

Proposed Research
2008-2011 Persistent Poverty and Upward Mobility Theme Project
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As my proposal for team membership indicated, my current research agenda is focused on poverty and the potential for upward mobility in old industrial cities (and their metropolitan areas), including those in Upstate New York. This agenda has developed out of research indicating that while concentrated poverty was decreasing in U.S. cities in the 1990s, it did not decline in Upstate New York cities (Pendall and Christopherson, 2004).

I am currently conducting research in Upstate New York urban labor markets on the shift toward knowledge-based, value-added production and its implications for the labor force. Initial findings from this research indicate that intra-regional labor market inequality is increasing in conjunction with the transformation of the manufacturing sector to emphasize a higher proportion of skilled jobs (Christopherson et al, 2007). At the same time, there is a labor shortage in firms who want to employ higher skilled workers.

I will be working within a theoretical framework that contains the possibility for addressing whether and how workers in low paying jobs can move into median wage jobs. This framework, broadly defined as “regional resilience”, provides an opportunity to address the question of upward mobility at the regional scale.

To economists, the concept of regional resilience has a rather narrow meaning – the ability of a regional economy to return to a previously established equilibrium state (as measured by employment levels, rate of output or population size) after a traumatic event, such as a hurricane or crisis in financial markets. Other social scientists have taken a longer view, connecting the concept of regional resilience to the ideas of regional and industry restructuring popular in the 1980s. They ask how regions affected by changes in industry strategies produced, for example, by trade liberalization, avoid severe negative impacts, are less affected than other regions, or benefit from the changes in incentives. In this respect the concept touches on the broader discussion of regional inequality and uneven development.

Central to the long view of regional resilience are concepts of path dependency and “lock-in”, which posit that regions that underperform relative to national averages are characterized by inefficient political and social institutions that prevent adaptation to new market conditions. The literature on regional resilience across the social science and economics has been characterized by problems in defining and measuring causes and effects. For example, regions that lag national median growth are assumed to be characterized by “lock-in”. And, there has been confusion about what constitute exogenous shocks to regional economies and how to measure them. For example, job loss is defined as a shock when it is actually an outcome. In general, theories of regional resilience treat the metropolitan region as an autonomous unit and neglect the ways in which regional fortunes are influenced by policies adopted at the state and national scale.

I will pursue the following activities using the funding support I receive:

- 1) Compile and analyze data bases that enable regional comparisons to test hypotheses regarding why some regional labor markets are able to produce a higher proportion of median wage jobs after a period of job loss and population out-migration. (These data bases are being developed by The Brookings Institution and in a MacArthur Foundation supported project at The University of California Santa Cruz.)
- 2) Site visits to regions that have been identified in the existing research as experiencing population loss and median income job loss in the 1980s but regaining population and median wage jobs in the 1990s. These include: Highpoint, North Carolina, and Allentown, Pennsylvania