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# Reconsidering the Urban Disadvantaged: The Role of Systems, Institutions, and Organizations

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and  
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The recent economic recession and a sluggish recovery have made conditions especially precarious for the most disadvantaged members of the urban poor population—those with criminal records, health conditions, undocumented status, or unstable housing. We argue that the fewer the resources to which people have access, the more their circumstances will depend on the organizations in which they participate, the systems in which these organizations operate, and the institutions governing the behavior of both. We call for a renewed focus on systems, institutions, and organizations among researchers who study urban disadvantage, and review a series of studies that show the promise of these perspectives.

Well into the dawn of the twenty-first century, the prospects for the urban poor seem far less promising than they were at the dusk of the twentieth. The robust economic expansion of the 1990s now seems like distant history, replaced by a weak labor market, a fragile housing sector, a fraying health care system, and a sense of public austerity that threatens to eviscerate the safety net. While these conditions are affecting all low-income people, they are especially pernicious for those whose income poverty is compounded by other serious disadvantages.

For example, a criminal record makes it nearly impossible to find stable employment in today's tough economy. For those with chronic health conditions and fixed incomes, grappling to pay medical bills often means teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. For unauthorized immigrants, a lack of legal status inhibits connections to the formal labor market and community institutions, particularly given the recent intensification in the enforcement of immigration law. Experiments with public housing demolition have created greater housing instability for many families formerly receiving project-based assistance. And the rapidly rising returns to education in an economy that increasingly rewards advanced training has created daunting obstacles to upward mobility for those with no postsecondary schooling.

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These conditions come at a time when the state's orientation toward the poor has shifted (see Garland 2001a; Wacquant 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). On one hand, the traditional safety net has slowly but steadily deteriorated: traditional cash assistance has experienced new limits and restrictions, staple programs such as Medicaid are being cut, and the twin foundations of elderly assistance—Social Security and Medicare—are expected to go bankrupt within our lifetimes, unless they are substantially overhauled. On the other hand, the criminal justice and security regimes have become consistently more robust and unforgiving, as evidenced in the dramatic rise in incarcerations and deportations. Furthermore, a greater sense of paternalism pervades social welfare policy, dictating behavior and delivering punishment when behavior deviates from expected norms (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Private for-profit and nonprofit organizations increasingly are relied on to fill in the gaps in federal spending, but private sources of relief are not always adequately funded or available in urban centers (Allard 2009).

Twenty-five years ago, Wilson (1987/2012) coined the term “truly disadvantaged” to describe residents of the inner city who faced low employment prospects and lived in neighborhoods with a high concentration of other poor people. In the decades that followed Wilson's book, scholars examined the urban realities producing poverty and creating different types of disadvantage. Income poverty is just one of many disadvantages commonplace in cities that raise serious doubt about the ability of the urban poor to achieve greater social and economic mobility in the foreseeable future.

Given these realities, what are the prospects for the urban poor and disadvantaged over the next half century? How might the welfare state, as currently composed of public and private institutions and organizations, affect the well-being of the urban poor or the state of urban disadvantage in the next several decades?

The present article, and the collection of articles that follows, suggests that to understand the conditions of the most disadvantaged among the poor population, social scientists should employ a set of perspectives that have not formed a major part of the recent literature on urban poverty. As we discuss below, over the past

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25 years, social science on urban poverty has grappled primarily with evidence of deindustrialization and the loss of low-skilled manufacturing jobs, whose consequences have been felt in patterns of employment, family structure, educational attainment, crime, and geographic concentration of the poor. Thousands of studies have been devoted to understanding patterns among these variables (e.g., Wilson 1987/2012; Jencks and Peterson 1991; Massey and Denton 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Small and Newman 2001). But researchers have approached these questions from a limited set of theoretical perspectives, perspectives wherein the core units of analysis, aside from the market, have been the individual and the neighborhood.

We argue that, today, understanding the conditions of these highly disadvantaged populations requires a focus not only on individuals and their neighborhoods but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the organizations that structure their lives, the systems in which those organizations are embedded, and the institutions that regulate the operation of both (Marwell 2007; Small 2009; Wacquant 2009; Sampson 2012). Economic recessions, difficult job markets, health care changes, and other macro-level conditions do not affect individuals in unmediated fashion. On the contrary, formal organizations, institutional regulations and norms, and the structure of the systems themselves play a major role in how well highly disadvantaged people do. This role is particularly notable in the context of a decentralized safety net that depends on local organizations for the delivery of services to populations in need.

We begin by making a case for organizational perspectives on urban disadvantage, defining our terms, and providing examples of how such perspectives may improve our research. We then discuss some implications of these perspectives for policy. We conclude by briefly discussing the articles that appear in this volume, which explore these issues across an array of substantive areas.

## Concepts

Wilson's seminal study framed most of the debates on urban poverty that followed its publication. Because that literature has been reviewed many times, we refrain from doing so here (for reviews, see Jencks and Peterson 1991; Goering and Feins 2003; Small and Newman 2001; Wilson 1987/2012). We do note that over the years the literature has examined an especially rich array of issues: the relevance of "the underclass" as an idea, the relative importance of economic restructuring versus residential segregation in the creation of concentrated poverty, the extent to which out-migration could account for concentration, the consequences of poverty concentration for the well-being of children and families, the importance of the male unemployment rate for rising unmarried birth rates, the feasibility of measuring "neighborhood effects," the relationship between poverty concentration and other forms of neighborhood disadvantage, and the cumulative effects of neighborhood disadvantage.

While researchers have asked a diverse set of questions, the diversity has not been limitless; it has been bound by the intellectual concerns of the community of social scientists who have produced the majority of the work—labor economists, social demographers, quantitative sociologists, social work researchers, criminologists, and urban ethnographers (e.g., see Massey and Denton 1993; Edin and Lein 1997; Venkatesh 2000; Danziger and Haveman 2002; Pager 2003; Goering and Feins 2003; Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Kling, Ludwig, and Katz 2005; Wilson 1987/2012; Sampson 2012). The literature has centered on the domains of inquiry that these scholars tend to study: markets, populations, neighborhoods, and individuals. In fact, a lot of the work has focused, one or another way, on people and neighborhoods. Evidence that people and neighborhoods have been the prominent units of theorizing can be found in the concepts that emerged during this period: social isolation, fragile family, concentration effect, collective efficacy, and neighborhood effect (see Reichman et al. 2001; Wilson 1987/2012; Sampson 2012). While these ideas have fed a robust and informative research agenda, they also provide a limited view, we argue, of the conditions of the urban disadvantaged. In fact, because the poverty research community has included few researchers from other backgrounds—particularly few organizational sociologists, institutional economists, or political theorists—a different and equally relevant set of perspectives has been less than central to the research agenda, namely, conceptual and empirical work on (1) organizations, (2) systems, and (3) institutions.

We define *organizations* as formally recognized sets of people and practices whose activities are oriented toward an overarching purpose; examples include schools, welfare agencies, employment centers, bodegas, supermarkets, half-way houses, churches, food pantries, and childcare centers (see Scott 1995, 2003). Organizations typically operate in buildings, file tax forms, receive coding regulations, employ people, and sell or provide goods to patrons or clients. They may be for- or not-for-profit and privately or publicly funded.

We define *systems* as the sets of individuals, organizations, and networks of relations that structure major aspects of urban life; examples include the criminal justice system, the education system, and the health care system. Systems are macro-level entities. They are typically governed by multiple sets of institutional rules and norms that affect the behavior of both the individuals and the organizations within them.

We define *institutions* as either formal rules or informal norms governing the behavior of individuals and organizations; examples include the rules governing parole release, the rules surrounding the receipt of housing support, the norms shaping what clients ask of and expect from a service provider, and the norms affecting how immigrants share resources with members of their ethnic groups (see Scott 1995; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Nee and Ingram 1998). Since institutions are rules and norms, they may be situated in groups, organizations, or systems. When they take the form of rules, they are often written in law books, manuals, job descriptions, and regulatory codes; when they take the form of

norms, they are manifested in informal practices, observed decorum, understood responsibilities, and shared expectations.

Local organizations are central to the opportunities, choices, and outcomes of the urban poor. Our core proposition is straightforward: the fewer the resources to which people have access, the more their circumstances will depend on the organizations in which they participate, the systems in which these organizations operate, and the institutions governing the behavior of both. All residents of contemporary cities must live under complex bureaucracies that regulate their opportunities, constraints, and behavior. It is impossible to understand the core problems that have concerned the urban condition—homelessness, the heightened constraints on workers, the challenges of reentry among former prisoners, the isolation of undocumented immigrants, and so on—without moving beyond a focus on their families and neighborhoods into a fuller picture of the complex, multifaceted, multisector, and loosely bound bureaucracy of the city.

Organizational perspectives on the city are not new to urban scholarship; they have informed prior generations of scholarship during earlier waves of institutional research, as evidenced in works such as Warren's *The Community in America* (1978) and Laumann, Galaskiewicz, and Marsden's (1978) early research on interorganizational networks among neighborhood organizations. Nevertheless, the past 20 years have seen the growth of an interdisciplinary literature on policy-relevant urban poverty research in which such perspectives have all but disappeared. For example, the extensive literature on neighborhood effects produced over the past 20 years has centered primarily on individuals, their social relations, their socioeconomic outcomes, and their selection into neighborhoods; it has offered comparatively little on how local organizations operate, structure neighborhood conditions, mediate the impact of macro-level factors, or affect the well-being of individuals. In what follows, we briefly consider what recent studies have uncovered about urban poverty through the examination of organizations, systems, and institutions.

### *Organizations*

Recent years have seen a spurt of studies of urban organizations, including churches, community-building organizations, childcare centers, immigrant organizations, and welfare offices. The publications have differed in important ways: some have studied nonprofits while others have studied government agencies; some have focused on the differences between the public and private sectors while others have found sectors to be irrelevant; some have addressed service provision while others have centered on political action; some have investigated patrons' experiences while others have zeroed in on staff. However, several similar findings have emerged. First, the ability of low-income individuals to acquire resources to avoid hardship is structured, mediated, facilitated, or undermined by the organizations in which they participate. For example,

Small (2009) found that low-income mothers whose children were enrolled in childcare centers or Head Start programs often gained access to health and other resources by mobilizing the centers' organizational networks. Marwell (2007) found that community-based organizations were essential in the low-income neighborhoods that she studied in residents' ability to secure valued resources for the neighborhood. Second, how people understand their circumstances may also be mediated by the organizations in which they participate. For example, McRoberts (2003) found that churchgoers' relationships to their neighborhoods, including their view of themselves as potential activists within the neighborhoods, were shaped by the understanding of service as participation inculcated by the church's theology. Third, how people avoid social isolation, develop their personal networks, and form social capital are shaped by their participation in local organizations. For example, Oldenburg (1989) found that cafes, bars, and neighborhood restaurants are equalizers that create and sustain networks in local environments. Similarly, Duneier (1992) found that a neighborhood cafeteria in the south side of Chicago managed to sustain community among the men who patronized it regularly (see also Putnam 2000; Small 2009; Curley 2010). One way or another, the studies suggest that the nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies through which people manage a paucity of resources play a major role in their well-being or opportunity for mobility.

### *Systems*

In recent years, there has been mounting work on three particular systems that affect the lives of low-income populations. The health care system comprises hospitals, clinics, asylums, elderly care facilities, and other organizations where patients receive care; the formal regulations governing the operation of these organizations (including those changing under the Affordable Care Act); the informal norms and expectations under which participants operate; the patients, health professionals, insurers, and regulators involved in health care; and the networks connecting these individuals and organizations (Starr 1982; Hacker 2007). The welfare system comprises welfare agencies, social service providers involved in the many facets of the provision of welfare supports; the federal and state rules and regulations governing the disbursement of supports; and the formal and informal expectations about the behavior of recipients, case workers, and others (Lipsky 1980; Skocpol 1992; Smith and Lipsky 1993; Allard 2009). The criminal justice system comprises courts, prisons, jails, half-way houses, and other organizations through which the law is constituted, evaluated, and enforced; the judges, police officers, offenders, prisoners, arrestees, wardens, and parole officers involved in its enforcement and execution; and the formal rules and cultural expectations governing the behavior of participants (Garland 2001b; Pattillo, Weiman, and Western 2004; Western 2006; Wacquant 2009).

Some of the most influential new research has examined the criminal justice system, which has experienced a historic expansion over the past 25 or so years. Garland (2001a) examines the criminal justice system in the United States and argues that the increase in incarceration is part of a cultural change in the United States and Britain that includes the abandonment of the rehabilitative ideal, an increase in punitiveness, and an overall transformation in criminological thought, which themselves resulted from a change in the structure of work and welfare. Much remains to be examined regarding not only the extent to which the conditions affecting the poor are systemic but also how systemic changes might alter these conditions.

### *Institutions*

We have defined institutions as formal rules and informal norms guiding and governing the behavior of people and organizations. Still, the term is notoriously ambiguous, because social scientists in various disciplines have used it in rather diverse ways (see Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995, 2003; Nee and Ingram 1998). Two examples illustrate the advantages of adopting an institutional perspective. In their contribution to this volume, David Harding and colleagues examine the fate of formerly incarcerated men in Michigan. Scholars have been concerned with stability, the extent to which the formerly incarcerated are returning to a single residence in a neighborhood with prosocial networks and decent job prospects. Unfortunately, many formerly incarcerated men experience high rates of residential mobility—the question is why. The authors show that a lot of the mobility is a result of the institutionalized sanctions imposed on parolees for low-level rule violations such as drinking or missing curfew. Because these sanctions (1) are enforced heavily and (2) involve punishments of short-term custody in jails or residential treatment centers, the parolees have a difficult time maintaining residential stability, lowering the odds of successful reentry into society. In short, an ostensibly trivial institutional regulation is having substantial impacts on the demographics of low-income neighborhoods. In the context of welfare, Watkins-Hayes (2009) examined how the relationship between recipients and their caseworkers changed after passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which imposed work requirements and instituted term limits. The shift in institutional regulations brought about a change that Watkins-Hayes describes as ironic. In the past, caseworkers' primary responsibility was to ensure recipients were qualified to receive benefits; the recipients, in turn, had an incentive to keep private any information that might threaten their qualification. After the change, caseworkers in many contexts had to inquire whether recipients were working and, if not, why not. Since the program intended to get people off the rolls and into work, recipients shared more of their circumstances that made work difficult, while the caseworkers, in turn, expanded their role to include providing information and access to resources that might help the recipient find work. In short, this institutional change created what



Watkins-Hayes (2009) called “catchall bureaucrats,” caseworkers who became a source for an array of resources for recipients in the early days after welfare reform.

While the extant work that examines urban poverty from the perspectives that we describe is too heterogeneous to constitute a coherent literature, it does underscore our proposition that we are unlikely to understand serious disadvantage in cities today without paying heed to local organizations, the systems in which they function, and the institutions governing their behavior. This shift in orientation does not require abandoning the individual or the neighborhood as core units of observation and analysis, but it does require broadening the scope of what we study when examining those poor residents of the city whose conditions are compounded by another disadvantage.

## Understanding the Local Impact of Policies and Programs

An organizational perspective on urban disadvantage is not only a matter of conceptual importance; it also is essential if we are to have precise empirical understandings of policy and programs intended to remedy urban poverty. Today, many of the most promising urban social innovations are delivered through local, community-based organizations and institutions. For example, the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) is a prominent private nonprofit innovation in the delivery of education and support services to children. HCZ operates its schools and service programs through a complex array of local nonprofit organizations (Tough 2009). Even programs funded by and closely identified with the federal government are mostly delivered through local, often nonprofit, organizations. Federal welfare cash assistance programs have become much more social-service and work-first focused in the two decades following welfare reform, making them highly reliant on the capacities of local public and private organizations that work with low-income women (Allard 2009).

This volume provides a number of other examples of how social welfare policy today, particularly efforts targeted at cities, is locally bound in a way that often goes overlooked. Housing assistance, largely funded by the federal government, is implemented through the interactions of housing authorities, developers, renters, and landlords. Youth programs are delivered through a myriad of public, private for-profit, and private nonprofit organizations. Efforts to connect individuals with HIV/AIDS to counseling and treatment are highly reliant on local service providers. Localness is found in many less formal sources of support as well. Ethnic immigrant organizations created to help ease integration, create economic opportunities, and maintain ties to the homeland are highly local in nature. Worker center networks that seek to improve the work conditions of low-wage workers have been emerging in recent years through local labor organizing and advocacy.

The inherent localness of urban policy means that accurate assessments of policy effects need to account for how individual-level behavior is embedded within the surrounding urban institutional and organizational environments. Implementing community-based solutions to today's urban problems often is vastly more complex than delivering a federal cash or food benefit to a family in need. Most program benefits or support services require individuals to interact with multiple bureaucracies or policy regimes, private actors or organizations, and the private market. Poor persons often must navigate multiple service or sector silos as they find work, seek quality affordable housing, secure childcare, and address obstacles to greater well-being. Community-based organizations resting at the core of today's most prominent urban interventions maintain their own rules, processes, incentive schemes, and caseworker routines. These features of local organizations layer on top of formal eligibility or implementation guidelines. Combined, the characteristics of many urban community-based interventions create challenges, contradictions, and puzzles for clients seeking help that can undermine the efficacy of interventions or programs of assistance.

The complexity of community-based interventions also matters to replication of interventions or innovations from one setting to another. Even in the context of randomized experimental designs, it is difficult to know what to replicate or which aspect of an innovation can be generalized to other settings without an explicit account of how participating local organizations shaped program delivery and participant behavior. In fact, it is not uncommon for experimental programs, such as Moving to Opportunity (MTO), implemented across many different sites to encounter site-level variation in administration (Goering and Feins 2003).

To understand how organizations come together to affect a particular set of policies or programs, we must think in a different manner than typically is the case for theories of change internal to any policy or programmatic endeavor. Theories of change highlight how a program or intervention is designed to interact with an individual to produce a behavioral modification or shift. Logic models often are constructed to represent what is expected to happen within the boundaries of a given program. Yet logic models and theories of change exist in isolation or with only faint recognition of local institutional and organizational features that powerfully shape individual choice and behavior. Logic models also do not adequately account for the contradictions and complexities program clients encounter when navigating multiple program silos.

What works in one setting may have as much to do with the local institutional and organizational environments as with the program model itself. Because organizational perspectives often are not well connected to our assessment of policy or programmatic effects, scholars and policy experts risk making errors in assessing the efficacy of a particular intervention. At the extreme, causality may be misattributed. It is more likely that causal effects of programs are exaggerated to a degree or understated. For example, it may be the social networks informally created through client-to-client interactions within a community-based intervention, rather than the formal intervention itself, that are the catalyst for behavioral

changes. Failing to take account of the institutional and organizational environments may lead a researcher to falsely accept program efficacy. On the other hand, a program delivered in a complex setting with multiple community-based organizations and actors simultaneously pursuing an array of conflicting goals could be more effective in a different setting. Here the risk is that researchers falsely reject a program that may actually have promise when the local organizational context surrounding program delivery is not explored explicitly.

Yet there is limited insight into the complex interplay between community-based organizations and disadvantaged urban populations. Consider HCZ. While there is significant discussion about HCZ's logic model and results, there is virtually no information about the work of organizations within HCZ that translate intent into outcomes. The promise of the idea is so great, however, that the federal government has begun to seed replication efforts nationwide. Similar circumstances surround many other prominent innovations in health, employment, and nutrition.

## Contributions to This Volume

### *Reconsidering the urban disadvantaged*

There are numerous mechanisms through which local organizations, systems, and institutions shape the behavior of disadvantaged individuals engaged in formal and informal social support programs. While the articles in this volume represent a broad array of perspectives on this argument, a few key mechanisms stand out.

First, low-income individuals often are involved with a multiplicity of institutional and organizational actors within a given policy system or across the several policy systems that they regularly encounter. Even within a single policy system, the goals of different institutions, organizations, and systems can conflict or run counter to one another. Goal conflicts manifest themselves in program rules, eligibility criteria, behavioral incentives, and enforcement approaches that contradict one another. At best, these conflicts lead to less efficient and marginally less effective programs. In the extreme, however, goal conflict can compound the socioeconomic disadvantage of low-income individuals.

For example, the tensions between the goal of recovery within substance abuse treatment and the priority for punishment in the corrections system lead to an environment where alternatives to incarceration are sapped of viable candidates. In their contribution to this volume, Eric Sevigny and colleagues reveal the institutional and organizational contradictions inherent within the corrections system that lead to little take-up of programs, such as drug courts, making it difficult to assess whether they are effective tools. Several similar tensions can be seen in our systems of urban housing assistance. Robert Chaskin, in his article, shows that strategies to establish mixed-income developments place policymakers' goals to deconcentrate poverty and integrate residential space at odds

with developers' goals to create viable market-rate units and satisfied homeowners. Work contributed here by Stefanie DeLuca and colleagues reveals the sub-optimal outcomes that emerge in housing voucher programs that seek to balance the preferences of landlords with the internal (conflicted) goal of supporting rental choice among low-income families.

By accounting for the surrounding institutional and organizational environments, we can discern the "partial" agency that program clients have within many community-based programs or delivery settings. By partial agency, we mean that the mix of institutional and organizational pressures surrounding a client can lead to more severely constrained choice options or opportunities for voice than we might otherwise assume. Local community-based organizations also structure the ways we interact and build networks, making certain types of interactions or connections more likely than others.

Partial agency can be seen in the shortcuts and satisficing DeLuca and her colleagues observe among housing assistance recipients who seek to use their rental vouchers.

Joseph Galaskiewicz and coauthors demonstrate in this volume that low-income households connect their children to a narrower set of recreational opportunities than do more affluent households, presumably because of cost and informational constraints. David Harding and his cocontributors find that intermediate sanctions for parole violations can dramatically narrow the residential options for formerly incarcerated individuals. The limited opportunities for labor organizing among low-wage, low-skill workers has led to the emergence of worker centers, which Héctor Cordero-Guzmán and coauthors anticipate becoming one of the few viable alternatives for workplace advocacy among the most marginalized workers. Min Zhou and Rennie Lee highlight how the role of ethnic organizations has shifted as trends in immigration have changed and the demands among immigrants have shifted. This means that traditional roles are no longer as prevalent and ethnic organizations become places for transnationalism and commercial opportunity rather than for community support in the destination city.

Throughout the articles that follow, we also find examples of how community-based institutions and organizations can do as much to compound socioeconomic disadvantage as to provide relief. Moving forward, we believe scholarship should endeavor to combine large-N policy analytic work, qualitative assessments of street-level realities, and models of local organizational and institutional function to better understand community-based interventions to reduce urban need and poverty.

### *Organization of articles and findings*

We argue that our ability to theorize and intervene with respect to the most disadvantaged members of the city has been undermined by our relative neglect of the role of organizations, systems, and institutions. The articles that follow do not constitute a single perspective on urban disadvantage or the manner in which local organizations and institutions shape urban disadvantage. Instead, they

represent attempts to generate new insight into these questions by studying how institutions, organizations, or systems structure well-being among those at the margins of urban society. Some articles ask new questions; others approach familiar questions from new perspectives; yet others adapt familiar perspectives to new kinds of data. The articles vary in both disciplinary and methodological perspective. Neither the editors of the volume nor the authors of the articles (with a few exceptions) are organizational sociologists or institutionalist political scientists; they are by and large social scientists in the field of urban poverty concerned with the limits of existing perspectives.

The articles in this volume are organized roughly around their primary unit of orientation—organizations, systems, and institutions. We note that these are rough boundaries, and no single article limits itself exclusively to one unit. Furthermore, many of them connect their perspectives to individuals or neighborhoods, or both.

The first four articles examine four different kinds of local organizations—immigrant organizations, children's organizations, HIV/AIDS service organizations, and worker organizations. Min Zhou and Rennie Lee examine the origins and developments of ethnic Chinese transnational organizations in the United States. Their article shows that ethnic Chinese organizations have shifted their mission and role in response to demographic, economic, and political change both in the United States and in China. Joseph Galaskiewicz, Olga Mayorova, and Beth Duckles draw on unique time-use diary data that track children's activities in their article. The authors use this type of data to understand the composition of and utilization patterns within the public and private youth services sector. By linking childhood recreational activities to household income and urban geography, they find that where families recreate and the types of organizations with which they engage are highly determined by class. In her qualitative study, Celeste Watkins-Hayes compares how middle-class and low-income women with HIV obtain services through their AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs). She finds that, because institutional relationships to service organizations vary among women of different class backgrounds, low-income women managed to secure access to a wide array of other resources through the ASOs ties. The middle-class women, by contrast, experienced greater isolation. In their article, Héctor Cordero-Guzmán, Pamela Izvānariu, and Victor Narro examine the conditions of low-wage workers from the perspective of worker centers. They find that, in recent years, worker centers have developed inter-organizational ties that have essentially created sectoral worker center networks. These networks have become important labor market institutions that channel an array of resources to low-wage workers.

The next four articles adopt a more systemic perspective—one article examines the social system as a whole, one covers the education system, and two explore very different aspects of the criminal justice system. Nicole Marwell and Michael McQuarrie make a case for a theoretical perspective on the role of organizations for the production and reproduction of urban poverty. They argue

that a perspective focused on integration will help us to perceive the interconnectedness among communities, organizations, and the larger political, civic, and economic systems that have an impact on poverty. Bruce Fuller and Danfeng Soto-Vigil Koon examine the recent efforts to decentralize the education system. The authors find that efforts to do so stem from a long-running attempt by activist reformers to unshackle local schools from the state bureaucracy. However, the consequences for poor children remain uncertain. In their article, Bruce Western and Chris Muller examine whether the historic rise in the number of people in prison in the United States, a phenomenon now referred to as “mass incarceration,” should force us to think more systemically about the consequences of high imprisonment rates for populations. Such a perspective suggests that large increases in incarceration could be associated with population-level shifts in other outcomes. The authors find mixed effects, underscoring the challenges of understanding the implications of the criminal justice system. Eric Sevigny, Peter Reuter, and Harold Pollack explore the tensions between recovery goals embedded within substance abuse treatment systems and the priority for punishment in the corrections system. Their article demonstrates that such goal and mission conflict leads to an environment that limits alternatives to incarceration.

The final three articles adopt highly institutional approaches in various forms and different contexts—one in criminal justice and two in housing. David Harding, Jeffrey Morenoff, and Claire Herbert examine the postrelease residential mobility of Michigan parolees. They find that an important predictor of the instability-inducing high mobility rates is the intermediate sanctions institutionally imposed by the state for minor infractions. Robert Chaskin examines the conflicted set of goals underlying mixed-income housing developments in Chicago. Through in-depth interviews with residents and developers, Chaskin examines efforts to promote inclusive residential environments connecting low-income renters with residents of market-rate units. Ironically, he finds that a range of institutional mechanisms and organizational actors embedded in mixed-income developments actually produce and reinforce the exclusion they are created to offset. Drawing on intensive fieldwork with one hundred poor African American families in Mobile, Alabama, Stefanie DeLuca, Philip M. E. Garboden, and Peter Rosenblatt uncover how the institutional rules that housing authorities impose constrain housing voucher recipients in ways that unwittingly contribute to their segregation in poor, high-crime neighborhoods. Their findings provide a street-level view of the difficult choices that housing voucher recipients face as they interact with landlords and housing authorities.

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