URBAN PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL POLICY

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Abstract

Just as cities provide opportunities, they also create problems. Humans have not only physical needs—food, shelter, and safety—but also a need for community, a feeling of belonging—the sense that others care about what happens to us, and that we can depend on the people around us. Some people find This sense of community in the city, others find its opposite, alienation, a sense of not belonging, and a feeling that no one cares what happens to you. Unless the root causes of urban problems –poverty, housing, education, and jobs are addressed, any solution one comes up with will be at best, only Band Aids that cover up problems.

KEYWORDS: Suburbanization, Disinvestment, Deindustrialization, Urban Renewal, Enterprise Zone, Gentrification.

Cities are not new to the world scene. Perhaps as early as seven to ten thousand years ago, people built small cities with massive defensive walls, such as biblically famous Jericho. Cities on a larger scale originated about 3500 B.C., about the same time writing was invented (Hawley,1981). At the same time cities appeared in several parts of the world-first in Mesopotamia (Iran) and later in the Nile, Indus, and Yellow River Valleys, in West Africa, around the Mediterranean in Central America and in the Andes

(Flanagan,2010).

 The key to the origin of cities is the development of more efficient agriculture. Only when farming produces a surplus can some people stop being food producers and gather in cities to spend time in other pursuits. The industrial revolution also stimulated rapid transportation and communication, and allowed people, resources, and products to be moved efficiently-all essential factors called infrastructure on which large cities depend.

Just as cities provide opportunities, they also create problems. Humans have not only physical needs-food, shelter, and safety-but also a need for community, a sense of belonging. Also, there is a sense of alienation, a sense of not belonging.

The primary problems of urban life today are poverty, decay, and a general decline of cities. This study examines underlying reasons for these conditions and consider how to develop social policy to solve urban problems.

Suburbanization.

Suburbanization, which refers to people moving from cities to suburbs, the communities located just outside a city, is not new. Many dream of a place of their own with green grass, a few trees and children playing in the yard. For the past one hundred and fifty years, as transportation grew more efficient, especially with the development of automobiles, people have moved to towns near the cities in which they work.

The city has been the loser in this transition. As people moved out of the city, businesses and jobs followed. Now about two-thirds of people who live in the suburbsalso work there (Gans,2001). As the city's tax base shrank, it left a budget squeeze that affected not only parks, zoos, libraries, and museums, but also the city's basic services—its schools, streets, sewer and water systems, and police and fire departments.

This shift in population and resources left behind who had no choice but to stay in the city. The net result, observed sociologist William Julius Wilson(1987) was to transform the inner city into a ghetto .Left behind were families and individuals who, lacking training and skills, were trapped by poverty, unemployment, and welfare dependency-along with people who prey on others through street crime. The term ghetto, says Wilson, suggests that a fundamental social transformation has taken place…that

groups represented by this term are collectively different from and much more isolated from those that lived in these communities in earlier years (Karp et al,1991).

City Versus Suburbs. Having made the move out of the city-or having been born in a suburb and preferring to live there-suburbanites want the city to keep its problems to itself. They reject proposals to share suburbia's revenues with the city and oppose measures that would allow urban and suburban governments joint control over what has become a contiguous mass of people and businesses. Suburban leaders generally see in their best interests to remain politically, economically, and socially separate from their nearby city.They do not mind going to the city to work , or venturing there on weekends for the diversion it offers, but they do not want to help shoulder the city's burdens.

It's likely that the mounting bill will come due ultimately, however, and that suburbanites will have to pay for their uncaring attitudes toward the urban disadvantaged.

Suburban Flight. In some places, the bill is coming due quickly. As they age, some suburbs are becoming a mirror image of the city their residents so despise, with rising crime flight of the middle class, a shrinking tax base, and eroding services. This.in turn, creates a spiraling sense of insecurity, more middle class flight, and a further reduction of property values.

Disinvestment and Deindustrialization.

As the cities' tax base shrank and their services declined, neighborhoods deteriorated, and banks began redlining. Afraid of loans going bad, banks drew a line on a map around a problem area and refused to make loans for housing or businesses there. The disinvestment pushed these areas into further decline. Youth gangs, murders, and muggings are high in these areas , while education, employment, and income are low—factors that are not unconnected to this process of disinvestment.

The globalization of capitalism has also left a heavy mark on the cities. As Rodriguez(2014) points out, to compete in the global market, many industries abandoned local communities and moved their factories to countries where labor costs are lower. This process, called deindustrialization, made U.S industries more competitive, but it eliminated millions of U.S. manufacturing jobs. Lacking training in the new information technologies, many poor people are locked out of benefits of the post industrial economy that is engulfing the U.S. Left behind in the inner cities, many live in despair.

The Rural- Rebound.

The U.S. is now undergoing a trend that is without precedent in its history. In the 1970s, people began to move out of cities and suburbs and into rural areas. During the 1990s,seven of every ten rural counties grew in population. The only losses occurred in the Great Plains and the Mississippi Delta (Johnson,2009). Little farming towns are making a comeback, their boarded-up stores and schools once again open for business and learning.

The push factors for this fundamental shift are fears of urban crime , recreation, and more space. Facilitating the movement are improvements in transportation and communication.Interstate highways make airports—and the city itself—accessible from longerdistances. With satellite communications, mobile phones, fax machines, and the Internet, people can be connected with people in the city—and around the world—even though they live in what just a short time ago were remote areas.

The Potential of Urban Revitalization.

Social policy usually takes one of two forms. The first is to tear down and rebuild—something that is fancifully termed urban renewal. The result is the renewal of an area—but not for the benefit of its inhabitants. Stadiums, high rise condos, luxury hotels, and expensive shops replace run-down, cheap housing. Out-priced, the area's inhabitants are displaced into adjacent areas.

The second is some sort of enterprise zone, economic incentives such asreduced taxes, that are intended to encourage businesses to move into an area. Although the intention is good, failure is usually the result. Most businesses refuseto locate in high crime areas. Those that do pay a high price for securityand losses for crime which can run higher than the tax savings. If workers are hired from within the problem areas, and the jobs pay a decent wage, which most do not, the

workers move to better neighborhoods—which does not help the area (Lemann,2014). After all, who chooses to live with the fear of violence?

Although urban renewal and enterprise zones have failed to solve the problems facing cities, a "nothing works" mentality will solve nothing. Cities can be revitalized and made into safe and decent places to live. There is nothing in the nature of cities that turns them into dangerous deteriorating slums. Most European cities, for example, are both safe and pleasant. If U.S. cities are to change, they must become top agenda items of the government, with adequate resources in terms of money and human talents focused on overcoming urban woes.

Given the deplorable condition of many cities and the flight of the middle classes—both whites and minorities—to greener pastures, an urban Manhattan Project seems in order.

Sociologist, William Flanagan(2010) suggests three guiding principles for working out the solution to the pressing urban problems:

Scale. Regional and national planning is necessary. Local jurisdictions, with their many rivalries, competing goals, and limited resources, tend implement a hodgepodge of mostly unworkable solutions. A positive example of regional government prohibits urban sprawl and ensures a greenbelt.

Livability. Cities must be appealing and meet human needs, especially, the need of community . This will attract the middle classes into the city and increase its tax base . In turn, this will help finance the services that make the city more livable.

Social Justice. In the final analysis, social policy must be evaluated by how it affects people."Urban renewal" programs that displace the poor for the benefit of the middle class and wealthy do not pass this standard. The same would apply to solutions that create livability for select groups but neglect the poor and the homeless. Unless the root causes of urban problems—poverty, housing, education, and jobs—are addressed, any other solution that is come up with, will be at best, only Band Aids that cover up problems.. Such fixes will be window dressings for politicians who want to appear as though they are doing something constructive about the problems that affect the quality of life.

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