RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS

Note: The International Journal of Comparative Sociology invites communications in the form of short articles and reports about ongoing research, not exceeding 5,000 words, both in the empirical and theoretical fields.

EDITOR

Prevalent Low Income Status in Canadian and United States Metropolitan Areas, 1980 and 1990

KEVIN M. GOREY*

ABSTRACT

As compared to Toronto's poor people, three to four-fold as many of upstate New York's poor live in severely impoverished neighborhoods, areas where 40% or more of the residents have annual incomes below the federally established low income or poverty criterion. However, the prevalence of such extremely degraded living conditions increased similarly (two-fold) on both sides of the Canadian-US border during the 1980s. This urban problem, of the concentration of poor people, seems to predominantly be an inner-city problem in the US, whereas it was found to be nearly equivalently extant in the inner-city, mid-suburban and outlying suburban areas of metropolitan Toronto.

The income disparity between people living in different urban neighborhoods increased dramatically in the United States between 1980 and 1990. Specifically, a geographic concentration or pooling of poor households has been observed in areas of severe deprivation, predominantly in the central-city neighborhoods of the northern mid-west and northeast. For example, recent panel analyses demonstrated that the proportion of Cleveland, Ohio's and upstate New York's poor populations residing in a relatively few extremely high-poverty areas, where 40% or more of the residents were poor, increased approximately two-fold from 1980 to 1990 (Coulton et al., 1990; Gorey & Vena, 1995). Furthermore, the census tracts which defined these extremely impoverished neighborhoods were predominantly adjacent to one another in inner-city areas; two-thirds of the explanation for such heightened impoverishment in these areas was estimated to be due to the phenomenon of more people becoming poor (the movement of many previously defined near-poor people to an income status below the federally established poverty criterion), whereas one-third was probably due to the out-migration of non-poor people.

Canadian versus US socioeconomic comparisons

Only one published study has systematically compared the inner-city socioeconomic circumstances of Canadian and US cities. This census-based, cross-sectional

* Social Work Program, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4, Canada.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1998
study compared five small to mid-sized (populations of 100,000 to 400,000) matched-pairs (Canadian and US cities matched on population, economic structure, age, and geographic region) on the prevalence of low income as well as other indicators of socioeconomic deprivation in 1980-81 (Broadway, 1989). It concluded that cities on both sides of the border share an inner-city problem, however, it also found the magnitude of the problem (concentration of poor people) to be greater in the Canadian cities, an inference which was counter to its original hypothesis. Though interesting and provocative, this study’s findings are most generalizable to relatively small cities such as one of its matched-pairs: Windsor, Ontario and Flint, Michigan. The endemic public health concerns which are most often associated with severely degraded inner-city living conditions are probably more germane to larger metropolitan areas (Gorey, 1995).

The present study systematically replicates Broadway’s (1989) with larger city comparisons. It also bolsters the methodology in a number of ways: (1) it allows for inferences about increasing or decreasing between-country differences by including panel comparisons; and (2) it uses a more conservative ecological poverty criterion — extremely high poverty area — which is more likely predictive of social (violent crime victimization, substandard housing conditions), family (child maltreatment, teenage pregnancy, family violence), mental (illicit substance abuse, depression) and physical (HIV seroprevalence, certain cancers) health problems (Gorey, 1995). More prevalent extreme impoverishment is predicted among US cities, with an increasing between-country differential on this score during the 1980s.

Census-Based Method

Extant Ontario and New York State (NYS) data sets from the 1980 (Canada, 1981) and 1990 (1991) censuses of the population provided an opportunity to compare the prevalence of extreme impoverishment in metropolitan Toronto (population of 3,857,310 residing in 804 census tracts in 1990) with that of upstate New York cities (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Albany; population of 2,311,630 in 595 census tracts) (Statistics Canada, 1983; 1992; US Bureau of the Census, 1983; 1992). New York City itself was excluded because its differential census errors by socioeconomic status are at least two-fold that of other NYS cities. The prevalence or cross-sectional proportions of poor people who live in extremely high poverty areas, census tracts where 40% or more of the residents are poor (Coulton et al., 1990; Gorey & Vena, 1995), were then compared between Toronto and upstate NY. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals around prevalence ratios were chi-square test-based (Miettinen, 1976).

Statistics Canada and the US Bureau of the Census use conceptually similar indices of economic impoverishment which facilitated this study’s ecological between-country comparison: ‘low income’ in Canada and ‘poverty’ thresholds in the US.