PROGRESS REPORT

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTOURS OF DEEPENING URBAN INEQUALITY: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND RESEARCH DESIGN OF A MULTI-CITY STUDY

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Abstract: Funded principally by the Ford Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation, the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI)—a primary data gathering initiative undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of social and behavioral scientists—is designed to advance our knowledge and understanding of the forces responsible for the growing schism between the haves and the have-nots in urban America over the last two decades. This paper highlights the study's research design and sampling frame, identifies the types of research and policy issues that will be addressed with the data collected, and discusses the significance and expected outcomes of the research.

Following World War II, a number of social and economic indicators exhibited a trend toward greater equality in America. However, this trend ended abruptly in the early 1980s and the nation has now entered its second decade of increasing polarization along the economic status dimensions of income, occupational prestige, and wealth accumulation (Michel, 1991; Levy, 1989; Harrison and Bluestone, 1988; Oliver and Shapiro, 1990). Perhaps the most visible manifestations of contemporary inequality are the growing incidence of poverty and the increasing geographical isolation of the poor from the mainstream of American society (Wilson, 1987; Jargowsky and Bane, 1991; Mincy and Ricketts, 1990). Recent studies indicate that,

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despite the implementation during the 1960s and the 1970s of anti-poverty, affirmative action, and a range of other anti-discrimination programs aimed at improving the quality of life of disadvantaged minorities, African-Americans, in particular, remain disproportionately concentrated among the growing population of have-nots in America (Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988; Kasarda, 1992; Hacker, 1992; Orfield and Ashkinaze, 1991; Jaynes and Williams, 1989).

Among social scientists and social policy analysts there are differences of opinion with respect to the forces responsible for the growing schisms between the haves and the have-nots in urban America. Conservative policy analysts attribute the high rates of joblessness and poverty in urban America to the combined effects of the growth of welfare benefits (Murray, 1984) on the one hand, and of character deficiencies and deviant values of inner-city residents, especially toward family (Loury, 1985) and work (Mead, 1992), on the other. Liberal and progressive scholars reject the views of conservative policy analysts, arguing instead that contemporary urban inequality reflects fundamental changes in the basic structure of the U.S. economy (Wilson, 1987), the role negative white attitudes continues to play in thwarting the social and economic aspirations of increasingly poor, non-white inner-city minorities (Bobo and Kluegel, 1991; Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Braddock and McPartland, 1987; Feagin, 1991), and the enduring significance of racial residential segregation (Massey and Denton, 1992).

The discourse surrounding these competing perspectives has been lively and thought-provoking. However, recent research on contemporary urban inequality suffers from several shortcomings. First, very little empirical evidence has been amassed to support the conservative perspectives (Ellwood and Summers, 1986). Second, no consideration has been given to how the forces highlighted by liberal scholars interact to create and maintain inequality. Third, and perhaps most important, liberal and conservative policy analysts alike have failed to incorporate in their explanations of contemporary urban inequality the findings of recent analyses of growing class polarization in American society (Bluestone and Harrison, 1988; Phillips, 1990). These studies, as distinguished from research on concentrated poverty and the underclass, identify the early 1980s as the historical turning point that signaled the end of the post–World War II trend toward greater economic equality in America. Central to these accounts is the ascent of Ronald Reagan and the hegemony of conservative national politics (Grant and Johnson, 1994).

In this essay, we describe an interdisciplinary, primary data gathering initiative, The Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI), which is designed to advance our knowledge and understanding of the forces responsible for the growing schism between the haves and the have-nots in urban America over the past two decades. We highlight the study's research design and sampling frame, and then identify the types of research and policy issues the MCSUI research team plans to investigate with the data collected. We conclude with a brief discussion of the significance and expected outcomes of the research.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The MCSUI is the brainchild of an interdisciplinary team of research scholars—geographers, sociologists, economists, political scientists, and historians—representing 15 different U.S. colleges and universities. Funded principally by The Ford

Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation, the MCSUI is designed to broaden our knowledge and understanding of how three sets of forces—changing labor market dynamics, racial attitudes and polarization, and racial residential segregation—interact to foster contemporary urban inequality. To address issues in each of these domains, the MCSUI research team is engaged in a primary data gathering effort, involving the conduct of linked household-employer surveys in four cities: Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

In the area of *labor market dynamics* the MCSUI seeks to capture the "real world" experiences of workers and job seekers. The primary objective is to gather data that will broaden our understanding of the nature of labor market outcomes, i.e., of what determines labor force participation, extent of employment, unemployment and earnings.

Previous research has attempted to address these and related issues by surveying either employers (Braddock and McPartland, 1987; Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991) or workers/job seekers (Freeman, 1991; Osterman, 1991; Marsden, Kalleberg, and Cook, 1993). But recent studies suggest that both "demand-side" and "supply-side" forces influence labor market outcomes (Moss and Tilly, 1991; Cross, Kenny, Mell, and Zimmer, 1990; Turner, Fix, and Struyk, 1991).

To assess the effects of influences on both sides of the labor market, the MCSUI utilizes a household survey to generate a sample of employers who, in turn, are interviewed over the telephone about their hiring and promotion practices as well as their perceptions and attitudes toward various race/ethnic groups in the labor market. In this way, researchers will be able to link the actual labor market experiences of individuals (i.e., the supply side) to the recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices of employers (i.e., the demand side).

Thus, in contrast to the Current Population Survey and other large-scale surveys that contain a battery of questions pertaining to labor market outcomes, the MCSUI will gather more detailed information on the processes that surround entry into and exit from the labor market, including hiring, promotion, firing, and quits. Also, in contrast to most employer surveys, which typically generate their samples from sources like Dun and Bradstreet that list only firms in the regulated economy, the MCSUI data will provide insights into the size and composition as well as the employment practices in the unregulated or informal sector of the economy, since the employer sample is generated from the supply-side rather than the demand-side.

The MCSUI will also gather primary data on *interethnic attitudes and beliefs.* Previous research typically focused on how the white majority feels about members of minority groups and on black-white relations (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1988). Thus, we know comparatively little about how members of different minority groups feel about one another or, for that matter, how whites feel about minority groups other than blacks (Bobo and Kluegel, 1991; Smith, 1991). The linked household-employer surveys are designed to measure the attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians hold about one another. The paucity of research that exists on interethnic minority conflicts, including the focus groups we conducted in support of this project (Bobo, Zubrinsky, Johnson, and Oliver, 1994), suggests that such beliefs may have a direct bearing on experiences in both the labor market and the housing market (Oliver and Johnson, 1984; Johnson and Oliver, 1989; Johnson and Farrell, 1993).

TABLE 1.—MCSUI SAMPLE

City	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Asians	Total
Atlanta	800	800	—	—	1,600
Boston	600	600	600	—	1,800
Detroit	600	600	—	—	1,200
Los Angeles	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	4,000
Total	3,000	3,000	1,600	1,000	8,600

In the area of *residential segregation* the MCSUI builds upon and expands the types of questions included in the 1976 Detroit-Area Survey (DAS) of racial residential segregation conducted by Reynolds Farley and Howard Schuman of the University of Michigan. While the 1976 DAS focused solely on black-white residential segregation (Farley et al., 1978), data collected in two of the cities in the MCSUI (Los Angeles and Boston) will enable researchers to explore the issues of residential segregation in a multi-ethnic context. At the same time, the Detroit and Atlanta data will afford the MCSUI research team and other interested scholars the opportunity to assess how and to what extent residential segregation continues to influence the structure of opportunity in black-white contexts. And in the case of Detroit, researchers also will be able to compare the results of the current study with those of the 1976 DAS (see Farley et al., 1994).

In contrast to other recent primary data gathering initiatives (e.g., the University of Chicago Urban Poverty and Family Life Project and the Boston Poverty Survey), the MCSUI is unique in its emphasis on inequality rather than poverty. Our goal is to complete a total of 8,600 interviews with a stratified random sample of adults living in households in both poor and non-poor neighborhoods in the four case study communities: 1200 in Detroit, 1600 in Atlanta, 1600 in Boston, and 4000 in Los Angeles (Table 1). In two of our case study communities (Detroit and Atlanta), the samples are stratified by race and poverty, and in the other two (Los Angeles and Boston) by ethnicity and poverty. By surveying Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites in poor and non-poor neighborhoods, we will be able to assess the relative impact of forces that generate not only poverty, but also affluence.

Household interviews average about 70–90 minutes in length in three of the cities, and 115 minutes in the fourth (Los Angeles). Interviewers and respondents are matched by race/ethnicity and language in as many cases as possible. This is essential to minimize what is known in survey research as race-of-interviewer effects. Previous research has shown that whites will often give more liberal responses to black interviewers and that for some racial questions (i.e., those that might involve expression of an anti-white attitude) blacks will respond more positively to white than to black interviewers. Given the ethnic diversity of our sample in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles household instrument was translated into Spanish, Korean, and two dialects of Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese). In order to prevent the exclusion of monolingual Spanish, Chinese, and Korean speaking respondents, native speaking interviewers are used when needed.

KEY QUESTIONS ADDRESSED BY THE RESEARCH

The MCSUI will provide data that will enable researchers to test hypotheses and address policy questions in the areas of labor markets, housing markets, and intergroup relations, as well as the interconnections among these domains.

In the labor market area, the results of the survey will enable us to address the following research questions/policy concerns:

Does job search behavior differ mainly along race or ethnic lines, neighborhood characteristics, or other individual factors (e.g., gender)?

The answer to this question will provide insights into group differences in reliance on formal versus informal channels of information in the job search process and on the possible contextual factors (i.e., residential segregation, size, composition, and diversity of friendship networks, etc.) that affect labor market outcomes (Kasnick, 1993).

To what extent do perceptions of the type and range of labor market opportunities approximate the objective structure of metropolitan-wide employment opportunities? Do these perceptions inform job search behavior, and if so, how? How do these perceptions vary by race and gender?

One working hypothesis is that the link between perceptions and actual behavior is stronger for whites than for blacks, Latinos, and Asians. The survey results will allow us to determine which of several factors (e.g., beliefs about employer preferences, commuting distance, reservation wages, and conditions of work, etc.) might underlie such differences.

What characteristics commit an employee to a job? To what degree do reservation wages and conditions, commuting distance, employer attitudes, and alternative income opportunities influence the decision to remain or leave a job? Do these vary by race and gender?

Data relating to these questions will allow the MCSUI research team to test hypotheses, advanced by conservative policy analysts (e.g., Mead, 1992), about the impact of personal values and work orientation on employment outcomes—an issue discussed in greater detail below.

In terms of residential segregation, the MCSUI survey results will enable us to address the following issues:

To what extent are people willing to use residential mobility as a way to improve their economic status and does that differ by race and ethnicity?

One might hypothesize that whites have greater ability than blacks, Latinos, and Asians to move in search of employment. The answer to this question will have strong implications for the utility of the "people-to-jobs" strategy as a policy tool to resolve the inner-city jobless problem.

What are the major barriers to residential mobility in the metropolitan housing market? Is it the cost of housing, access to financing, perceptions of discrimination

by realtors, anticipation of hostility by potential neighbors, or other neighborhood characteristics? Do perceptions of the barriers vary by race and ethnicity?

These findings could affect policy vis-à-vis lending institutions, real estate and insurance industries, delivery of city services, and enforcement of fair housing laws.

To what extent are whites, blacks, Asians, and Latinos willing to share residential space? To what extent is the racial tipping point still a relevant concept and, if so, how does it operate in a multi-racial context?

Answers to these questions will provide insights into the likely success of encouraging residential mobility as a policy strategy for achieving social and economic mobility for blacks, Latinos, and Asians.

With the data on interracial attitudes and polarization, we will be able to address the following research questions:

What are the dimensions, extent, and sources of tensions between racial and ethnic groups? To what extent do they reflect perceptions of group competition and differential opportunities or group stereotyping and prejudice?

These findings will have a bearing on the types of strategies policy makers should pursue to minimize interethnic conflict in diverse metropolitan communities like Los Angeles, where tensions among non-white ethnic minority groups were one of the sparks of the 1992 civil unrest (Johnson and Farrell, 1993).

How do groups differ in their perceptions of whether and how government should address issues of racial and class inequality? What are the prospects of black-Latino-Asian coalitions on issues affecting their communities (e.g., affirmative action and anti-discrimination enforcement)?

Answers to these questions will have implications for the viability of government efforts in the areas of employment, education, housing, and criminal justice. In addition, the MCSUI will afford researchers the opportunity to move beyond single-factor to more complex explanations of contemporary urban inequality. To illustrate how the data can be used in this way, Figure 1 shows a heuristic model, developed by the MCSUI research team, which delineates a set of macro- and micro-level causal agents and specifies how these forces, through a fairly complex web of interactions, influence employment outcomes for various racial or ethnic and gender groups in the restructured American economy.

The heuristic model is comprised of five exogenous variables (labor market context, neighborhood context, school context, family background, and individual and human capital attributes) and five endogenous variables (social resources, cultural capital attributes, group-specific employer attitudes, job search behavior, and employment outcomes). Embedded in the structure of the model are a number of competing theoretical perspectives and hypotheses that the linked household-employer survey design of the MCSUI will enable us to test.

Four of these competing hypotheses are highlighted here: the Wilson hypothesis, the Kirschenman/Neckerman hypothesis, the Mead hypothesis, and the social resources hypothesis (Fig. 2).

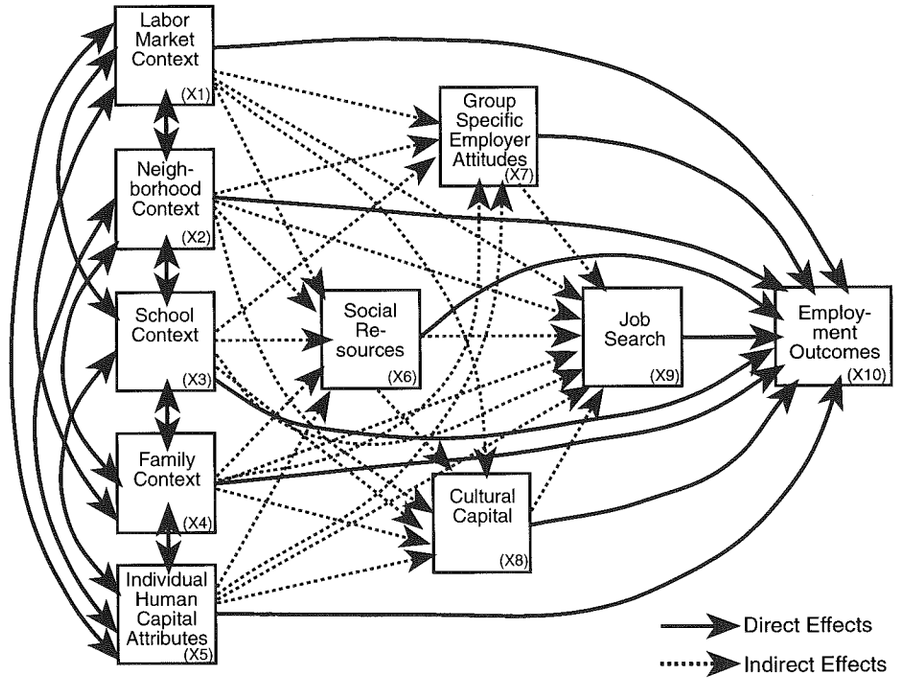

Fig. 1. A heuristic model of employment outcomes.

The Wilson Hypothesis

Wilson's theory of the underclass (1987) attributes the high rates of black male joblessness in urban America to the decline of high-wage, highly unionized manufacturing employment (i.e., deindustrialization) and to the increasing social (and spatial) isolation of inner-city neighborhoods from mainstream economic opportunities. In our heuristic model, as Figure 2a shows, Wilson's thesis reduces to five specific, testable hypotheses which can be summarized as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Employment outcomes are directly influenced by local labor market conditions. Individuals who find themselves in local labor markets that have experienced deindustrialization are more likely to be unemployed or outside the normal workings of the labor market than their counterparts in local labor markets experiencing rapid job growth in the economic sectors that match local skill requirements.

Hypothesis 2: Employment outcomes are directly influenced by the individual's neighborhood environment. Residents of poor inner-city neighborhoods (i.e., concentrated poverty communities) that are isolated, socially and geographically, from mainstream employment opportunities are less likely to find jobs than residents of more affluent and geographically accessible neighborhoods.

Hypothesis 3: Employment outcomes are directly influenced by the type of school an individual attends. Individuals attending inner-city schools are less likely than their

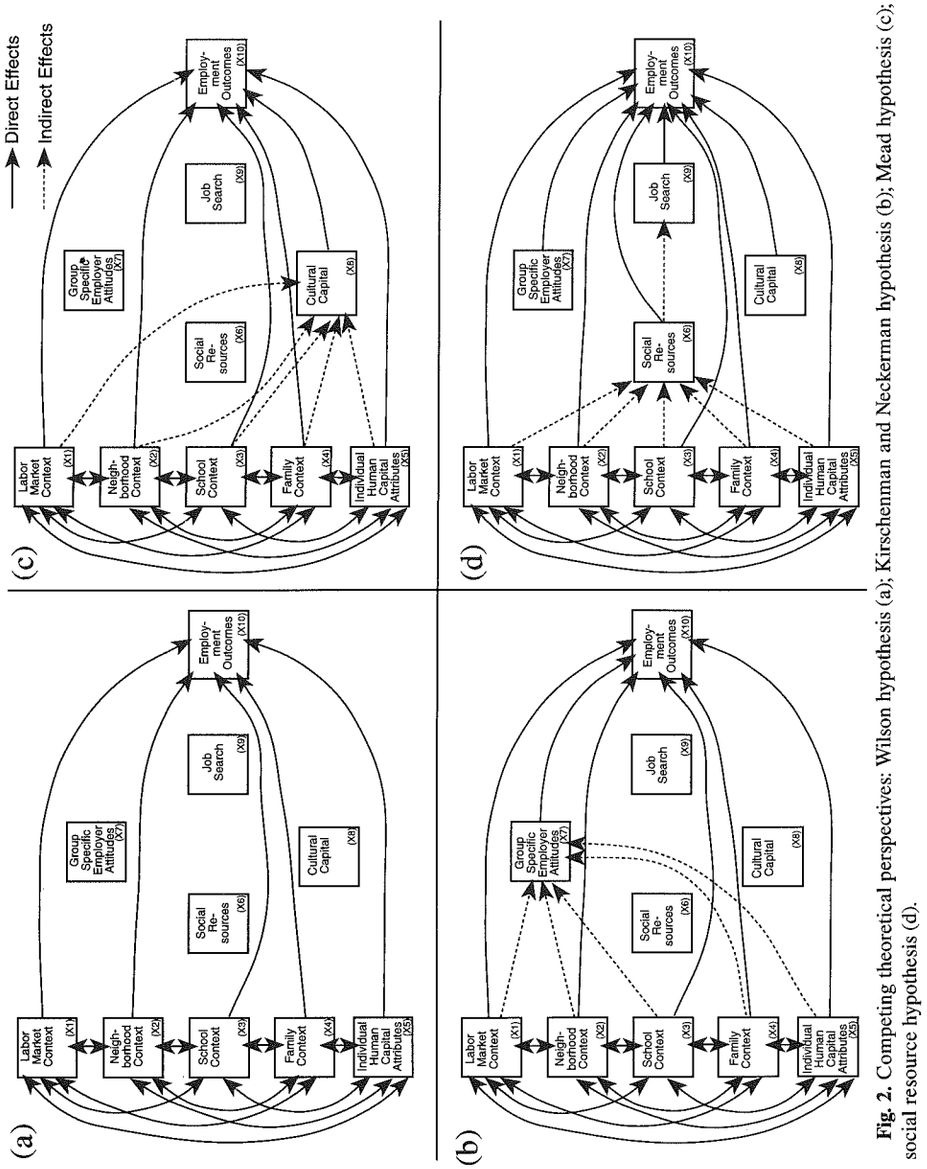

Fig. 2. Competing theoretical perspectives: Wilson hypothesis (a); Kirschenman and Neckerman hypothesis (b); Mead hypothesis (c); social resource hypothesis (d).

counterparts attending suburban schools to have the requisite skills to compete for jobs in the restructured economy.

Hypothesis 4: Employment outcomes are directly influenced by the individual's family context. Individuals who have grown up in higher-status, well-educated, and traditionally structured families are more likely to be employed than individuals who have grown up in lower-status, less well-educated, and alternatively structured households.

Hypothesis 5: Employment outcomes are directly influenced by an individual's human capital attributes. Young individuals who are high school dropouts and have criminal records are less likely to find jobs than their counterparts who have finished high school and have not had a brush with the law.

The Kirschenman/Neckerman Hypothesis

The employer surveys conducted by Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) in Chicago suggest that employment outcomes are directly influenced by employer attitudes and stereotypes of the work ethic, reliability, and dependability of prospective job applicants and job holders. Their work, along with the surveys by Moss and Tilly (1991) in Detroit and Los Angeles, suggest that employer attitudes/stereotypes vary along racial or ethnic and gender lines, and that they are often applied categorically. For Kirschenman and Neckerman, then, employment outcomes are not a direct function of the exogenous forces in our heuristic model, as postulated by Wilson.

Rather, as Figure 2b shows, they would argue that the exogenous forces in the model influence employment outcomes indirectly through interaction with employer attitudes. Individuals who are members of groups about whom employers have negative attitudes/stereotypes (e.g., black males) are more likely to have experienced discrimination in the labor market and less likely to be employed than individuals who are members of groups about whom employers have positive attitudes/stereotypes (e.g., Latino men and white, black, and Latino women). We hypothesize further that employer attitudes are likely to exert the strongest influence on employment outcomes in labor surplus environments and a much weaker influence in tight labor markets (Freeman, 1991).

The Mead Hypothesis

Mead (1992) argues that the high rates of joblessness and poverty in urban America are due neither to structural constraints in the labor market, as posited by Wilson (1987), nor to employer discrimination, as postulated by Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991). Rather, Mead contends that the existence of these problems reflect character deficiencies and deviant values of inner-city residents. He argues that inner-city residents actually choose not to work regularly and that this unwillingness to work is embedded in the nature and culture of the inner city. Negative attitudes toward work, he asserts, are rooted in

> *ghetto life* (the breakdown of authority and lack of disapproval of antisocial behavior); *ethnicity* (the lack of value placed on getting ahead by some ethnic

> groups); *black culture* (a history of slavery and dependence on whites created a world view among blacks that makes them uniquely prone to anti-hero attitudes); and the *Third World origins of immigrants* (less industrious work attitudes shaped by African and Latin rather the European origins of today's poor) (Abramovitz, 1992, emphasis added).

For Mead, then, employment outcomes are directly influenced by the individual's collective of cultural capital attributes. Individuals who do not possess the appropriate attitude toward work (i.e., willingness to work at any job even if it is part time, pays poverty level wages, and does not provide benefits) and other cultural capital attributes valued in the workplace (e.g., adherence to appropriate norms of work attire, punctuality, etc.) are less likely to be employed than their counterparts who do possess the appropriate cultural capital package.

The Social Resources Hypothesis

In contrast to Wilson (1987), Mead (1992), and Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991), who emphasized the role of structural changes in the economy, individual attitudes and values, and employer discrimination, respectively, an emerging school of thought posits the centrality of access to social resources as a key determinant of employment outcomes (Johnson and Oliver, 1990). Social resources can be broadly defined as contacts through which the individual maintains his/her social identity and receives emotional supports, material aid and services, information, and new social contacts. Such support can be obtained from individuals (e.g., immediate and extended family members, friends, co-ethnics, etc.) and/or institutions (e.g., churches, community-based organizations, schools, etc.).

The ability to find and maintain a job, some studies suggest, depends on access to these types of social resources (Kasnick, 1993). Results of a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey revealed, for example, that a majority of employed persons found their jobs not through employment agencies, newspaper ads, and the like, but, rather, through an acquaintance, friend, or relative. But access to valuable social resources varies by the individual's race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood context, and human capital attributes. Thus, as Figure 2d shows, we hypothesize that access to valuable social resources is a critical mediating variable in determining employment outcomes.

Taken together, these four competing perspectives specify a number of the direct and indirect linkages in our heuristic model (Fig. 1). The MCSUI data will enable us to test the relative weight of these competing perspectives in explaining contemporary urban inequality.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Interest in urban inequality in the late 1980s and early 1990s has intensified among both scholars and policy makers as the gulf between the rich and the poor has widened. The MCSUI will generate data that will enable scholars and policy analysts to address important research and policy issues in the urban inequality debate by drawing on the unique economic, social, and demographic contexts of four case-study communities: Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles. While much of the debate

has been hopelessly mired in biracial conceptions of urban inequality, this study's significance lies in its multi-ethnic focus, which will shed light on the future racial and ethnic composition of America's largest urban centers, rather than on their previous black-white history.

Another weakness of previous research has been its preoccupation with singular focus explanations of urban inequality. This research will transcend such conceptions by exploring how the complex interplay of three major forces—racial residential segregation, interethnic attitudes and polarization, and labor market dynamics—contribute to the maintenance and growth of urban inequality in the late 20th century. It is only within a multicultural and multivariate framework that explores how various forces, singularly and in concert, influence the placement of individuals and groups within the urban hierarchy that we can begin to understand, and eventually develop policy to ameliorate, the worst features of urban inequality.

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