas. However, as the interviews make clear, it is the voices of individuals which document the complex ways in which such factors actually play themselves out in everyday life.

EMPLOYMENT HISTORIES

The respondents in the interview sample shared similar educational and employment trajectories. The youngest in the sample was 27 years of age and the oldest was 44 years old. Only five persons in the sample (19%) reported having

any college experience. Of those five who had gone on to college, one was unemployed and receiving public assistance, another worked as a salesman and real estate appraiser—earning $31,000 per year, and the remaining three worked at menial labor jobs which paid less than $20,000 per year. Eleven persons in the sample had obtained a high school diploma or G.E.D. certificate, and sixteen had not completed their high school education.

Whether quitting high school in order to find employment or upon completion of their high school education, nearly all of the respondents began their work careers in manufacturing and related industries. Only two persons initially obtained skilled employment; the remaining 25 entered the workforce as semi-skilled or menial laborers. At the time of the survey, only five persons were employed full-time—two of the five reported incomes over $30,000 per year—and 11 persons reported their current status as either "unemployed" or "not working." Fourteen were receiving public assistance support such as General Assistance (G.A.) payments or food stamps; some reported public assistance as their sole form of income while others used welfare monies to supplement part-time or irregular employment. Nineteen persons in the sample (70%) had been on the welfare rolls at some point in their lives.

In contrast to conservative studies which argue that welfare recipients prefer to remain on welfare rather than seeking employment (Mead 1986), nearly all of the welfare recipients in our sample moved back and forth between employment and enrollment on public assistance. All of them had worked and received a steady income at least once in their lives. Moreover, the majority who were receiving welfare payments would have preferred to work and were actively seeking steady employment. As the interviews make clear, their placement on public assistance programs resulted from job loss, the inability to find full-time employment, a lack of necessary skills and training, or the need to supplement existing income, rather than a lack of motivation or desire to work.

For example, Jerry was 37; he lost a steady manufacturing job as a utility man and forklift driver at a Printing Company because the company relocated. "I [was working], but my company moved to another state after I had been there 16 years." Unemployed at the time of the interview, he had a strong desire to go back to school and learn a trade and had been searching the want ads, applying to companies, and asking friends about job opportunities. He has been continually turned down by employers because he did not possess the "special skills" that companies desire. "Being out of work, for one, and trying to get back out here into the job market, I can see that a lot of doors are closed, because they want people with special skills." To feed a household of three, public assistance was the only option.

Adam, 33 years old, was another G.A. recipient with a strong work history. From 1972 to 1981, he was employed full-time until, like Jerry, he was "laid off" from a factory job. When interviewed, he was supporting a household of two on $637.00 per month. In response to questions concerning his attempts at procuring employment, he said quite simply, "[For] most of [the jobs] I ain't qualified. *What I'm qualified for they ain't hiring.*" Both Adam and Jerry, and all of the other

respondents, shared the same basic values commonly attributed to the American personae—for example, a strong sense of individualism and belief in the virtues of hard work. Attributing their difficulties to a lack of a solid work ethic or productive values is incorrect.

The historical trajectories of these two respondents do not fit simplistic models of social mobility. It cannot simply be said that they lack human capital because at one point they held skilled factory-level jobs. Similarly, their current position cannot simply be attributed to "level of parental education," "parental occupation," or other variables employed in orthodox status-attainment models. Such models cannot explain how and why they were hired *initially*, nor how they remained employed. Both Jerry and Adam lost their jobs due to changes in their respective industrial sectors—for example, deskilling, rising organic composition of capital, decreased productivity—which rendered their skills and training anachronistic. Hence, any explanation for their predicament must take into consideration the historically specific transformation of the urban economy.

Industrial Outmigration and Technological Advances

Several patterns in Jerry and Adam's interviews concerning employment histories are common to the sample as a whole. We now turn to a more systematic exploration of these themes. As noted above, urban blacks historically have had significant representation in manufacturing and related sectors of the urban industrial economy. The interview sample was no different in this regard; 18 of the 27 respondents (66%) had held a skilled, semi-skilled, or general laborer position in a factory or industrial firm. For those in our sample over 30 years of age ($N = 16$), this figure jumps to 81% ($n = 13$). However, many have been displaced due to plant closure and relocation and have not been able to translate their industrial sector skills into full-time work. Accounts such as "ain't as many factories and stuff," "labor jobs are scarce," and "the steel mill laid off, they had a big cutback," are emblematic of the responses given to account for their work histories.

Larry is a 30-year-old black male. He has a high school diploma and was working in various factory jobs for eight years until he was laid off. In explaining his employment history, he stated, "the steel mills they've folded, they've moved out of Chicago. This isn't a steel mill city; it's a business city now." When interviewed, he was receiving public assistance, working at odd jobs when he could find them, and studying to earn a degree in electronic repair and welding. J.T. was also laid off when the local steel mills were rapidly shutting down. Industrial plant closure was mentioned immediately (and throughout the interview), not simply to account for his personal economic status but in response to questions concerning the contemporary structure of social mobility.

> *Interviewer:*   Is America a land of opportunity, for you personally, or your family?
>
> *J.T.:*   What can I say is, maybe ten years ago it wasn't like this, here, 'cause I had a good job, but you know, the steel mills all fold up. So I was working on the railroad

crane, I had a good job, I was making good money. You know, livin' good.... Had a house too, lost it, you know. Steel mill went down, it's like, seems like everything went down here."

The historically significant presence of blacks in the urban industrial labor force is most directly evidenced in the prolonged unemployment of those who were working as industrial blue-collar laborers. However, as the interviews make clear, the historical reliance of blacks on industrial labor market opportunities is also apparent in the respondents' inability to envision an increase in future labor market opportunities. That is, due to the lack of availability of skilled or semi-skilled blue-collar labor in Chicago, some respondents exhibited a general pessimism concerning their future status, and that of succeeding generations. Theo is a 34-year-old male who had worked for nine years in manufacturing jobs until he was laid off. When interviewed, he was supporting a household of two with an income of $637.00 per month from G.A. He saw both the closure of plants and the computerization of the workplace as indicative of a decrease in social mobility opportunities for his son.

> *Interviewer:* Do you think there is more or less opportunity for people to get ahead today than there was in the past?
>
> *Theo:* Less.
>
> *Interviewer:* Why do you think that is so?
>
> *Theo:* I think it's less because everything is more computerized, you need more technical knowledge now. Ain't as many factories and stuff.
>
> *Interviewer:* What kind of job do you think your son will really get?
>
> *Theo:* I don't know.... Like I said, there ain't hardly no factories around so the way conditions is now he probably wouldn't have a job.

In addition to the lack of "factory" jobs, Theo correctly points to technological advancement as an additional factor affecting opportunities for social mobility. The American economy has been affected by a series of rapid technological advances which have transformed the role of the worker (Peterson 1985:3; Harvey 1989:186). Workers have not only been deleteriously affected by industrial relocation to areas where labor is cheaper to employ, where the working day can be extended to suit capital's needs, where the real wage can be lowered without union confrontation or any other effective form of worker resistance, but the social reorganization of the workplace through continuous technological advances in production has wrought disaster on the American workforce (O'Connor 1984). As regards the urban *black* labor force, both lower- and higher-skilled blacks have been hurt (Wilson 1980).

The pessimistic attitude of some of the respondents toward technological advancement arises in part because the introduction of machinery resulted in the

loss of jobs both for themselves and their community. David, one such "victim" of these technological advances, was laid off twice by "computer technology." Speaking of his superfluity, he said:

> *David:* Well, I've worked for Time magazine for a number of years and a lot of their companies and I've always got advancement, up until that I was laid off. That's you know, getting laid off is a fact of life ... because the machines are putting a lot of people out of jobs. I worked for Time magazine for 7 years on a videograph printer and they come along with the Abedic printer, it cost them half a million dollars: they did what we did in half the time, eliminated two shifts.

After being laid off the second time, David was forced to accept G.A. for several months to help support his family. Eventually, he went back to school and was working toward a bachelors degree in computer science until 1985, when his studies were abruptly curtailed by a cut in federal educational grants. Unable to find any steady work, which he attributed to a lack of jobs as well as discrimination, he was forced to take an $8.50 per hour part-time janitorial position. When interviewed, he was making $650 per month and, together with $200 per month in food stamps and his wife's monthly income of $200, they were supporting a household of five.

Some spoke more positively of the impact of "computers," "electronics," "new technical stuff," etc. on their children and the black community in general. In response to a question concerning the quality of life today in relation to thirty years ago, Len said, "This is the age of computers.... And, I think that my kids will have a better life [than I did] because of opportunities today and the working situation today in computers."

> *Lee:* Before, blacks didn't really know how to achieve things. Now they know and they have the vehicles to do it, so there really [isn't] much excuse for them not to do it. It's common sense that robotics and computers are the wave of the future. Anybody would know that they have to go into that.

Others were attentive to the impact of the changes for people living in their neighborhood. Darrell, speaking in a prophetic manner, states:

> And [the people in this neighborhood] don't have any motivation from anybody in their family to [change their thinking], so it's worse. It would be much better for them if it was ten years later. In the past it would be better for them. You see, *automation is moving further and further on and on and they can't cope with what's coming now and they'll never be able to cope with what's coming in the future.* What their better chance would be is to roll the clock back ten years and start over.

Discrimination in the Labor Market

Neckerman and Kirschenman argue that race continues to be an important factor in the hiring process, especially for inner-city blacks. They write:

> While there has been sustained interest in the high joblessness of blacks in the
> United States, most research considers skill deficiencies or spatial mismatches
> in labor supply and demand rather than barriers to employment that exists in
> the hiring process. (1991:434).

In interviewing numerous employers in and around Chicago, the authors found
that at different points in the hiring process—interviews, skills tests, advertising—
employers employed strategies which placed blacks, specifically blacks residing
in inner-city neighborhoods, at a disadvantage. Some strategies were explicit, such
as advertising job openings in "neighborhood, suburban, or ethnic papers in
addition to or instead of metropolitan papers" (Neckerman and Kirschenman
1991:438), while other disadvantages for inner-city blacks arise because of
interactional difficulties in the job interview—for example, culturally specific
communicative differences between employer and applicant.

The respondents in the sample viewed the job search process as discriminatory
and, consequently, as being an additional factor contributing to their current
predicament. Some stated that most of the jobs were advertised in "suburban
newspapers"; such selective recruitment strategies were seen as reducing the
employment opportunities chances of blacks, thus confirming the supply side
finding of Neckerman and Kirschenman: "I say blacks [have the least chance of
being successful in life]. Well, it's hard to get a job. The jobs they're so far out,
that when you do go out in the suburbs, most of the time people don't wanta
hire you, you know?!" (Barton). Examples of discrimination were also said to occur
at the site of employment:

> *Interviewer:*   Who gets the greater share [of the good jobs in the city]?
>
> *Ben:*   I'd have to say whites. Do I have to say why? I went to a coupla jobs where
> a couple of the receptionists absolute[ly] told me in confidence: "You know what they
> do, with these applications from blacks as soon as the day is over?" We rip them
> and throw' em in the garbage. And she was white.

Respondents generally felt that "whites," in addition to refusing blacks employ-
ment, gave preferential treatment to other white applicants, and that whites have
retained advantages in the labor market regardless of movements in the economy:

> *Edgar:*   Whites got a better chance of gettin' ahead than others. More than this,
> because they always had, a lot of them always had money in their family. Blacks hasn't
> always had the chance that they had now. Whites, whites, if they can't make it, their
> parents already made it, they have money for them already. Blacks have to go for
> it more from scratch.... It's still the same old thing: whites get ahead much quicker
> than blacks. Still the same, that hasn't changed, 'cause on this job right now, I can
> see that. But there's nothin you can do about it if you wanta keep your job, you gotta
> to just lay dead and try to make it.
>
> *Interviewer:*   Who gets the good jobs in this city?

> *Buck:* The whites get the best jobs in the city. It's like that all over the country so that's no surprise. Because they control the strings, so to speak, they hire who they want to hire And they hire whites for the higher-paying jobs.

However, not only was "race" factored into their perceptions of employment opportunities, but respondents also understood the organization of work to be racially structured as well. Thus, successfully locating announcements for work, negotiating an interview, and obtaining a job was only part of the process of overcoming racial bias. Respondents reported that their white co-workers were unfairly given promotions before them; additionally, since whites were promoted quicker, more whites were retained than blacks when the company chose to lay off the lower rungs of their workforce. Others stated that they were frustrated and quit jobs because they were passed over in promotions due to racial discrimination and, therefore, they were effectively relegated to lower-wage employment. Edgar worked eight years at a Chicago steel mill until the company shut down. After working as a truck driver for a few years, he was at the time of the interview employed as a "handyman" doing "odd jobs" for a transportation company. When asked to give his perceptions of the social class structure of Chicago, he employed racial and geographic categories. He placed Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and blacks living in the inner city in the lowest two classes—"poor" and "poorer"; in the highest two classes, he placed whites and blacks who attempt to "play white." He spoke often of the indignation which he suffered at work because he is black, and he narrated the following incident from his workplace to argue for the continuing racial privileges that the "really rich" enjoy over their lower-class counterparts in the workplace.

> One day, [my boss] made had me chauffeur for him, he had to go to a funeral. And then he had to go to, uh, Mayor Washington's big meeting, somewhere down there on Michigan. So he bought me the whole suit, to show you how he is: the black cap, the black suit, the black coat. That was just for one night and I drove his limousine. I worked that day till three o'clock. He said: "Well, you go in, go take a shower and put your uniform, I have it ready for you." The only thing, I bought the shoes, I bought my own black shoes (chuckles). You can tell, the way [the really rich] dress.... You can tell by the way they talk. You can almost tell, there's a certain air about themselves. They can't help it: they got his class and they know it! Ain't no doubt about it, they know it. And you, it makes you know it too. *They make you know it too: I am this and you are that, and don't you ever forget it! They put you in your place real quick* (emphasis added).

CURRENT ATTEMPTS AT SOCIAL MOBILITY

Given that the respondents identified industrial flight, the displacement of jobs by technological advances, and the continuity of racial preference as historical factors which had shaped their current socioeconomic position, what attempts were they making to improve their condition and what obstacles did they face in the process?

"It Ain't Who You Know But What You Know"—Robert

Social networks have received renewed attention in the study of the urban poor. In *The Truly Disadvantaged,* Wilson argues that due to their "social isolation" an important means for obtaining jobs has been effectively shut down for the urban poor, namely, the use of informal networks and social ties to acquire information on available employment as well to enlist recommendations and personal references. In the most rigorous application of the "social isolation" hypothesis, Fernandez and Harris confirm Wilson's theory regarding the significantly low levels of contact between the nonworking poor—the category in which most of the respondents in our sample fall—and those exhibiting "mainstream" characteristics, that is, those who tend to be employed, not on public assistance, and living in "stable areas":

> Non-working poor tend to have fewer employed and highly educated friends, and tend to have more friends on public assistance than people in other classes.... [A]lthough the isolation of the non-working poor from people with mainstream characteristics is far from complete, the degree of isolation is disturbingly high. A minority of women's friends are employed, and over 40% of minority women's friends are on public aid. The degree of contact between non-working poor males and people who are employed is somewhat better, but a large proportion of minority males have no employed friends (Fernandez and Harris 1992:274).

The respondents were acutely aware of the importance of social ties in locating and successfully obtaining employment. Indeed, personal "connections" was the most systematically invoked and ubiquitous factor which the respondents felt affected their opportunities for social mobility.[3] While all of the respondents emphasized the importance of education and hard work, many admitted that these were ultimately limited paths of social mobility. For example, consider Judd, a 27-year-old who has been working as a machine operator for the past five years and supporting a household of four with a yearly income of $20-25,000. When asked if education is the best way to get ahead, he responded:

> That's not true, that's not true! Because I know some people who went to school and still go to school now and they still haven't gotten ahead yet. They went to school and still go to school and graduated from school and their diploma has done, ain't done them no good.

When listing people who had "made it," he explained one such person's success as "luck" and another's good fortune by saying, "he knew somebody: he knew somebody to get there (smiles), somebody helped him into it!" In discussing his *personal* chances for advancement, he stated the importance of "knowing somebody" once again:

> *Interviewer:*   What do you think is the best way of getting ahead in Chicago today?
>
> *Judd:*   Hard work and knowing the right people(smiles).
>
> *Interviewer:*   What do you think is the best way for you to get ahead?
>
> *Judd:*   For me? I need to know somebody. *I work hard already and it doesn't do me no good.* I need to know somebody to make me get ahead.

Another respondent answered in a similar manner, tempering the importance of "human capital" with "social capital":

> It's not where you go, it's the people, you got to know somebody to get you in. It helps to know somebody nowadays. I mean, you can look at it: it's a lot, a lot of people out here that's graduated college, that's got various skills doin' this and doin' that, and they still don't have a job. It's hard to find a job. You need someone inside.

Who *does* have the necessary connections? Whether asked to answer questions concerning persons in Chicago who were currently "getting ahead," who had the greatest success in "getting the good jobs in the city," or who were in the "highest social classes," respondents overwhelmingly pointed to "whites" as having the best access to employment opportunities. Some stated simply that in general employers tended to prefer, or hire, whites over blacks—for example, "For an employer to hire, he feel that white is superior," "more doors are open to [whites]." Other interviewees went further; here are Steve, Michael, and Judd on the subject:

> *Interviewer:*   Which people have the best chance [to get ahead] and why?
>
> *Steve:*   You talkin' about race?
>
> *Interviewer:*   Whatever is relevant, race or something else.
>
> *Steve:*   It can't be nothin' else!(laughs) Oh, white people got the best chance. (Why?) They just do. They got the top jobs, you know what I'm sayin'? They got the top jobs, and in this city, man, you know, it's all who you know. 'Cause if you know somebody you can get a good job, you understand what I'm sayin'? And, and, and most of them push their family: you got one who got a job, a big kinda job, for the city or somethin' like that. Most likely, he gonna get some of his family on it, if they're workin …
>
> *Interviewer:*   Who gets the good jobs in this city?
>
> *Michael:*   It depends. Middle-class white folks. You come from a family where the father has a good job, nine times out of ten, the kids are going to have good jobs. That's the way it works.
>
> *Judd:*   Uh, whites got a better chance of getting' ahead than others. More than this, because they always had, a lot of them always had money in their family. Blacks hasn't always had the chance that they had now. Whites, whites, if they can't make it, their

parents already made it, they have money right there for them already. Blacks have
to go for it more from scratch.

While respondents stressed the historic and existing control over labor markets
by whites, many were careful to point out the growing presence of minority groups
such as blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in the middle and upper classes. That is,
in certain instances, class combined with race was for them a fruitful set of
explanatory variables. Interestingly, whereas for whites, entrance into the higher
social classes and into better employment sectors was seen as the result of family
wealth or good connections, the success of blacks and Hispanics was explained
as "good fortune" or "luck." In no case was mobility seen with an unjaundiced
eye.

Moreover, some expressed animosity toward those blacks who had successfully
moved out of their lower social stations. That is, once reaching the middle and
upper strata, blacks, unlike whites, did not help "their own" to climb up as well.
The lack of self-help among blacks was seen as partially responsible for the ongoing
social problems in the black community.

> Larry: Blacks, they don't like to vote for blacks. They like to vote for whites. They've
> been educated that way. Look like to me, our people are trying to hold one another
> back from getting ahead. Most other races, they look like they try to help their
> people.... Blacks aren't getting ahead because they aren't helping themselves.

Edgar echoed these views:

> You notice: your own people don't like to help you. Among blacks, I'll put it that
> way. Because, I got some people in my family, they got good jobs, honest to God,
> they cash money. They say they'll help you but they won't!

The resentment toward those socioeconomically successful blacks who refuse to
help other blacks in lower social stations is understandable given the emphasis
that respondents place on "connections" and "race" in the hiring process. Whereas
whites, as well as Hispanics and Asians, are perceived as "looking out for their
own," this important avenue of obtaining employment is seen as absent in the
black community as a whole.

Jobs and Neighborhoods

The relationship between neighborhood quality and individual social mobility
is a relatively new area for social science research, and many questions remain
regarding the specific nature of this relation (see Jencks and Mayer 1990). Recent
research, conducted in large metropolitan areas, has found that neighborhood
quality *can* affect processes of status attainment; the socioeconomic composition
of a neighborhood can mediate the effects that social problems can pose for

residents (Crane 1991; Sampson and Groves 1989). As many respondents in our sample argued, the neighborhood in which a person lives can be as important as "race" and "connections" in achieving upward mobility. For example, in the very first question of the interview, William stated that social mobility in America was conditioned on one's neighborhood:

> *Interviewer:* Is America a land of opportunity where everyone can get ahead?
>
> *William:* If you're from a nice neighborhood I believe it's easier for you to get a job and stuff. I have been on jobs and such and gotten looks from folks and such, I wonder if he is the type who do those things in that neighborhood.

And, throughout the interview, he pointed to importance of one's place of residence:

> *Interviewer:* Is [America a land of opportunity] for you personally.
>
> *William:* I have a fair chance but not as good a chance as if I didn't come from....
>
> *Interviewer:* Do people in this city all have the same chance of getting ahead?
>
> *William:* No
>
> *Interviewer:* Which people have the best chance and why?
>
> *William:* Well, I think people that stay in the out lying areas or the lake front. I think that they have the best chance. And there are more people that work from the outlying areas from the lake.... I think the poor people have less chance because there are more competition and more people in their neighborhood.

Others remarked in similar fashion, arguing that "neighborhood" can be as stigmatizing a marker as skin color:

> *Interviewer:* Which people have the best chance [of getting ahead] and why?
>
> *Carl:* It's dependent on the area you live in. For instance, I have a better chance than the people living in Cabrini Green because of the fact that Cabrini Green has that stigma about it so that they are considered lower than people from my neighborhood.
>
> *Interviewer:* Which people have the worst chance and why?
>
> *Carl:* The people from the Projects simply because they have the title of them, you know the Projects. We tend to think of them as being the lowest of the low in society and so forth.

Some respondents felt that employers discriminated against people living in particular urban neighborhoods, thus confirming Neckerman and Kirschenman's survey of employers who actually use place of residence in recruitment and hiring

decisions. Moreover, in neighborhoods with high poverty and unemployment, individuals must not only struggle to obtain meaningful employment, but those who *are* working become identified as lucrative targets for theft and robbery:

> *Interviewer:*   Do you think it matters which neighborhood people live in if they want to be successful in life?

> *Buck:*   Yes it does matter. See, this is a violent neighborhood. You always hear somebody gettin' shot, just about everyday or something like every night. Because you know, like I said, I see people are crowded up together, especially in the high rises. I would say it drags you down, because, you know, when people get crazy and everything, it'll drag you down. *They gonna rob you, tryin to beat you. They don't wanta work, you know, they'd rather for you to work and then wait for you, you know, to get your paycheck so they can rob you or something.*

The perceived relationship between "neighborhood" and social mobility is not always symbolic, but has a basis in the actual attempts of respondents to better their current status. Witness the frustration exhibited by Thomas, Terry, and Michael concerning the lack of publicized job advertisements in their own neighborhoods:

> *Thomas:*   Ain't too many opportunities in this neighborhood. This neighborhood just take care of people, all them Jesus places and Salvation Army and all that. There's more bums walking around here than people working. It's a real low neighborhood.

> *Terry:*   A lot of people in this neighborhood, they want to work but they can't get work. A few, but a very few, they just don't want to work. The majority they want to work but they can't find work ... you've got to know when to look for, where to find [jobs]. There are papers like the *Learner* up north with good jobs in them but they don't distribute them around here.... *The good jobs are mostly in white neighborhoods.*

> *Michael:*   There aren't as many opportunity for people in this neighborhood as there could be.... Okay, we have people that are put there to get this money for us, like politicians, ward committeemen, aldermen, or so, they're not doing their jobs. To put things out here for these people. There are people that want. Are people that are willing to do, *but the things, the facilities, are not the same, per se, as for the lily white neighborhood* or something. There aren't these kind of things like YMCA or *these certain help centers or places where people can go to get help or seek certain amounts of counseling ... as far as education of how to ... advance themselves, how to make a better living for themselves* (emphasis added).

Jobs were felt to be located either in "white" neighborhoods or in suburban areas. The latter presented difficulties of access: it was difficult to find out about jobs since they were in "small suburban newspapers" or, transportation problems—for example, the lack of effective public transportation, inaffordability of car ownership—made it difficult to get out the outlying suburban areas (see Wacquant 1992b).

> *Tim:* Most of the time the places in the paper be too far, and you need transportation, and I don't have none right now. If I had some I'd probably be able to get [a job]. If I had a car and went way into the suburbs, 'cause there ain't none in the city. And jobs in the city don't pay you nothing and they work you hard too.... 'Cause most of the jobs is out in the suburbs and you have to have transportation 'cause the buses don't run out there.

As Rosenbaum and Popkin's work demonstrates, when blacks *could* get to the suburbs, they not only found more jobs available but had a higher incidence of obtaining work. They write, "this retrospective analysis provides further evidence that suburban residents participated more in the labor market after they moved than those who remained in the city.... Of those who were never employed before their move, 46% found work after moving to the suburbs; for the city this figure was only 30%" (1991:348).

Education and Skills

Apart from their social ties and the conditions of their neighborhoods, lack of education and inadequate skills were cited as the greatest barrier to social mobility. Every respondent mentioned the need to have educational credentials to acquire a job or to "move up in the world." While the majority of the discourse took place at a general level—that is, "education is the best way to get ahead," "you gotta have an education these days"—at times, respondents articulated the ways in which this issue had a direct impact on their livelihood. One respondent, actively searching for employment, attributed the lack of response by employers to "a lack of skills" on his part. Another, Jerry, who we learned had lost his factory job of 16 years because his "company had moved to another state," had been searching for new employment for over two years at "hundreds of places," and had been repeatedly turned down due to lack of credentials:

> For a lot of jobs I can't apply for because I didn't finish high school.... I have plans for going to school, for like a trade, you know. Anything you know. I know that I'm not going to find a good job like that just going out filling job applications, 'cause most jobs I see, they want experience.

As mentioned above, there were a few individuals who saw the educational path to success as necessary, but limited. "You need some education, but, you know, it's not the only way to get ahead," stated one respondent quite emphatically. Another told us, "I know some people who went to school and still go to school now and they still haven't gotten ahead yet. They went to school and still go to school and graduated from school and their diploma ain't done them no good." Although such moderate views regarding education did surface, in general the interviews evidenced a faithful adherence to the power of educational credentials as well as a belief in the latter's ability to "move you automatically up into the middle class."

"Alternate" Economic Opportunities

The 1970s ushered in a series of changes to the occupational structure of the leading industrialized countries. Due to factors such as continuous technological innovation, increased global competition, and mergers and market takeovers, an increasingly unstable and precarious business environment has emerged. Many firms have chosen to adapt to such environmental exigencies by gradually moving away from standardized mass production schemes to more "flexible" forms of organizing production. Translated into social categories, this has meant laying off large numbers of full-time workers, using part-time labor, and subcontracting out jobs in response to production demands (Harvey 1989; Gorz 1988). For U.S. metropolitan areas, full-time employment in industrial-goods production has been replaced by job opportunities which are seasonal, temporary, menial, or located in informal economies (see Sassen 1992; Portes, Castells and Benton 1989; Ferman and Ferman 1973). The current work patterns of the respondents in our sample bring to life these structural shifts. Many are forced to search for and accept irregular jobs in legal and illegal economic sectors. For example, eight of the residents in our sample had been forced to take on temporary or part-time work while searching for more stable, full-time employment. Another three worked in their spare time on "odd jobs" around the neighborhood—for example, "fixing cars," "painting houses," "washing windows." Since being laid off, Larry worked sporadically at part-time jobs for five years (when he could find them). He actively searched out any opportunities for work; once, he made the thousand-mile journey from Chicago to Texas because he heard of a job opportunity, only to be given a menial $5.00 per hour job which he turned down: " Why should I relocate my family? I can get $5.00 in [Texas], I can get $5.75 in [Chicago]. I didn't like Texas. It was too hot." His describes his most recent effort at "getting by":

> I make enough just to pay the rent, enough just to keep everything up. I haven't paid for those magazines on the coffee table, I still owe $11.00. So, my wife was saying I should go sell some golf balls. Go get some golf balls out of the lake and sell them to golfers. I made a rack. Sinks to the bottom of the balls and I got a rope and I pull it. And they roll up in a basket. Bring them home, sit down and wash them off, polish them off, sell them to golfers. Some of the balls are practically brand new. We sell them five for a dollar and that's a good deal; that's just twenty cents a ball, and the balls they buy are like $3.00. So they say it's a good deal. Some of the golfers, they say, "Hey, don't sell them like that." And, I say, "Well, I can't eat them and the little bit I make, I'm not trying to get rich. I'm just trying to pay a bill or get a layaway out."

Numerous others, sincerely and in jest, responded to questions concerning the availability of jobs with the retort that "McDonalds" was always looking for people. However, neither minimum wage jobs nor irregular work opportunities were seen as affording the stability and security necessary to raise a family, or to plan for the future.

In many of the community areas in which the respondents live, a lucrative informal economy has become entrenched which includes the distribution of illicit goods—for example, drugs, guns, sexual favors—as well as the unreported sale of handicrafts and clothing, "gypsy cab" service, and plumbing and household maintenance.

> *Interviewer:* Many people have a hard time makin' ends meet when they are out of a job, or their pay is not enough. What do people in this neighborhood do when they run out of money?

> *Ben:* Get depressed, drink, snort (sighs heavily), break in other people's houses. Borrow, get on aid, whore—that means prostitute. Really, I'm not trying to be funny. The guy down here was making pretty good sellin' cocaine till the detectives got him yesterday. And, really, it's just an economic thing. It's a little, they, there were two dope houses on this block at the same time. And there are a few more. The guys, really, just don't have any other way of making money, that's what they're doin. They're not interested in the drug trade or anything like that, they just, um, see it as a way of making a living. Though illegal, still a way. That's what they tell me.

A few individuals admitted participating in both types of illegal exchange—that is, selling illicit goods and failing to pay taxes on occasional income. However, they visit this economic sector only to get "quick cash when times are tough," and prefer not to rely on illegal activities for their sustenance. One respondent, Carl, stated, "I hate to say it, but it look to me that dealing drugs [is the best way to get ahead] 'cause these guys (gestures out of his window) make more money out there;" however, in general respondents either disdained such types of income generation or downplayed their worth because of the lack of stability and high levels of violence involved.

Most of the respondents in the sample explicitly frame their participation in part-time, irregular, or informal work as a temporary survival strategy until they can find steady full-time employment. Paying monthly bills, providing for household needs, and supporting their current job searches are some of the reasons given for continuing to work at low-wage jobs which carry relatively few benefits and little security. Some respondents point to a better time in the past when they could rely on others in their neighborhood for money and support until they found work: "The neighborhood ain't like it used to be when I was coming up, like in the sixties. Everyone used to stick together, help each other." Now, however, their neigh-borhoods lack such support mechanisms and they must take up any opportunity for income generation, regardless of the low wages they receive, the degrading work entailed, or the time such involvement takes away from job searches.

CONCLUSION

The Reagan Administration's assault on social policies designed to aid the poor and needy in America's cities stemmed from a belief that the urban poor were

largely responsible for their predicament. This position was grounded in the writings of Murray, Mead, Auletta, and other conservative scholars who argued that the efforts of the Great Society period to rebuild inner-city communities through massive federal support were successful only in creating a population of urban dwellers who deviated from the moral and social codes governing behavior in "mainstream" society. They argued that for two decades, the federal government's "war on poverty" did not alleviate America's urban ills, but instead had fostered persistent (and transgenerational) criminal involvement and welfare dependency; thus, further federal assistance would only continue to prolong the problem. Building off these arguments, the Reagan Administration sharply cut federal funding to state and city governments and the war on "poverty" became the war on the "poor and needy."

Wilson, Kasarda, and others in the field of urban poverty have argued against this conservative position. Their work demonstrates that economic restructuring and the institutional decimation of the inner city have reduced meaningful opportunities for social mobility, rendering welfare enrollment and participation in illegal economies a necessity rather than a choice. That is, inner cities have not only been hard hit by the loss of thousands of blue-collar jobs, but they no longer have the social and political resources which can help to alleviate economic impoverishment. Federally initiated cuts in funding for community development, job training, social service programs, education, and mass transit, to name a few, have effectively reduced the ability of urban municipalities to service the needs of their constituency (Caraley 1992). These reductions, together with the departure of stable middle- and working-class families to the suburbs and the inner city's declining tax base, have altered the institutional support available for residents: public assistance and illegally derived monies from drug selling, prostitution, and informal labor markets have taken the place of community institutions such as churches and social service agents to provide the main sources of support for needy individuals and households. The result has been the increasing "social isolation" of inner-city residents from "mainstream" persons and institutions; this becomes a self-reinforcing process which, by effectively restricting their social networks to others of similar social and economic status, continues to reduce their opportunities for reintegration into the "mainstream."

The interviews examined in this article are congruent in many ways with the scholarly hypotheses regarding the growing "social isolation" of the urban poor. The respondents confirmed social scientific studies which argue that a lack of meaningful job opportunities, resulting from continuous industrial outmigration, technological advancement, and discrimination in the hiring process, is at the root of their current predicament. Moreover, they supported Wilson's central claim that the unavailability of jobs is compounded by the effects of living in neighborhoods of high poverty concentration. These "concentration effects" emerged in the respondents' testimonies in systematic ways: They have minimal social ties to individuals who are employed in mainstream labor markets; moreover, not only do they see "whites" as having such "connections" and using them routinely to

find employment, but they criticize blacks who are steadily employed for failing to help other blacks "climb up the ladder." They cite various aspects of extremely poor neighborhoods which frustrate both their job searches and their abilities to lead stable lives: employers do not advertise in metropolitan newspapers, neighborhoods lack training and job information centers, and high rates of violent crime and petty theft restrict their social interaction. They perceive higher educational credentials to be mandatory for social mobility, but not sufficient. Finally, they argue that the remaining opportunities for income generation are located in illegal and informal economies which provide neither sufficient nor stable income and job security.

The contribution of these interviews goes beyond their empirical support for theories seeking to counter conservative arguments that blame the urban poor themselves for their predicament. The respondents also provide rich descriptions of the ways in which social forces impinge upon the everyday lives of individuals. A quantitative analysis may be effective in proving through statistical measures the significance of a factor or a set of factors in a model of social mobility; however, the above excerpts show that employment availability, social ties, neighborhood conditions, educational experience, and so forth are intertwined in complex ways in everyday experience. Who one knows depends on where one lives, what job one gets depends on who one knows and where one lives, and so on....

In addition, for the residents of the inner city, a sense of fatalism and a perception of social obstacles as being insurmountable are compounded daily not only by their own experiences but also through witnessing the difficulties of neighbors and friends. These "interaction effects" have been addressed in qualitative studies on the lifestyle of inner-city residents which were written in the mid-1960s (Clark 1965; Liebow 1967). However, the contemporary American inner city is not the same as it was in the 1960s and 1970s; while structurally, many of the same problems linger—for example, unemployment, low educational attainment, poverty—the inner city's deterioration has accelerated and become more intense in the last 30 years (Wilson 1987; Wacquant 1992b). Concomitantly, new forms of social organization and new survival strategies have emerged. This article has addressed some of the (historically novel) efforts inner-city residents make to reenter "mainstream" institutions and to carve out a meaningful existence. In doing so, particular attention has been paid to the obstacles these individuals feel affect their attempts at social advancement. This dimension of the lives of the urban poor has been given scant attention in urban poverty research; that is, to date, our understanding has been informed predominantly by demographic and other quantitative data. However, further qualitative research is necessary not only to understand more thoroughly the ways in which inner-city residents perceive their changing world, but also to temper our immediate conclusions regarding their "deviant" behavior, laziness, lack of a work ethic, and so forth. Open-ended interviews, as well as other qualitative methodologies, carry the potential to bring out the richness of their experiences and, thus, to provide a more accurate understanding of their lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

   1.   Krogh argues that blacks are particularly vulnerable to changes in the economy as compared to their white counterparts. In periods of economic decline, blacks have been affected "earlier and more severely than whites," experiencing quicker and greater job losses. And in times of economic growth, gains for blacks were "more tenuous than for other groups" (Krogh 1991b:11); that is, blacks have had greater difficulties than whites and hispanics in capitalizing on upswings in metropolitan labor markets *both in the low and high wage sectors*.

   2.   In theory, the "New Federalism" doctrine was designed to give greater decision-making power to state and city legislatures in determining taxation policies and social-welfare spending. However, in the context of reductions in federal funding, combined with federal regulations mandating that cities maintain spending levels on particular programs such as Medicaid and AFDC, the cities' new "freedoms" were won at the cost of the decline in spending on inner-city communities and the elimination of public bureaucracies which employed significant numbers of urban black workers (Collins 1983).

   3.   In the interviews, respondents used not only the term "connections" but also phrases such as "good ties," "knowing somebody," "someone inside," and "it's scratch your back and you scratch mine" to refer to people who were linked to the workforce and could help others find employment.

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