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The Opinion Pages | CAMPAIGN STOPS

Will the Democrats Ever Face an African-American Revolt?

Thomas B. Edsall MARCH 15, 2016

An insurrection now threatens the future of the Republican Party — an insurrection of white working class voters who have been among the party's most loyal supporters since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. These men and women felt that they lacked an effective political voice, until they heard the siren call of Donald J. Trump.

Could the Democratic Party face a comparable revolt?

Beginning with the administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson, African-American voters have provided Democrats with their margin of victory in elections at every level across the nation, year after year.

How have African-American voters been faring over all? Badly. The Democratic debt to black voters is immense, and the party has not paid up.

There is no evidence yet of a political rebellion parallel to the one taking place in the Republican Party, despite the fact that poor black Americans are having a much tougher time than the white working class Republicans flocking to Trump.

One key measure of how well a demographic group is doing is the percentage of children living in communities of high concentrated poverty, in so-called toxic social environments.

There is a rapidly growing body of evidence, compiled by economists, sociologists and public policy experts, which demonstrates the depth of the damage inflicted on children in such toxic neighborhoods.

"Thirty years of research has converged on a clear and compelling fact: It's not just the family a child is born into that determines her fate, but the neighborhood she grows up in," Stefanie DeLuca, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins, wrote to me.

DeLuca is one of the authors of a forthcoming book, "Coming of Age in the Other America," along with Susan Clampet-Lundquist and Kathryn Edin. The book provides evidence that African-American children born in Baltimore's large public housing projects made significant "educational gains relative to their parents" when their families left the projects, using federally issued housing vouchers to move to privately owned properties.

Reed Jordan, of the Urban Institute, describes in detail how detrimental the effects of impoverished neighborhoods like the constant anxiety

> resulting from witnessing and experiencing trauma and violence in distressed neighborhoods, negotiating the sacrifices and trade-offs caused by food insecurity, living in unstable housing conditions, struggling to pay bills, and dealing with numerous other worries burn up cognitive capacity.

Elaborating further, Jordan continues:

> Persistent stress and exposure to trauma trigger harmful stress hormones that permanently affect children's brain development and even their genes. The damage to childhood development is so severe that medical professionals now describe the early effects of poverty as a childhood disease.

Another researcher who has mapped the impact of concentrated poverty is Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at N.Y.U. Sharkey emailed his findings to me:

> If we want to understand why middle-class black Americans are more likely than whites to experience downward mobility, then we should focus on the

> neighborhoods where blacks and whites have lived for the past 40 years. Blacks making more than $100,000 per year live in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than whites making less than $30,000 per year.

Sharkey points out that

> Black children still live in neighborhoods that offer lower quality schools, more toxic stressors like violent crime, more pollution and environmental hazards than white children from similar families. These differences play a big role in explaining racial gaps in economic mobility over the past two generations.

In a 2009 Pew Charitable Trusts report, "Neighborhoods and the Black-White Mobility Gap," Sharkey argued that:

> Neighborhood poverty alone accounts for a greater portion of the black-white downward mobility gap than the effects of parental education, occupation, labor force participation, and a range of other family characteristics combined.

Elizabeth Kneebone, a Brookings Institution scholar, confirms the brutal impact on poor families of concentrated deprivation. In a 2014 essay, "The Growth and Spread of Concentrated Poverty," she reported that:

> The challenges of poor neighborhoods — including worse health outcomes, higher crime rates, failing schools, and fewer job opportunities — make it that much harder for individuals and families to escape poverty and often perpetuate and entrench poverty across generations.

During the 1990s, there was a substantial decline in the percentage of families of all races and ethnicities, including African Americans, living in neighborhoods of dense poverty.

From 1990 to 2000, the percentage of poor black individuals and families living in neighborhoods where the poverty rate was 40 percent or higher fell from 30 percent to 19 percent.

Since 2000, however, this favorable trend sharply reversed, and the post-2009 economic recovery has not improved matters.

By 2014, according to the most recent data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 32 percent of black children were living in neighborhoods where the poverty rate is 30 percent or more. A higher percentage of black children live in impoverished neighborhoods than any other demographic group, including American Indians, who lie just below, at 31 percent; Hispanics at 24 percent; Asian-Americans at 8 percent; and non-Hispanic whites at 5 percent.

The negative consequences of living in high poverty neighborhoods are not only imposed on the poorest African-Americans, but also on African-Americans with earnings above the poverty line.

According to data provided by Elizabeth Kneebone, a majority of African-Americans, 52.5 percent, live in communities where the poverty level exceeds 20 percent. Put another way, 44.8 percent of all non-poor African-Americans live in neighborhoods where the poverty rate exceeds 20 percent. In contrast, 8.1 percent of whites live in such neighborhoods.

Despite the flaws of public housing, the lack of federally subsidized housing (and of subsidized housing vouchers) has contributed to an acute housing crisis for the nation's poor.

Federal housing officials explicitly acknowledge the devastating shortage of housing for the poor. On the Section 8 page of the HUD online website we are informed that the housing voucher program

> cannot be relied upon as a definite solution for rental assistance. Finding a Section 8 application online, for example, is very difficult because most housing authorities have to keep their waiting list closed because of overwhelming applications. It is not uncommon for someone to be on a Section 8 waiting list for several years.

In New York City, residents of public housing are 45.8 percent black, and the average household income for residents of public housing is $14,425. The number of

families on the waiting list for public housing, 227,000 — constituting half a million people — outstrips by far the total number of units, 178,900.

This pattern is repeated across the country. In Chicago, in 2014, 282,000 individuals and families applied for public housing or housing vouchers during the four-week period in which applications were accepted. Those four weeks last November were the only open application period since 2010.

In August 2010, in East Point, an Atlanta suburb, 60 people were hospitalized after fights broke out among the 30,000 people in line — some of whom had camped out for three days in sweltering heat — to get on a waiting list for 455 housing vouchers.

In "The Architecture of Segregation," a paper published in August 2015 by Paul Jargowsky, a professor of public policy at Rutgers, Jargowsky argues that the increasing concentration of African-Americans in high poverty neighborhoods is a significant factor driving the protests against police shootings in cities from Ferguson to Baltimore:

> The riots and protests — which have occurred in racially-segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods, bringing back images of the "long, hot summers" of the 1960s — have sparked a national conversation about race, violence, and policing that is long overdue.

What makes these trends explosive is that the "expansion and continued existence of high-poverty ghettos and barrios is no accident," Jargowsky writes:

> These neighborhoods are not the value-free outcome of the impartial workings of the housing market. Rather, in large measure, they are the inevitable and predictable consequences of deliberate policy choices.

Public officials — and the Democratic Party — have, in point of fact, failed to deliver housing, employment or education programs that convincingly remediate the problems of poor black families.

Barbara Sard, vice president for housing policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank, argued in an email to me that

> While interventions targeted at people in very poor places may be somewhat effective, their chances or degree of success are much more limited than if the places themselves became less poor and racially isolated. This focus on the role of place in persistent poverty is particularly important because such concentration appears to be getting much worse since at least 2000.

This is where politically initiated solutions should begin.

The Democratic Party cannot continue to reap the electoral rewards of the black vote — or embark on a comprehensive revaluation of life at the bottom of the economic scale — without fundamentally reconceiving how it deals with the neighborhoods where many of its voters live.

Steps to reduce the trouble caused by extremely poor neighborhoods include the assertive use of the existing housing voucher programs to move people into "high opportunity communities," which have poverty rates of 10 percent or less.

The existing voucher program could be expanded to cover many more than the 2.2 million low income families currently in the program.

One problem with proposals like these is that many Democratic politicians view support for a genuine expansion of affordable housing for African-Americans as likely to have a negative impact — or at least to be perceived as having an negative impact — on white communities. They see the distribution of resources away from whites to blacks as a form of political suicide.

Even in super-liberal, very Democratic Amherst, Mass. — Obama 12,316, Romney 1,872 in 2012 — residents fought bitterly against a proposal to build 26 units of moderate income housing. Their decade-long, ultimately futile battle involved "court cases, appeals, and $150,000 worth of legal costs, despite pro bono legal assistance," The Atlantic reported in June 2015.

In another liberal city, Seattle — Obama 279,000, Romney 46,000 — Mayor Ed Murray announced a major affordable housing initiative on July 13 last year that included a mandatory requirement that all new development include affordable housing.

Then, on July 29, Murray did an about face. "I will no longer pursue changes," he announced, "that allow more types of housing" in single-family zones. "Politically, the blowback has been enormous. It's been hard for the mayor to talk about anything else," Alan Durning, a member of the committee that produced the housing initiative, told the Seattle Met.

These developments suggest that African-Americans living in poor neighborhoods cannot rely on Democratic leaders to take the decisive steps needed to ameliorate the problem as long as the Democratic Party can take the black vote for granted.

The question, then, is how long can Democratic Party leaders and candidates continue to rely on African-American voters before African-American voters take matters into their own hands — just as white working-class Republican voters have done this year.

The advent of Trump may mask this situation for now, but unless the Democratic Party makes different "deliberate policy choices" — and devises a way to harness the sense of injury and injustice prevalent in many minority communities without President Obama at the top of the ticket — African-American voters may choose to abandon the ballot box or to back more radical dissidents, just as Republican rebels have done this year. For the American center-left, even a small group of defectors would have a disastrous effect.

Correction: March 17, 2016

An earlier version of the column misstated the name of the publication to which Alan Durning, who served on a housing committee in Seattle, spoke about the mayor; it was the Seattle Met, not The Seattle Times.

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