

Research on urban ghettos must recognize differences among cities

February 15 2014



University of Chicago sociologist Mario Small will discuss "Poverty and Organizational Density" Feb. 15 at the 2014 annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Science in Chicago. Credit: University of Chicago

Research on urban neighborhoods must take into account differences among cities and rely on some techniques that have not been used extensively by sociologists studying neighborhood effects, according to Mario Small, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago.

Small, who is also dean of UChicago's Division of the Social Sciences, studies urban neighborhoods and has studied the diversity of experiences for people living in [poor neighborhoods](#) in cities across the country.

Studying only a few neighborhoods extensively fails to capture important differences, he said in a talk, "Poverty and Organizational Density," at a session Feb. 15 at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Chicago.

His presentation was part of a seminar, "A New Era for Urban Research: Open Data and Big Compu-tation." At that session, scholars discussed the impact of urban growth, which over the next two dec-ades will see the world's urban population grow from 50 to 70 percent, bringing an additional 3 bil-lion people to live in cities.

These trends require new, interdisciplinary studies and the emergence of new research techniques to better understand the changes, scholars point out.

In order to develop a more comprehensive theory about why some groups in the United States are marginalized economically, scholars need to understand the ways people respond differently to neighborhood circumstances and how neighborhood resources vary, Small explained.

Poor neighborhoods in Chicago have been studied extensively as some scholars consider them examples of [disadvantaged neighborhoods](#) nationally. Small's work has shown that those neighborhoods are not necessarily representative because they are often less dense in population and services than poor [neighborhoods](#) in other cities.

For instance, the average predominantly black, poor ghetto of Chicago has 82 percent fewer small restaurants, 95 percent fewer small banks, and 72 percent fewer small convenience stores than a predominantly

black, poor ghetto in the average U.S. city.

The level of civic and governmental resources vary as well and create differences in services such as the number of childcare centers in different urban communities with similar kinds of populations.

"The experience of poverty varies from city to city, influenced by neighborhood factors such as commercial activity, access to transportation and social services, and other facets of organizational density," Small said.

He explained that new sources of information, ranging from open city data to detailed, high-resolution imagery from commercial mapping services, provide new opportunities to compare the experience of the poor among multiple cities, in turn pointing cities and service providers toward optimal decision-making about policies, investment, or other interventions.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Research on urban ghettos must recognize differences among cities (2014, February 15) retrieved 2 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-02-urban-ghettos-differences-cities.html>

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