MISSION STATEMENT

Advocates’ Forum is an academic journal that explores implications of clinical social work practice, social issues, administration, and public policies linked to the social work profession. The Editorial Board of Advocates’ Forum seeks to provide a medium through which Crown Family School students can contribute to public thinking about social welfare and policy in theory and practice. Above all, Advocates’ Forum serves to encourage and facilitate an open, scholarly exchange of ideas among individuals working toward the shared goal of a more just and humane society.

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ESSAYS AND ARTICLES

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ON THE COVER
Photo by Beth Rooney
FROM THE EDITORS

Although we have been separated from one another this year, the journal gave us the opportunity to come together and share the work of our classmates and friends. How we work, study, and engage in community have fundamentally changed in response to the pandemic. This time has led us to consider and process how our relationship with ourselves, friends, families, and communities must change in ways that push us towards creating a more just and equitable world.

The articles of the journal can be framed as calls to action; calls to speak out against injustice, calls to examine data to inform our policies, and calls to re-examine our thoughts about ourselves and our roles as social workers. The articles underscore how pre-existing disparities have been exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic and provide us with perspectives and tools to consider how to ameliorate these disparities. Sara Bovat’s article illustrates how structural racism in the US healthcare system results in high maternal mortality rates among Black women and the shortcomings of Medicaid policy. Alexandrea Wilson explores the connection between the environmental justice and defund the police movements, and how symptoms of environmental racism like policing disproportionately impact low-income communities of color. Karlyn Gehring’s article points to the success of renter credit programs in other cities, such as Cincinnati, as a tool to decrease concentrated poverty in communities and promote long-term financial stability. Danielle Maranion offers a critique of current place-based funding strategies in Chicago, warning that they often exacerbate the inequality they are meant to alleviate. Kaitlyn Rippel’s article explores the movement to raise the minimum wage and argues that to assess the true effect of the minimum wage among the working poor, policymakers must consider how increasing income interacts with eligibility for social programs. Abigail Compernolle’s work explores the use of Buddhist principles to inform how social workers can practice de-centering themselves to center the relationship with their client. Poems by Alexandra Galván reflect on the themes of place, identity and belonging as well as the theme of the deserving poor. Derek Nettingham’s poem challenges misconceptions around code-switching and illustrates how it is used as a “mode of survival, not convenience.”

The quality of the submissions and dedication of the authors to their works throughout the past year continually inspired the Editorial Board. We are excited to share these articles with our community, and hope that they will also provide our readers with inspiration as they embark
on further education and their careers. Our board also made an effort to select more art and media pieces this year, and we look forward to seeing more original compositions in future journals.

We would like to thank everyone who made this year’s journal possible. We are grateful to all the authors who submitted their work, and shared their experiences, vulnerability, and insight with us. We would like to thank Daniel Listoe, PhD, for working with our authors on their submissions, Associate Professor Nicole Marwell for her support and guidance as our Faculty Advisor, and Julie Jung for her patience and support throughout this process. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Dean of Students Office for their service to Advocates’ Forum and the student body at the Crown Family School. Finally, thank you to our dedicated and thoughtful Editorial Board. This journal would not have been possible without each of you.

Caroline Kelly and Matthew Teeters
RACIAL CAPITALISM AND BLACK MATERNAL MORTALITY RATES IN CHICAGO

Sara Bovat

Abstract

Non-Hispanic, Black women in the United States experience the highest maternal morbidity and pregnancy-associated mortality rates. These rates hold for Chicago as well. On April 12, 2021, Illinois became the first state to expand Medicaid coverage from 60 days postpartum to 12 months postpartum when its Illinois Continuity of Care & Administrative Simplification 1115 Waiver was approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The waiver should lower the number of Black women dying from pregnancy-associated causes. However, the policy only addresses the issues of access related to the social determinants of health, and not the heavily embedded biases rooted in anti-Black, structural racism. This paper uses the idea of racial capitalism to examine Chicago’s high rates of Black morbidity and mortality rates surrounding pregnancy and the potential limitations of the state’s expansion of Medicaid coverage for postpartum care.

Medicaid coverage plays a significant role in the limited care that many Black women receive, and a 2019 Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) report found that “women covered by Medicaid were nearly three times more likely to experience a pregnancy-associated death than women with private insurance” and 71% of women who experienced a pregnancy-associated death were on Medicaid (p.15). These rates of mortality for women on Medicaid are particularly concentrated among Black women.

Black mortality and morbidity rates remain a particularly urgent Chicago issue since the city experiences spatial inequalities when it comes to having quality healthcare, accessing healthy water and food sources, suffering exposure to pollution, and other social determinants of health (Kolak, et al., 2020). From 2016 to 2017, 527 women in Chicago experienced severe maternal morbidity at a rate of 74.1 per 10,000 deliveries, a rate about 45% higher than the rate for the state of Illinois (CDPH, 2019). In the same period, overall Chicago experienced only a
marginally higher maternal mortality ratio than Illinois: 48.6 per 100,000 live births (CDPH, 2019). Together, the higher morbidity and mortality rates reveal the great risks for pregnant Black women in Chicago.

In April 2021, the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS) proposal for expanded Medicaid coverage from 60 days-postpartum to 12 months-postpartum (HFS, 2020) was approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The Illinois Continuity of Care & Administrative Simplification 1115 Waiver should provide a significant step toward decreasing the rates of maternal morbidity and pregnancy-associated mortality in Illinois, particularly for Chicago’s non-Hispanic, Black women—who suffer the highest rates of such morbidity and mortality (CDPH, 2019).

However, Medicaid expansion alone will not prevent racial disparities in health outcomes related to pregnancy-associated deaths. To address those disparities, the state would need—in addition to expanding Medicaid coverage and eliminating barriers to access—to combat structural racism in the health-care system through other programmatic policies. In this paper, I will analyze the Illinois Waiver through the lens of racial capitalism to argue why this expanded Medicaid coverage alone will not do enough to eliminate Chicago’s high Black maternal mortality and morbidity rates.

U.S. POLITICAL ECONOMY AS RACIAL CAPITALISM

The United States has a profit-driven health-care system. The system and its race-neutral language easily occludes the fact that Black women are dying in maternity-related “care” at an alarming rate. When this is acknowledged, moreover, maternal mortality rates and other health outcomes are cast as mere “disparities”—outcomes and not symptoms of a structural racism that works as the very foundation of the system as it currently operates.

Neoclassical economics argues that where there are racial imbalances, a natural, market-based correction will arise (Arrow, 1998). Becker’s (1971) model of taste-based discrimination offers the canonical neoclassical explanation of this supposed corrective, arguing that market preference accounts for market preference or “taste” for people and that tastes for less racial discrimination will self-correct over time due to open market competition. But as Arrow (1998) points out, such claims contradict the neoclassical expectation that employers serve as “simple profit-maximizers” (p. 94). He asserts that “personal interactions occur throughout the process, and therefore there is plenty of room for discriminatory beliefs and preferences to play a role” (p. 96). Arrow thus reminds us in a simple
that personal interactions and racialized beliefs can, and do, create different marketplaces for whites and Blacks.

Neoliberal economics have further complicated the perpetuation of racial inequities (Mele, 2013). Focusing on the example of urban development in a way that can instruct us on the dynamics in health care, Mele (2013) observes that many of neoliberalism’s urban policies and practices use colorblind discourse and race-neutral rhetoric. He further argues that this discourse “ultimately deflect[s] responsibility for problems of structural inequality from society to the individual and ignore[s] the persistence of structural and systemic racism” (p. 600). The framework of racial capitalism challenges the promotion of neoliberal urban policies and practices that remain complacent to continuing racial inequities and racial harm.

BLACK WOMEN AND PREGNANCY-ASSOCIATED DEATH IN CHICAGO

Black women in Chicago experience the highest rates of maternal mortality and morbidity rates in the city, according to the Chicago Department of Public Health’s 2019 Maternal Morbidity & Mortality in Chicago. The five most common, severe maternal morbidity indicators are: disseminated intravascular coagulation, acute renal failure, hysterectomy, sepsis, and adult respiratory distress syndrome. The report found that the women experiencing these higher maternal morbidity and mortality rates came from neighborhoods with higher economic hardship or worsening economic conditions. Indeed, neighborhood-level determinants show very different rates of access to quality obstetric care, which can make a woman more likely to experience severe morbidity during pregnancy or post-partum. The CDPH’s city map of severe maternal morbidity and high economic hardship shows that zip codes on the South Side experienced both increased maternal morbidity rates per 10,000 deliveries and economic hardship compared to the city’s North Side zip codes (CDPH, 2019)—disparate outcomes that parallel the overall racial segregation of the city (Janevic, et al., 2020).

Taylor (2020) acknowledges that factors like the neighborhood-level determinants listed in the CDPH report certainly impact Black women, their overall health, and their higher risk of maternal morbidity and mortality, but emphasizes the urgency to highlight structural racism as the “powerful social determinant of maternal health” (p. 507). She argues that policies which enhance social determinants are not enough because in the case of Black women, positive social determinants do not serve as protective factors since providers and the healthcare system have
historically been steeped in racism, discrimination, and bias. As proof, Taylor recounts the fate of a highly educated Black woman who gave birth at a top medical facility in April 2016, only to die of a post-partum hemorrhage because she didn’t get medical attention until seven hours after her husband first informed the medical team that her catheter had blood in it.

Therefore, it is true that not expanding Medicaid coverage would continue the harmful effects, and negative health and wellbeing impacts on Black women and that Illinois’ current policy to only provide Medicaid coverage for 60 days after giving birth increases the likelihood Black women will continue to experience high rates of health complications post-partum. But even if Medicaid were to expand to 12 months of post-partum coverage, she argues, it would not be enough (Taylor, 2020).

ILLINOIS CONTINUITY OF CARE & ADMINISTRATIVE SIMPLIFICATION 1115 WAIVER

The Illinois Continuity of Care & Administrative Simplification 1115 Waiver lists three goals: (1) extending postpartum coverage from 60 days to 12 months; (2) managed care reinstatement within 90 days, and (3) waiving Hospital Presumptive Eligibility (HPE) (HFS, 2020). The extended postpartum coverage will provide full Medicaid benefits for women up to 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), which is the income threshold for the Medicaid pregnant women category of eligibility in Illinois. It will align continuous eligibility for the impacted mother and newborn baby, so that both would be eligible for coverage for 12 months after delivery. Additionally, if a woman applies during her 12-month postpartum period, Illinois will enroll her in the pregnant women category of eligibility for the remainder of her 12-month postpartum period (HFS, 2020). These additional two goals not only remove administrative burden, but help ensure that new, low-income mothers have uninterrupted access to full Medicaid benefits throughout their critical, postpartum period. It is clear that the HFS is trying to establish a necessary, policy-driven foundation for lowering the risk of Black women dying from pregnancy-associated causes since “the decision not to expand Medicaid has a disproportionately harmful impact on the health and wellbeing of African Americans” (Taylor, 2020, p. 513). It is important that we use the current Medicaid waiver tools at our disposal.

While doing so, HFS’s waiver does name the racial disparities involved in its maternal mortality rates. The waiver highlights the systemic issues that lead to the state’s racial disparities in maternal health outcomes, drawing attention to the social determinants of health. The application
emphasized how Black women’s varied access to housing, employment, education, health literacy, childcare, and neighborhood safety impacts their overall health conditions, as well as their accessibility to seek and receive quality health care (HFS, 2020). However, the waiver demonstration only discusses racial disparities in light of outcomes and not how systemic racism is embedded in our U.S. health care system. More explicitly tackling structural racism as a social determinant to maternal health outcomes might more effectively confront the “historical foundations of racism and reproductive oppression” and how they “set the stage for manifestations of structural racism seen in the present against the backdrop of ongoing patterns of perpetual and persistent racial inequity in health care” (Taylor, 2020, p. 515). HFS’s waiver will not usher in a one-step solution.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PENDING WAIVER APPLICATION

The greatest strength of the Illinois Continuity of Care & Administrative Simplification 1115 Waiver is the expansion of eligibility to cover the entire 12-month postpartum period. In the two-year period from 2016 to 2017, out of the 78% of the pregnancy-associated deaths, 50% of maternal, pregnancy-associated deaths took place more than 42 days after childbirth, while 28% took place within the immediate postpartum period (CDPH, 2019). The American Medical Association and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists have recommended the expansion of Medicaid coverage for the entire postpartum period to lower postpartum “pregnancy-related tragedies” (Shriver Center, 2020).

The old eligibility requirement of 60-days postpartum was negligent to the challenges that low-income, Black mothers faced medically during the majority of their 12-month postpartum period and added to the challenges of a lack of employer-sponsored insurance or knowledge, affordability, and/or ability to navigate the Health Insurance Marketplace. The primary strength of this extended care is to ensure that low-income mothers have full, uninterrupted Medicaid benefits for the complete postpartum period, especially as low-income, non-Hispanic Black mothers also have the most chronic issues that place them at higher risk during pregnancy. As the HFS application laid out: “continuous eligibility for the postpartum period will prevent mothers from having to switch providers during a medically vulnerable time due to different provider networks, will prevent disruption in courses of treatment during the postpartum period, and will increase access to needed care, follow-up visits, and medications when health issues arise during the postpartum period” (HFS, 2020, p. 12).
However, as indicated above, although the Illinois demonstration waiver application explicitly named the racial disparities seen in maternal mortality and morbidity rates, it did not account for structural racism as a cause of these outcomes. The expansion of Medicaid coverage will play a significant role in removing barriers of access especially for low-income, Black mothers during their postpartum period, but as Taylor (2020) emphasizes, this important step in Medicaid programmatic efforts “must [also] entail eliminating health provider bias and racism which manifests in a lack of compassion and support for Black women interacting with the health care system” (p. 514).

Taylor (2020) therefore asserts that “health care providers must be adequately trained in order to ensure an antiracist health care system,” which can include trauma-informed care training, antiracism training, training on cultural competency, and training related to unconscious racial bias (p. 514). Taylor names the current power dynamics and hierarchal provider-patient relationship and recommends that “the standard should be health care providers working in partnership and collaboration with patients and families to devise treatment plans, consider personal histories, and adhere to health care preferences” (p. 514). The Illinois Continuity of Care & Administrative Simplification 1115 Waiver is a significant step toward lowering the high risk of Black maternal mortality and morbidity rates for Chicago and the entire state. However, until structural racism within the health care system is also addressed through additional policy initiatives, Black women under racial capitalism will still be at risk for not receiving equitable care as addressing the social determinants of health is not enough to prevent racial disparities in health outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Even though the Illinois Continuity of Care & Administrative Simplification 1115 Waiver is one step in reducing Chicago’s as well as the entire State’s high maternal mortality rates—especially for non-Hispanic, Black women—the demonstration waiver’s expansion of Medicaid coverage only addresses the social determinants of health related to inequitable access and health outcomes; it does not address historically embedded structural racism in our health care system and the individuals providing care. A racial capitalist approach to political economy attempt to bring urgency in understanding that the neoclassicist, self-regulating market will not dismantle systemic racism on its own. Although Chicago certainly remains highly segregated between neighborhoods in housing discrimination, medical racism, environmental racism, food access, education quality, and other social determinants of health that increase
alarmingly higher rates of maternal mortality for Black women, we should therefore echo Taylor’s argument that addressing these determinants alone will not prevent more Black women from dying of maternity-related death. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) should create more specific guidelines for healthcare providers to attend reoccurring trainings on trauma-informed care, antiracism, cultural competency, and unconscious racial bias. What’s needed now are specified policies and regulations to address structural racism in the U.S. health care system, and with those, Chicago will be more likely to comprehensively address and lessen its disturbingly high Black maternal mortality rates.

REFERENCES


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THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS FOR
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Abigail Compernolle

Abstract
Social work clinical literature describes methods for developing clinical relationships that embrace flexibility, authenticity, and efficacy. Translation, or the private use of one's spirituality to inform engagement with clients, is an area of social work practice that can aid in fostering such relationships. The Four Noble Truths as described in Theravada Buddhism provide a model for the care of the self that practitioners can use to inform their practice. This paper explores these Buddhist principles in conjunction with the relevant social work literature so as to highlight the variables of effective clinical relationships.

In recent years, social work literature has emphasized the therapeutic relationship as a key element in successful therapy. In the focus on relationality, both practitioner and client are seen as ideally engaging with, and being moved by, one another. This is a far more complex process than the older “blank slate,” distanced approach. Approaching the therapeutic relationship has been described as an art that relies on both intuition and training (Coltart, 2000). The particulars of that dance, and how it necessarily changes with each client, requires a practice of ongoing openness and skill.

One way to strengthen and guide such a practice is to consider translation, or how social workers make use of their own spiritual practice to inform engagements with their clients. Spirituality and religion often follow themes of compassion, connectivity, and going beyond oneself, which can be, and are involved in, the practice of therapeutic engagement. Theravada Buddhism, which follows the teachings in the Pali Canon and is the oldest sect of Buddhism, includes a pragmatic practice and conceptualization of suffering that can inform how social workers show up to and hold space for their clients mindfully and with presence. The basis

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of Theravada Buddhism is the ongoing practice of the Four Noble Truths: The First Noble Truth acknowledges the inevitable presence of suffering in human life; the Second Noble Truth explores the cause of suffering as originating from desire; the Third Noble Truth describes the end of suffering as enlightenment, or the ceasing of desire; and the Fourth Noble Truth describes the path toward the end of suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path.

The First Noble Truth describes the presence of suffering in human life; to have a body is to experience illness, displeasure, and death. Therefore, the Buddha teaches to accept the inevitability of suffering. Walpola Rahula (1967) describes this Truth as “not falsely lulling you into living a fool’s paradise, nor does it frighten and agonize you with... imaginary fears and sins” (p. 17). Social workers might follow this idea by accepting the presenting suffering and distress of the patient or client. Indeed, Berlin (2005) describes the importance of acceptance of the client and their distress as the first step towards any therapeutic engagement. Berlin describes acceptance as “a relational feeling that stems from our appreciation of our clients’ humanity; it is this recognition of our common humanity that sensitizes us to their distress and ultimately brings us to action” (p. 483). When social workers accept the client’s suffering, we sensitize ourselves to it and find our common humanity in it, before and during engagement.

In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha describes the cause of suffering as ignorance and desire. “It is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination” (Boddhi, 2005, p. 76). There are multiple ways such ideas might inform social workers in practice. One theme of the Second Truth is that suffering comes from a “false idea of self arising out of ignorance,” and operating from the idea of a self that is concrete, knowing, separate, definite, and masterful over one’s person and circumstances (Rahula, 1967, p. 30). There is a parallel to this to be found in Mary Ellen Kondrat’s (1999) conceptualization of the critically reflexive practitioner. Inspired by critical theory, Kondrat urges social workers to understand themselves as “co-constructed by individual consciousness in interaction with the social and physical environment and mediated through language and culture” and therefore, “the self is viewed as a process, an ongoing, fluid construction whose identity is inextricably linked to social context and interpersonal interactions. The self-construct is defined, at least in part, in dialogue with other people’s understandings of who the self is” (Kondrat, 1999, p. 459).
In relation with clients, then, the social worker’s self is distinct from one client to another. It is with a fluid yet co-created self that one can properly collaborate towards a healing place for clients, and there tend to the meaning-making systems that they bring. In the Buddha’s words, conceptualizing the client as a frozen, knowable object comes from a desire to mark oneself, as the social worker, in stone—to be definite, to be an expert. Such understanding leads to suffering both for practitioner and client in claiming either participant as absolutely knowable or experience as capable of mastery.

If one is able to think of themselves as a fluid, conditioned being, engagement with clients can tolerate a practice of “not-knowing.” One, therefore, becomes deeply curious and respectful of the client’s porous, in-process self. Psychoanalytic therapist Christopher Bollas (1987) delves into this practice further. He writes that in working with a client, the practitioner “discovers who I am, even if this ‘who’ is a composite of the patient’s mother, father, and former child self” (p. 277). Through the therapeutic relationship, the analyst functions as an object created by the client’s relationships that remain unresolved. The practitioner must be willing to participate in that flexible, co-created position, with the capacity and willingness for the practitioner’s self to be so constructed. Thus, the Second Noble Truth in Buddhist thought reminds us that in social work, one should resist the temptation to remain stagnant, safe, definite. Instead, as social workers we should recognize and honor both the porousness and history of the practitioner and client, creating a holding space for healing, not knowing, and understanding our subjectivity in a new, relational and co-constructed light.

The Third Noble Truth discusses the end of suffering as enlightenment. Upon enlightenment, the Buddha was inspired toward the embodied cessation of craving, desire, and attachment. Epstein (1995) reminds us that the enlightened Buddha did not “enter some new territory” but actually “[discovered] that which had been present all the time” (83). The Buddha had awakened to the truth of the false self, the self that craves to endlessly reassure its selfhood through unskillful striving and consumption. The craving keeps the self in the cycle of suffering, falsely attaching to that which makes it secure or seemingly satisfied.

In the therapy room, the therapist may crave recognition as an expert. This craving threatens the therapeutic relationship because it insists on a certainty in the client, an insistence that the client be knowable through the therapist’s trainings and previous clients, missing what the client actually presents. In her book, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Coltart (2000) echoes Bion and urges the therapist to “refrain from memory and desire” (4). Memory and desire may lead the therapist to reduce the client
to an artifact of psychoanalytic “templates, theories, teachers” in order to reinforce the therapeutic self as all-knowing, the other as distinctly knowable, and therefore indulge in the false satisfaction of certainty (Coltart 2000, p. 6). Such desire leads to suffering in both the therapist and client.

After defining the end of craving as enlightenment, the Fourth Noble Truth describes the behavioral, meditative, and wisdom practices and path toward—alongside and among moments of—Nirvana or enlightenment through the eightfold path: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Discussing the parallels of all eight elements and social work practice is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the broader theory underlying the eightfold path, the idea of the middle path and the middle way, also resonates with social work practice. The Buddha discovered the middle way searching for happiness through living in extreme asceticism and extreme sensual indulgence. Neither extreme brought him closer to enlightenment. He decided, instead, that a balance was necessary—not to starve himself, but not to overindulge. Such a balance is more complex than sticking to an extreme, as it necessitates taking risks and improvising with the sensations and phenomena that arise. The middle way, therefore, refers to the space and practice between extremes that embraces ambiguity, focuses on the present, and cultivates moments and opportunities of enlightenment.

The middle way, in tandem with Buddhist conceptualization of a fluid, in process, porous self, is the practice of a skillful balance between all extremes that focuses neither solely on the social worker nor on the client, neither solely on behavior nor on cognition. In social work clinical practice, such a balance is crucial, and is familiar from Winnicott’s (1991) idea of a “potential space” in the therapeutic relationship, one that, through relationship, creates a balance that is “neither in behavior nor in contemplation, but somewhere else” (p. 105). Winnicott builds off the relationship between the mother and child, which is not between two individuals, but instead “a third area of human living, one neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality. This intermediate living can be thought of as occupying a potential space” (p. 110). The therapeutic relationship recreates this relationship and the consequential third space that is neither dominated by social worker nor client, but an in-process, holding area between behavior and contemplation. In this space, spontaneous, often vulnerable play and individual expression can emerge, leading to moments of negotiated healing and growth through risk shared between the practitioner and client. The cultivation of this space, however, necessitates both parties carving out intimacy through
vulnerability and authenticity, much like the mutual practice of a fluid self the Buddha describes throughout the Noble Truths. Thus, the middle way, a balance between stagnant extremes, informs the social worker much like Winnicott’s potential space of healing, to create a space to hold the client in a safe ambiguity, where their true self can create and be created.

With the Four Noble Truths in mind, we see that social workers can practice showing up to their clients possessing a comfort with ambiguity and not-knowing, cultivating an appreciation of nuance, and an understanding of the co-creation of the therapeutic relationship. Through the acknowledgement of the presence of suffering, desire and ignorance as the cause of suffering, enlightenment potential as the end of suffering, and the middle way through the eightfold path as the journey towards that end, social workers can practice de-centering themselves to center the relationship in process. Such a practice creates a holding space for the client with a greater capacity for healing.

REFERENCES


ABIGAIL COMPERNOLLE is a second-year student at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice. She looks forward to practicing psychotherapy and pursuing a Somatic Experiencing certification. Abigail received her BA from New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study with a concentration entitled “Health, Humanities and Cultural Studies,” exploring the body and healing through critical race theory, queer theory, and spirituality. She’s grateful to her experience at the University for the opportunity to deepen her interest in those subjects and is honored to be included in the Forum.
THREE POEMS

Alexandra Galván

I. Everyone Wants to Help the Homeless Kids but...

Only if they look sad.
Only if they’re “really” homeless.
Only if they come with thank you letters and tax deductions.
Only if they can tweet about it.
Only if the kids are small and cute
hopeless, damaged and innocent.
Only if they stay children forever
because once they grow up, they become responsible for their trauma
and that doesn’t make for a good fundraising campaign.

AFTERWORD

The theme of the deserving poor runs deep through this poem. In my experience working at an organization that serves families living in homeless shelters, I often have observed conflicting attitudes towards supporting those experiencing homelessness, depending on the age of the client. Folks tend to be eager to serve kids, perhaps due to their perceived “innocence”; however, parents are often viewed as “deserving” of their situation, rather than deserving of support. This poem also questions the sincerity and motivations of those that get involved in “helping,” and highlights the deficit perspective some may have when working with this population.
II. I am From

I am from streetlights come on and it's time to go inside,
grandparents watching Caso Cerrado,
mom's car here to pick me up.

I am from tires in the garage that my grandpa will take to the garra this weekend,
burnt peppers in the kitchen,
Friday car rides to garage sales.

I am from 6 o'clock means Wito is playing la guitarra in the basement,
Wita is praying from her room,
I am watching Selena for the 100th time.

I am from Tala, Mexico.
A place I have only formally met once but have known my whole life.

I am from un Español muy rural,
cheese makers,
nurses without degrees,
entrepreneurs,
and musicians.

I am from whitewashed with the Latinos,
too ethnic to be understood by the whites.

I am from Catholic school has people thinking I'm rich,
but being Latina on a college campus must mean I am a PEOPLE scholar.

I am from you confuse people with your racial ambiguity
pero mi gente me pide ayuda en Español.
III. This Place

This place is hidden
as if to say
ignore us
do not come here
no one needs to know.

This place is an unlocked door
a sign in sheet for volunteers
a record of those that can come
and go as they please.

This place is a home
between homes
between jobs
between families
between schools
for some,
between shelters.

This place is someone’s 9-5
someone’s “dream job”
someone’s grad school credential
someone’s good deed
someone’s photo op for their company fundraiser
someone’s experiential learning opportunity.

This place shouldn’t exist
because there should be a place
with many places
with individual doors,
not individual beds,
that provide a place
that can truly be home.

This poem is about the homeless shelter that I work at. I often think
about what the space means for different people—especially the residents
and staff.
ALEX GALVÁN is a first-year clinical Extended Evening Program (EEP) student at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice. Alex currently works full-time at Chicago HOPES for Kids as the Outreach and Family Engagement Administrator and she is doing her field placement at the Hyde Park Refugee Project. Alex is pursing the School Social Work program of study where she hopes to combine her passions for writing, narrative therapy, community activism, and working with youth.
RENTER CREDIT PROGRAMS: A PATH TOWARDS REDUCING CONCENTRATED POVERTY IN CHICAGO

Karlyn Friesen Gehring

Abstract

This article proposes that renter credit programs should be implemented alongside current investment initiatives in low-income Chicago neighborhoods to address concentrated poverty. Renter credit programs invest cash credits in accounts tied to each tenant that can be redeemed after a set amount of time. Such programs have helped to strengthen community ties and increase financial stability for renters. The article considers historical and current drivers of poverty as well as the lasting impact that racial segregation has had on urban areas. It further discusses recommendations for implementing renter credit programs in Chicago based off of models that have found success in other U.S. cities. Finally, it proposes strategies for adapting the approach and overcoming its limitations, ending with current opportunities for collaborating with city development initiatives.

In Over-the-Rhine, one of Cincinnati’s highest poverty neighborhoods, renters living in apartments with a renter credit model have described their housing as an “oasis” in the community (Drever et al., 2015, p. 30). Residents know their neighbors and often sit together in a shared courtyard after work. They attend regular building meetings and help with property upkeep, which gives them a say in how shared common areas look and feel (Donnellan, 2010). When times become difficult and unexpected costs like medical emergencies and job losses arise, renters can rely on savings accrued through their participation in the renter credit program or loans from the nonprofit organization running the program to keep them financially afloat. As one community member described it, the program has “gotten people off of the payday lender merry-go-round. This makes for a stronger community. They aren’t [moving] in and out, in and out” (Drever et al., 2015, p. 28).

Renter credit programs such as the one in Over-the-Rhine add cash credits to residents’ accounts each month they make an on-time rent payment and contribute to property upkeep. After a set number of years, typically five, residents’ accrued credits are fully vested and can...
be redeemed for personal investments that can increase their financial stability and help break cycles of poverty. The program in Over-the-Rhine has offered credits of about $58 per month and tenants gained $3,500 in five years on average (Locke, 2008).

The promise of renter credit programs comes from increasing savings in low-income households, keeping housing affordable, and strengthening support among neighbors. Despite these benefits, the story of such programs’ success has remained largely absent from academic investigation and urban development initiatives. It is time to take another look at these models. Applying renter credit programs in Chicago—alongside neighborhood investment initiatives—provides an opportunity to reduce concentrated poverty and guard against displacement. Such programs can thus help to address the lasting impact that inequitable housing policies have had on low-income communities of color.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR CONCENTRATED POVERTY

Discriminatory housing laws have played a significant role in structuring wealth distribution along racial lines and segregating cities in the United States. In addition to racially segregated public housing and restrictive covenants that isolated Black communities, government policies also created unequal access to homeownership. Through government programs, including the 1944 GI Bill, homeownership was granted to White Americans at affordable rates while the same programs rendered most Black Americans ineligible (Rothstein, 2017). Tax benefits, including the mortgage interest deduction, allowed the beneficiaries of homeownership to build wealth through their property (Desmond, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2016). Property ownership thus became a key mechanism through which White Americans achieved upward economic mobility and passed wealth on to their children (Rothstein, 2017). Today, White families are over a third more likely to own a home and have, on average, more than six times as much wealth as Black families (Lei, 2017).

Spatial separation of wealth in cities like Chicago has only become starker over time. While poverty in Chicago has declined on the whole, it has also become more concentrated (Ramos, 2019; Misra, 2019). In the process of desegregation, Black families who could move out of lower-income segregated areas did so, while those with fewer economic resources remained. Policies of the 1980s and 1990s, including the War on Drugs, led to further disinvestment and increased criminalization of these communities (Wacquant, 2001). This sent many Black families deeper into poverty and ruptured community networks of support.
Today, one in five residents in Chicago’s seven highest-poverty areas live off of income that is less than half of the federal poverty line (Emmanuel, 2015). All seven of these areas are located in predominantly African American communities (See Figure 1).

This stark racial and economic segregation is projected to increase as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data on economic instability tied to the pandemic shows that Black households have already lost employment at higher rates than their White counterparts in the same economic bracket (Huber, 2020). Furthermore, Black households that hold little accrued wealth have had a disproportionately difficult time affording rent (Lake, 2020).

TODAY’S HOUSING CRISIS

Housing has become one of the largest costs of living today due to property prices that have risen faster than income (Wetzstein, 2017; Elis, 2019). Lack of affordable housing has left nearly half of all renters in the United States “rent burdened,” which means that they are spending over 30% of their income on housing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], n.d.). Those earning under half of a geographic area’s median income often spend over 50% of their paycheck on housing (Desmond, 2018; Institute for Housing Studies, 2019; HUD, n.d.). This leaves residents unable to save, making them particularly vulnerable to economic crises such as the one brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. These precarious living conditions also increase job insecurity and disrupt social networks, which compound the financial instability that people living in poverty experience (Edin & Shaefer, 2016).
RENTER CREDIT PROGRAMS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS

One of Chicago’s attempts to address affordable housing and build household savings has been to implement the federal Family Self-Sufficiency Program (FSS) (“Family,” n.d.). Like other renter credit models, the program establishes an interest-bearing account for low-income families that they can access after five years. FSS, however, is tied to housing vouchers that can be used across the city, which means that it does not target community-level needs. The program is also inaccessible to many families due to strict eligibility requirements, long wait times to enter, and a time limit on program participation. Moreover, once enrolled, participants must adhere to an individual training and services plan and must demonstrate measurable progress toward goals to accrue money or receive a payout (“Family,” n.d.).

In contrast to FSS’ limitations, place-based renter credit models can provide broader access and expand their impact to a community level, as has happened with the program in Over-the-Rhine. Such place-based models are often run by nonprofits known as Community Development Corporations (CDCs), which work to support and revitalize communities. In Over-the-Rhine, as well as in Collinwood, Cleveland, CDC-run models called “Renter Equity” programs have helped to strengthen residents’ community support networks in addition to increasing their savings (Clark, 2015). CDCs can connect tenants to neighborhood resources for support with finding jobs, managing legal work, and other technical assistance (Locke, 2008). Furthermore, through shared responsibilities with property upkeep and community meetings, residents build relationships and come to rely on one another when times are difficult. “People look out for one another. I haven’t seen that since childhood,” explained one resident in an evaluation of the Over-the-Rhine program (Drever et al., 2015, p. 30). This evaluation showed that residents named such community support as a primary positive outcome of their program participation (Drever et al., 2015, p. 33). CDC-run renter credit programs have thus helped renters to build savings in a way that parallels several benefits of homeownership, including increased community stability and a return on housing investment.

Not only do CDC-run renter credit models offer financial and community support, but they have been able to do so without increasing overall housing costs. In the long run, the credit payments these programs give to renters are financially self-sustaining. Renters’ financial incentive to stay until their credits are fully vested and can be redeemed decreases turnover and increases investment in property upkeep, both of which reduce administrative costs for the organization running the program.
One limitation of the renter credit approach is that it has few models and little precedent for scaling up since it has been largely ignored by urban development initiatives. Implementing the model on a broader scale in Chicago would therefore require further pilots. Start-up costs such as kick-starting renter credit funds and obtaining property do exist; however, the saved costs and self-sustaining nature of the model over the long run mean that innovation is fairly low-risk. CDCs in Chicago thus have opportunities to experiment with the approach.

Following the lead of programs that found success in Cincinnati and Cleveland, Chicago CDCs can pilot renter credit programs that learn from best practices but also adjust to the needs of local communities. For example, CDCs could experiment with adapting the model to include mixed-income residents. In doing so, they could use credits from higher-income renters to subsidize costs for lower-income renters in order to increase overall affordability.

COMBINING RENTER CREDIT PROGRAMS WITH CHICAGO’S CURRENT INITIATIVES

When renter credit programs are combined with investment projects targeted for low-income neighborhoods, they can help to increase community stability and affordable housing as these neighborhoods undergo changes associated with economic development. In 2019, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot began the Invest South/West initiative to redevelop infrastructure and support programs for residents and business owners along ten declining commercial corridors on Chicago’s South and West sides (“Invest South/West,” n.d.). Community investment of this type plays an important role in reducing poverty, yet such new development also increases the likelihood that current residents will be displaced if housing costs rise faster than local income (Zuk et al., 2017; Duda, 2018).

When displacement occurs, families with the lowest income leave first. Recent studies show that families who leave areas undergoing redevelopment have household incomes that are over $20,000 lower than the incomes of families who remain (Howell et al., 2019). Furthermore, these families often move to areas with a significantly lower median area income, which can further concentrate poverty within a geographic region. Adding renter credit programs alongside the Invest South/West initiative could thus play a critical role in guarding against this type of displacement and help to reduce, rather than simply disperse, the number of households living in poverty.
CONCLUSION
Implementing renter credit programs in Chicago’s low-income, racially segregated neighborhoods could provide an opportunity for residents to increase financial and community stability. Such community stability is critical in the process of alleviating poverty yet has often been left out of plans for neighborhood investment. When renter credit programs work in tandem with other neighborhood investment initiatives, the combined effect can help decrease concentrated poverty in communities of color. This takes a step towards addressing the nation’s history of racial discrimination that has limited wealth building opportunities for Black families across generations and led to racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. Such initiatives that actively address this history and respond to ongoing community neglect are especially important to consider in the face of the current COVID-19 pandemic that has already widened disparities along race and class lines.

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THE POWER OF PLACE: AN ANALYSIS OF CHICAGO’S NEIGHBORHOOD OPPORTUNITY FUNDS

Danielle Maranion

Abstract

To address growing inequalities, cities across the nation have turned to place-based funding strategies. In Chicago, the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (NOF) provides grants to fund startup activity of local entrepreneurs in disinvested areas. Many of the contemporary challenges of cities today reflect the neoliberal assumptions of late twentieth-century policies. These solutions claim that market-driven processes, and not state intervention, are sufficient to promote positive, socially neutral development and growth. As one of the most segregated cities in the United States, Chicago stands as an example that these neoliberal policies exacerbate inequalities and actively exclude low-income, communities of color. With widespread neoliberal urban development, this paper seeks to show why municipal governments must consider realigning efforts to better empower local communities with the substantive tools and power to address neighborhood needs by using place-based strategies as a start to addressing racial inequalities.

Chicago personifies the “modern-day tale of two cities” and the growing inequality that characterizes most U.S. urban areas (Mendell, 2020). Roughly fifty years of neighborhood disinvestment have blocked some residents, usually communities of color, from accessing the networks, resources, and experiences needed to survive, operate, and thrive (Dymski, 2005; Martin & Sunley, 1997; Wilson, 2012). What we know today as the defining characteristics of the North, West, and South Sides of the city are found in neighborhoods shaped by a long history of discriminatory actions, practices, and policies.

As a response to the Great Migration of 1916, the Chicago Real Estate Board permitted practices like restrictive covenants and redlining that banned Black individuals from purchasing housing or accessing loans in certain areas on the South Side. These legal contracts gave White communities the power to contain and control how people from the South settled into the city. After World War II, massive waves of White
communities fled into the suburbs to purchase homes; while at the same time, African American and Hispanic families resided in overcrowded, unsafe public housing like Cabrini Green. These developments were located in the same communities that had already endured disinvestment perpetrated by previous discriminatory covenants. While this historical account is far from comprehensive, it is clear that inequality is both a historical practice and current reality as we observe the expanding racial wealth gap, the results of neighborhood disinvestment, and even the disproportionate COVID-19 cases, deaths and vaccine distributions (Malsky, 2021).

As a response, Chicago and municipal governments across the nation have been promoting a variety of place-based strategies (Aceves & Greenberg, 2015; Neiman, 2020). These solutions are based on the belief that public expenditure in underserved geographical areas will foster long-term private investment and ultimately generate sustainable capital gains (Neiman, 2020; Theodos & González, 2019). Essentially, these strategies use physical location as a proxy to address racial disparities. For context, there are a variety of place-based strategies currently utilized in Chicago. *Protect Chicago Plus* acted as a place-based launch of vaccine distributions in fifteen target communities where residents have been most likely to contract and die from COVID-19 (City of Chicago, 2021). Additionally, the *Neighborhood Opportunity Fund* targets grants to fund startup activities for local entrepreneurs in underserved areas, mostly on the South and West sides as a part of the City’s place-based *Invest South West* initiative (City of Chicago, 2019). As more and more cities are turning to place-based strategies to address social inequalities, it is crucial to understand their potential efficacy. Racial disparities by neighborhood suggest that place-based strategies in conjunction with a racial equity framework are necessary to mitigate poverty and allow for a move toward just inclusion in the United States.

The following sections draw on foundational approaches to political economy. Together they help us analyze just one example of a place-based strategy, Chicago’s Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (NOF). While they may not be solely sufficient, I believe place-based strategies have the potential to powerfully complement a racial equity framework that explicitly names and addresses individual and systemic discrimination in the city and nationwide. To begin, I will provide a brief overview of key approaches to political economy.
FOUNDATIONAL APPROACHES TO POLITICAL ECONOMY

The theories of neoclassicism, Keynesianism, and neo-Marxism present useful frames for understanding the rationale and effectiveness of place-based strategies such as Chicago’s NOF. The neoclassical understanding of political economy, for instance, imagines a self-regulated market as the most efficient mechanism to distribute resources and capital among consumers and producers. In this line of thinking, under a scarce environment, consumers rank and pursue their preferences given limited resources in a manner that preserves choice and is assumed to be rational. As a result, the welfare of both parties is said to improve, being mutually beneficial so long as the transaction is noncoercive. Given the assumptions of a laissez faire position by the state and perfect competition in the market, individual agents are said to be equipped to proficiently carry out transactions independent of government regulation and should the market stray from perfect competition, the state subsequently steps in to limit externalities and restore competition (Caporaso & Levine, 1992).

Within this approach, welfare is inextricably tied to the freedom of choice, and thus neoclassicists maintain that since a market proficiently combines preferences and resources together to satisfy consumer needs, with time, the market will clear disparities by way of “the invisible hand.” The resulting inequalities in society, neoclassicists claim, are thus, justifiable since free market-processes are the best way to distribute goods and services.

A Keynesian approach to political economy rejects the idea of a proficient combination of preferences and resources and stresses the tendencies of a capitalist system to generate instability and inequality by underutilizing the resources at its disposal. Keynesian thinkers therefore view the state as a necessary stabilizing force. Because inequality is viewed as intrinsic to capitalism, and then exacerbated while moving through market processes, the intervention of an impartial oversight body is necessary (Caporaso & Levine, 1992; Martin & Sunley, 1997).

Historically, Keynesian policies have been employed after periods of substantial economic downturn to mitigate inequalities and reignite nationwide recovery. After the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began the foundation of the modern welfare state through the New Deal, a set of programs and policies created to bolster the nation’s recovery from the depression and provide basic sustenance for many citizens amidst widespread job loss. These policies established the social security system, created the Fair Labor Standards Act to set a minimum wage, abolished child labor and mandated the 40-hour work week, and catalyzed other state interventions to ensure citizen well-being (Semuels,
Additionally, as a result of the Civil Rights era, the federal government initiated a set of expansive policies that were found to decrease the Black-White wage gap by 20%. Such Keynesian strategies demonstrate that state intervention is necessary to mitigate existing inequalities and individual suffering.

As an example, one might say that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts in employment settings serve as an example of a Keynesian strategy to mitigate market-driven inequalities. If there were no explicit DEI efforts in recruitment and workforce development, selected candidates would naturally reflect the existing social networks of the staff and thereby reinforce inequality. And if an organization or company already lacks diversity and inclusion, this inequality would clearly be exacerbated throughout the processes of the organization itself. Therefore, the state body provides the infrastructure, coordination, and redistribution needed to stabilize wealth production and allocation (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). Only with strategic intervention by the state, says the Keynesian perspective, can the market effectively distribute resources and goods.

A Neo-Marxian understanding of political economy extends the argument against capitalism through a more multi-faceted understanding. In the neo-Marxist view, capitalism is simply not redeemable. “The political institution defines and protects the interests of [the capitalist] class and it does so on its own initiative” (Caporaso & Levine, p. 77, 1992). Assuming a society divided by class conflict, market success hinges on the economic exploitation of workers (Caporaso & Levine, 1992), leaving the working class politically disenfranchised, as well as economically and socially deprived (Harvey, 2012). This approach claims that economic class is what defines the political agenda and since affluent individuals are often acting as elected representatives, there is an unconscious protection of class interests that perpetuates class inequality in policy (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). Rather than finding solutions in policy, Marxian thinkers bring critical reflexivity into solutions by asking society to address intersections of class and privilege and by focusing on movement building between the people themselves, specifically the working class (Mayer, 2013). With inherent class conflict in a capitalist society, awakening class consciousness and bolstering collective action will foster societal improvement. It is important to note that the state of improvement as defined by the Neo-Marxian perspective is not universally agreed upon (as demonstrated by the variety of Marxian theories such as Marxist revolutionary politics, Marxist social democratic politics, and Marxian state theory) (Caporaso & Levine, 1992).

While there is no unified Neo-Marxian outlook, Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” provides a relevant framework for envisioning urban
solutions outside of the state (Purcell, 2013). To create a just society, politically and economically disenfranchised groups have to claim their right to the city, the right to change and reinvent oneself and one’s city by mobilizing collective power, and recreate the city themselves. He believes the city exists as a microcosm for society at large, acting as the driver for historical, widespread change. This neo-Marxian principle imagines a new contract of citizenship that involves “urban inhabitants” envisioning and fully participating in remaking the city as their own because “the city belongs to those who inhabit it” (Purcell, pg. 149, 2013).

After the 1960s, the world as a whole shifted toward neoliberalism as a result of post-war sentiments and globalization (Mayer, 2013). Moving away from welfare, these policies focused on austerity measures and market discipline to foster city growth. For example, the welfare state began to adopt workfare programs, created work-hour eligibility requirements for services and additional stipulations that emphasized autonomy. Cities were running by what Peck labels “austerity urbanism” in which the social welfare state was purged of fiscal resources, government became decentralized to allow for private enterprise, and municipal expenditures were tightly controlled (Peck, 2012). Contemporary market patterns and policies have been framed by these neoliberalist practices, as demonstrated by the decline in unionization today, prevalent cost containment policies, loose government regulation and standards, and management short-termism (Lambert, Haley-Lock and Henly, 2012; Stout, 2013). In the context of neoliberal urban development, neighborhood disinvestment is just one outgrowth of the color-blind, market-driven ideologies that have allowed for inequalities to grow unchecked (Dymski, 2005; Mele, 2013).

NEIGHBORHOOD DISINVESTMENT AS AN URBAN ISSUE

Market-driven urban governance perpetuates an instability that is inherently discriminatory. It encourages accumulation in some areas while prompting disinvestment in others. If multiplier effects posit that initial capital investments create even greater returns from positive spillover over time, it is fair to say that the inverse is also true for disinvestment—there is a decumulative effect. In this case, peripheral neighborhoods are affected by the negative spillover effects of these structural decisions. These are the conditions for what Wilson (2012) labels the “urban underclass”—lower-income households, typically communities of color, in highly concentrated areas of decumulation (i.e., intentional disinvestment).

The spatial configuration of resources and investment mold the poverty landscape that we observe in cities today (Dymski, 2005).
Neighborhood disinvestment in Chicago is characterized by significant racial segregation and wealth inequality, coming with economic and social costs (Mendell, 2020; MPC, 2017). Communities of color are systematically cut off from the pathways needed to obtain the desired outcomes since these neighborhoods are often absent financial institutions, thriving commercial corridors, and adequate educational opportunities (Wilson, 2012). The Metropolitan Planning Council’s (2017) report, *The Cost of Segregation*, paints a clear picture of how segregation harms and inflicts those in disinvested communities but also our city as a whole. Even further, it siloes communities of varying races that cause us to focus on others’ differences, propagating harmful, individualist explanations of poverty. Each and every Chicagoan deserves the right to their city: to imagine, play, create, and—most importantly—connect with those around them (Purcell, 2013). Neighborhood disinvestment prohibits this human experience from being realized by hoarding wealth in selected communities and preventing residents from relating to one another.

**CHICAGO’S NEIGHBORHOOD OPPORTUNITY FUND**

Since the 1980s, wealth and wage gaps between whites and communities of color have increased exponentially, pushing mobile Chicagoans into the suburbs or surrounding states and isolating many neighborhoods on the City’s South and West sides (Mendell, 2020; Wilson, 2012). Wilson (2012) explains that this economic deprivation constructs barriers to accessing the social networks required to succeed—networks that are more readily available in neighborhoods of affluence (Theodos & Gonzalez, 2019). It is important, however, to explicitly acknowledge that these neighborhoods are systematically created and not individually perpetuated. Despite disinvestment, redlining, restrictive covenants, and more, these communities remain of great unity, imagination, and creativity that continue to forge pathways to welfare by using the assets they do have (MPC, 2017).

To address this history, Chicago utilizes the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (NOF), a place-based policy. The NOF takes the form of a public grant available to fund commercial projects located on the South and West sides of the city (City of Chicago, 2019). Its premier goal is to cultivate sustainable development in historically underserved communities by building community assets, supporting local businesses, and catalyzing new commercial projects. Originally, Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s administration implemented this strategy in 2016 as a matching fund (Quiq, 2019). Ultimately, the eligibility and the need for upfront capital inhibited many applicants from the communities that needed
these resources the most. In response, Mayor Lightfoot absorbed the NOF into the Invest South West initiative and expanded the grant to cover 100 percent of project costs if the owner and employees were residents of NOF-eligible target areas (Sabino, 2020). The fund prioritizes longevity, selecting applicants based on the following categories: project readiness, financial feasibility, construction implementation plans, and catalytic impact in their neighborhood (City of Chicago, 2019). With these adjustments, the NOF bridges the gap that many businesses face during the earlier stages of their development (Theodos & Gonzalez, 2019).

Viewed in terms of the political economy, the NOF occupies in an interesting position. Its strategy foundation is predominantly Keynesian since it presumes that neighborhood disinvestment can be mitigated through government-initiated reallocation of capital from downtown development (Caporaso & Levine, 1992; Dymski, 2005). Specifically, the grant aims to bolster commercial corridors of disinvested neighborhoods in order to provide needed services and amenities while also producing social capital and preserving neighborhood identity (Theodos & Gonzalez, 2019). Because developers and planners would otherwise invest in areas of preexisting affluence to capture positive spillover (Dymski, 2005; Martin & Sunley, 1997), the NOF is designed to reallocate downtown wealth to neighborhoods that would otherwise be neglected. If downtown developers commit a portion of their revenue towards the NOF, the City permits them to purchase larger amounts of space (City of Chicago, 2019). Because it is consistent with recognizable Keynesian frameworks of mitigating the shocks of capitalism’s instabilities, the NOF is publicly perceived as a small business development fund that balances out the downtown hyper-investment and its inevitable counterpart, rapid neighborhood disinvestment (Bennet, et. al., 2017; Quiq, 2019). However, there are distinct neoclassical elements of the NOF as well. Ultimately, the fund preserves freedom of choice. As long as a project is feasible and ready, entrepreneurs are free to choose what they produce in light of their understanding of their community’s needs (Quiq, 2019). Additionally, it upholds market participation as the ideal standard. Once provided with the needed equity, entrepreneurs are able to jump-start their projects, thus promoting participation and catalyzing even more activity in their local economy (City of Chicago, 2019; Theodos & Gonzalez, 2019). These traits are characteristic of neoclassicism because they believe in the efficacy of market-driven processes.

To provide broader context, there are myriad place-based strategies across the nation that further reflect Keynesian strategies as fuel for neoliberal development. New York’s Change Capital Fund focuses on funding community-based organizations that support cross-sector social
service needs (Aceves & Greenberg, 2015). Other, more common, place-based strategies establish tax incentives in qualified opportunity zones to attract private investors in commercial or real estate investments (Neiman, 2020). With dominant patterns of neoliberal development, the issue of neighborhood disinvestment is clearly not a Chicago-specific affliction. However, this variety demonstrates that place-based programs all converge at the point of a key Keynesian assumption: public intervention can and will encourage the private investment needed to reinvigorate underserved areas (Neiman, 2020).

The NOF reform that came with the Lightfoot administration made the funds more readily accessible for its targeted recipients, local entrepreneurs (Spielman, 2020). As previously discussed, many place-based policies do not provide the needed equity for local businesses but rather aim to attract external private investment. Conversely, the NOF offers to cover both costs and provide network connections when policymakers understand that market participation is understood to be both economic and social (Theodos & Gonzalez, 2019). One can credit the NOF for this funding structure because it does allow for grants and funding to acknowledge social patterns observable along geographic lines, such as race; patterns that neoliberal financialized discourse tends to ignore (Bennett, et. al.; Mele, 2013). That said, given the perpetual disinvestment of Chicago’s South and West Sides, place-based funding structures like the NOF are not fully sufficient for cultivating anti-oppressive and equitable practices for community investment.

There is no denying that the NOF comes with loopholes that can overtly harm the communities it was purports to benefit (Neiman, 2020). While development is presumed to bring universal benefits, it is highly likely to gentrify and displace a neighborhood’s current residents (Neiman, 2020). Supplemental policies and provisions, like affordable housing, must be taken into account to ensure that local development does not further exacerbate displacement of current residents and overall depopulation in Chicago. Additionally, the public nature of the grant forces recipients to navigate complex bureaucracy. These regulations and licensing procedures may deter targeted neighborhoods since many new entrepreneurs may not have the experience or knowledge to maintain eligibility (Quiq, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The limitations of Chicago’s NOF ultimately challenge a primarily Keynesian assumption that the state is best situated to respond to urban inequalities. Indeed, a neo-Marxian lens would highlight the ways in which government perpetuates capitalism, and subsequently, inequality,
permitting the oppression of lower-income populations (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). In this way, the NOF would be said to fit into the framework of current neoliberal urban development since the discourse of financialization supports the government justification to promote harmful investments without giving residents substantive input (Bennet, et. al.; Mele, 2013). Similarly structured public policies, like Tax-Increment Financing (TIFs), reveal that slush funds are often highly susceptible to government misuse and corruption, especially governments with a history like Chicago’s (Dabrowski & Klingner, 2017; Spielman, 2020). These examples support the neo-Marxian claim that perhaps the state is not the capable or impartial body that is needed to mitigate urban challenges.

Chicago’s NOF can be understood as, predominantly, a spatial Keynesian approach with elements of neoclassical principles, and thus one that invites a neo-Marxist critique. In recent history, neoliberal urban development has led to what we see now as “fragmented cities” - cities characterized by growing wealth inequality along racial and spatial divides (Dymski, 2005; Mele, 2013, p. 613). While the NOF does represent the goal of empowering historically underserved communities and mitigating city-wide inequalities, it is insufficient by itself. As previously discussed, Neo-Marxian frameworks invite us to bring critical reflexivity into the conversation by asking society to address intersections of class and privilege (Mayer, 2013). Even further, it demands that we try to envision what full participation in Chicago could and would look like—it demands that we try something new.

With inequality at the forefront of public discourse, government intervention must not waste this opportunity to provide substantive discretionary power to local communities and coalitions (Bennet et al., 2017). Social workers also must not shy away from economic frameworks in social policies but utilize them to sufficiently understand the complex processes at play in the social realm—because the economic is social. The goal must be a multi-dimensional framework that centers community choice, understanding that there are significant limitations of state policy intervention that are arbitrarily developed by policymakers and academic elites. This recognition suggests that we must reconsider the role of the state. As a funder and as a centralizing force, the state is sufficiently positioned to funnel its resources into powerful participatory solutions. In these instances, the state utilizes its inherent, formal power to equip local communities, aiming to foster cross-sector collaboration and local ownership because residents themselves are viewed as experts of their own experiences.

The reality of Chicago’s inequality is not coincidental, and it has everyday repercussions that continue to endanger the lives of society’s most
vulnerable populations. We are living in the aftermath of our inherited history while at the same time, are charged with the responsibility to forge a new way. Policymakers and elected representatives must consider the role they play in perpetuating this inequality and blocking the true empowerment of the communities that are already doing the work of caring for their own. Place-based strategies in conjunction with participatory principles are necessary to ensure that discretionary power is placed back into the hands of communities of color.

For Chicago to become the just city we envision, we have to continue to understand the complexity of its “lived spaces,” spaces that cannot and should not be reduced to neoliberal, financialized processes (Purcell, 2013). Rather, the spaces found within our city, especially its disinvested neighborhoods, hold the potential to foster the authentic connection, respect for difference and reimaging that our city truly needs (Purcell, 2013). With place-based strategies, equity can become a reality. The more that policies and strategies empower local interaction and participation, the closer we are to expanding the right to the city for all Chicagoans.

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CONVOLUTED CODE-SWITCH

Derek Nettingham

Preface

Code-switching involves adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, and access to opportunities (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, et al., 2019). Many characterize it as an inauthentic attempt to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings. However, why and how code-switching is deployed by marginalized folks in settings that lack BIPOC representation differs vastly from their white counterparts. More often than not, marginalized folks use it as a means of survival and respite, not convenience. This poem aims to take a strengths-based approach to an otherwise exhausting act for underrepresented populations while also challenging the white-centered social work sector to address oppression-driven emotional fatigue amongst BIPOC social workers.

Let me make this very clear,
I am not apologizing for my organic complexity or seeking your validation of my countless years of 21 questions.

Because I know this identity interrogation is infinite.
As is your curiosity.

But what I am doing is giving you a gift.
See, most days I just shoulder this burden and summon the strong backs of those gracious ebony ghosts that fill me with such resilience. More than 400 years’ worth.

Believe me I can take it.
But the pieces to your life puzzle seem to lay still and dormant while you peek over at mine.

My puzzle is bright orange with the sun’s rays infused in every piece. Deep charcoal corners that fold over on themselves like a scroll, and when the light hits them just right, you can see little grains of brown sugar melting into the center.

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They dance and dart about the floor,
latching on to each other and then pushing away.
A captivating Lindy Hop to a silent tune that only I can hear.
A hushed chaos.

But you notice the puzzle pieces never stay the same shape.
Each time they make contact a warm embrace is the result,
a calculated union that was prearranged in the milliseconds
it took for them to meet.

Then as soon as they are intertwined in harmony
they are again forced apart, indecisive, unfulfilled,
colliding with another piece moments later.

This is my code-switch.

See, in this world I unfortunately don’t have the luxury of being
authentically me
in spaces that match your connotation of intellect.

I was taught these chameleon games the moment my eyes saw daylight,
the moment I became the only Black face in the room,
the moment I heard, “I mean…but you’re not like them.”

Who is “them” and who is you?
See I am the “them” you speak of.
I have just given you my gift and you didn’t even notice.
My gift is a simplified version of myself
to keep your robotic mind from short circuiting

Your bias error alerts crash the whole room and let’s be honest,
My cultural bandwidth is enough to overload your closed-minded
connection,
and we’d all be left buffering for hours waiting for you to process my
existence.

See, my gift allows progress and facilitates urgency.
My puzzle pieces whizz around the room so fast connecting to everything
in sight
that you didn’t even notice I connected to you.
That’s why you see me.
See, when I am with my people and those that understand, our pieces lay together. Holding one another in silence, this time they don't let go or push away. They turn a warm Earth tone and exhale peace. Still glowing bright. Smelling brown sugar sweet.

Stand back to the heavens and you will see a beautiful tapestry. No end and no beginning. Splendor for eons.

That tune that you couldn’t hear before, hums loud and proud. Divine notes only Momma knows how to hit.

But when you’re around my pieces feel uneasy. They run around screaming, they feel anxiety and isolation. They cry out “I demand that you see me, I am here, I do exist!” But again, their sound goes away.

They latch on to anything in sight to feel a touch. But the other pieces they collide with don’t match. They latch to themselves for comfort, but that isn’t enough. They push away, the brown sugar sweet is overtaken by a bitter salt.

But with momentous pride and class they make it look like that rhythmic Lindy Hop. “Don’t let it show,” they whisper. Wiping the tears and putting on a smile.

I don’t mean to paint a grim scene. I’m just trying to shed light on that cloud of confusion that comes from trying to comprehend my code-switching convolution.

So, you see, when you’re staring at my puzzle pieces commenting on how they dart around. Making remarks about how they “seem okay” but would be much better if they just “open up” or just “act right”.

They actually have…and do. They have the power to mold and fit any puzzle piece they come into contact with. You can thank those gracious ebony ghosts for that.

But it is only with the chosen few that the connection remains.
The embrace is true and filled with common love.

You are not a piece of the beautiful tapestry that has already been painted. And I feel sorry for you.

So, each day I politely awaken the tapestry pieces, valiantly wipe the sweet brown sugar from my soul, and put my inner peace into disarray while I walk amongst you in order to change this world.

Because at the end of the day you need me. You need Us.

REFERENCE


DEREK NETTINGHAM is a second-year student at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice with a Social Administration and Global Social Development Practice focus. With over 8 years of professional experience doing DEI work within higher education, Derek believes that rooting his approach to social work in a global framework allows room for boundless growth and infinite ways to support marginalized folks worldwide. He hopes to return to higher education in a leadership role focused on DEI advocacy and making college campuses welcoming spaces for all students no matter their race, religion, sexual orientation, citizenship status, or any other attribute that encompasses one’s identity.
THE MINIMUM WAGE AND MEANS-TESTED BENEFITS: RAISING THE WAGE AND RAISING THE THRESHOLD

Kaitlyn Rippel

Abstract
This article argues that in the current and ongoing political battle to raise the minimum wage, we must account for the impacts on means-tested benefits. Beginning with a look at how raising the federal minimum wage to $15/hour would improve the financial conditions for people whose income falls at the poverty line, it tackles the arguments against raising the minimum wage and explores means-tested benefits by looking at marginal tax rates and income thresholds. It further engages concerns that raising the minimum wage will negatively impact employment by discussing the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. This article is not an exhaustive analysis of the fight to raise the minimum wage, but it paints a picture of where the movement is headed and what we need to keep in mind on the way there.

The “fight for 15” movement goes back to sometime around 2012, emerging on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis, Occupy Wall Street, and the kind of attention to inequality that was new. The Raise the Wage Act passed the House in 2019 but died in the Republican-dominated Senate. With the inauguration of Democratic President Joe Biden and greater Democratic control over the Senate, the promise of this legislation becoming law has increased. There has been continued buy-in from liberals and moderates alike, and a global pandemic presenting even more oppressive challenges for low-wage workers, and thus the push to raise the federal minimum wage continues. The Raise the Wage Act was reintroduced in Congress early in 2021. Though there is still skepticism among Republicans in the Senate, Joe Biden, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer have all shown support for the bill. The Raise the Wage Act 2021 proposes, again, a gradual increase in the minimum wage to $15/hour by 2025 and an end to pay below the minimum wage for tipped workers (Pramuk, 2021).

It is commonly accepted that the federal minimum wage of $7.25/hour is not enough for anybody to live on, yet it has not been raised

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since 2009—marking the longest span the country has gone without an adjustment. While wages have generally not kept pace with inflation over time, this is particularly true for minimum wage workers (Nightingale, 2018, p. 2). In “$2.00 A Day” Edin and Shaefer (2018) describe a woman named Jennifer, who works a minimum wage job every day of the year without a single day off to be with her family, just above the poverty line (p. 42). Because almost 60 percent of poor households include at least one employed person, a higher minimum wage is considered to have strong antipoverty promise (Romich & Heather, 2018, p. 1).

Specifically, raising the minimum wage is thought to have positive racial and gender equity implications. An Economic Policy Institute report by David Cooper found that “35.6 percent of women of color would receive a raise, along with 27.9 percent of men of color” (2019). This is notable as the United States continues to reckon with racial inequity and violence. Cooper’s report also found that “the Raise the Wage Act would disproportionately help workers in poverty or near the poverty line” because “nearly half (46.7 percent) of all workers who would be affected by raising the minimum wage to $15 by 2024 have total family incomes within 200 percent of the poverty line,” demonstrating that raising the minimum wage would directly affect the working poor who have long been oppressed by stagnant wages.

However, income interacts with means-tested benefits, meaning that raising wages alone may cause many poor families to actually end up with less money in their pockets. This is due to programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), housing, childcare and healthcare subsidies, all which have income-threshold eligibility. Romich and Hill speak to this when they explain marginal tax rates (MTRs), as the combination of payroll and income tax rates as well as the implicit tax rates associated with means-tested benefits. They say that implicit MTRs are the result of how earnings interact with means-tested income supports and eligibility rules (2018, p. 32). They argue that if the minimum wage were to reduce the official poverty rates by itself, the policy would have to increase wages much more than $15/hour due to these interactions.

We cannot have families losing access to these income supports and public benefits. Still, it is imperative that we pay hard-working earners in low wage working environments a dignified wage as one way of addressing inequality. Romich and Hill’s study (2018) illustrates the necessity of increasing both the minimum wage and major income support programs like SNAP and EITC. Their findings show that “the combination of a higher minimum wage with the two major income support programs (EITC and SNAP) is what successfully raises family resources above the
poverty line” (pp. 30-32). However, “the MTRs for full-time workers increase to as much as 60 percent for those moving to the $12 and $15 level,” indicating a need to counteract this interaction (p. 32). Their work demonstrates that we can increase the minimum wage without a negative effect on families receiving means-tested benefits through a $12/hour minimum wage and targeted public investments. More importantly, they prove that while it’s necessary to increase the wage to $12/hour, we also need to take into consideration the income thresholds that impact many of these families.

One approach is to adjust the income threshold at which families begin to phase out of programs, such as SNAP and the EITC, which would in turn lower the implicit marginal tax rates for these families (Romich & Hill, 2018, p. 36). The time to advocate for such changes is now. The recent American Rescue Plan, Biden’s coronavirus relief bill, includes adjustments to tax credit programs such as the EITC and the Child Tax Credit (CTC). This bill significantly increases benefits for those eligible, in addition to expanding eligibility. Firstly, the bill nearly triples the maximum benefits for childless workers. Additionally, “it expands the eligible age range, allowing for younger and older workers to claim the credit” (Hendricks & Roque, 2021). Hendricks and Roque (2021) say that “taken together, these important reforms would expand access for more than 17 million adults who are largely excluded from receiving the credit.” This new bill is exciting progress in benefits available to those near the poverty line and imperative context to consider as the fight to raise the minimum wage continues.

A common argument that Republicans have championed is that raising the minimum wage will decrease available jobs. This argument believes that higher personnel costs for businesses will mean fewer positions available. However, this argument loses validity when thinking about larger businesses and corporations, as there is plenty of room to dip into profit margins. In the context of smaller businesses, nonprofits, and public organizations, there is some discussion about how to support the move to higher wages. Romich and Hill argue for a Work Opportunity Tax Credit that would offer “temporary subsidies to employers of low-wage workers to support their absorption of higher personnel costs in the transition period” (2018, p. 35). This is certainly one approach to incentivize businesses in support of greater quality of life for the working poor in our country.

More glaringly, however, is the literature that demonstrates how there is no evidence that raising the minimum wage negatively impacts employment. Cooper (2019) quotes a study done by Wolfson and Belman in 2016 saying “no support for the proposition that the minimum wage has had an important effect on U.S. employment.” This meta-analysis included 739 estimated effects from 37 published studies on the minimum wage.
and employment between 2000 and 2015, demonstrating that the concern for increased unemployment is not based in evidence.

A higher minimum wage, $15/hour cannot by itself decrease the poverty rate, but it is one step toward addressing our country’s neglect of low-wage workers. While there is validity in the fear that raising the minimum wage could negatively affect the working poor, through the impact a higher income would have on their means-tested benefits, using this fear as a justification for not pushing toward a higher minimum wage would be in service of systematic inequality. What is necessary is to push for an increased minimum wage and reduced marginal tax rates for low-wage workers. A higher minimum wage is not the end of economic oppression, but it is critical for moving workers toward a more livable income.

REFERENCES


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DEFUNDING THE POLICE AS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Alexandrea Wilson

Abstract
Policing, rooted in the surveillance of Black folks and used to subordinate minority communities, is often understood as an icon of institutional racism. Environmental racism refers to the policies that create and build on racial disparities, again in terms of the space in which people live. Food insecurity, climate change, and air pollution are the symptoms of environmental racism because they disproportionately impact low-income communities of color. This paper explores the connection between two responses to these forms of anti-Black violence embedded in space: the environmental justice movement and the defund the police movement. It argues that anti-Black violence, through policing, contributes to the normalization of environmental racism that primarily burdens Black and Brown communities. It closes with discussing the contribution that social workers could potentially provide to the environmental field and what a focus on the environment in which people live could mean for social work more broadly.

“I Can’t Breathe”

For the past year, COVID-19 has created an environment of uncertainty. This alone caused the cyclical change of seasons to feel like unfamiliar moments in time. The pandemic also seemed to bring to the forefront the structural inequalities that are so deeply embedded within American society. These inequalities were reflected in the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on communities of color across the nation. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that Indigenous Americans were 2.4 times as likely to die from Covid-19 than White non-Hispanic Americans (Center for Disease Control, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, medical scholars highlighted the relationship between structural racism and Covid-19. Social determinants of health such as housing, food access, transportation, and employment were linked to Covid-19 outcomes as

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the poor quality of these determinants contributed to Black and Brown communities suffering higher infection and death rates of Covid-19 (Tai, Shah, Doubeni, et al., 2021).

As the pandemic exposed the need to address structural racism, further threats to Black and Brown lives continued on. Police violence against Black lives is one such issue. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked protests in all 50 states and across the globe—in countries such as Belgium, England, Brazil, and Australia. Participating in these protests put people at risk of contracting COVID-19; however, these protests were a needed release from the binds of being entrenched at home as well as an opportunity to express anger and grief at failing institutional structures. I debated participating in these protests. Being a Black woman, I knew that my melanin made me especially vulnerable to the excessive police force and violence historically employed by the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

I ultimately decided to participate in the protests and witnessed police violently attack protesters; this made me realize that I could never call the police again. Many of my memories of last summer are of police officers with their batons and riot gear. Naturally when I first heard the idea of “defunding the police,” I quickly supported this call to action. Defunding the police sounds like a radical idea and it was easy for some people to feel threatened by such changes. Creating new systems and institutions is often met with resistance. This is especially true when those in power are challenged. As I began to unpack what it meant to defund the police, I leaned into the movement even more.

In this essay I will explore the connection between the call for defunding of the police and the environmental justice movement. I will argue that anti-Black violence such as policing contributes to the normalization of environmental racism, a type of state-sanctioned violence that primarily burdens and harms communities of color. Furthermore, I will discuss the importance of social workers engaging with environmental justice. My objective in the final section of this paper is to provide a call to action for social work professionals and students—a call to see the contributions that social workers can provide to the environmental justice movement.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

In 1982, the residents of Warren County, North Carolina, protested the state-sanctioned dumping of toxic soil into the landfill of Afton, a small, predominately African American town in the county (Skelton & Miller, 2016). Their protest gained national attention, including coverage
by the *New York Times*, which described “125 demonstrators who marched two miles to the entrance of the landfill” being “met by 60 riot-equipped North Carolina highway patrol officers,” who arrested a great many; the protesters were then loaded on “to waiting prison buses that took them to Warrenton, the county seat” so the PCB-laden soil could be dumped (“55 Arrested,” 1982).

These events led civil rights leader Dr. Benjamin Chavis (1982) to coin the term “environmental racism.” He defined this form of racism as:

Racial discrimination in defining environmental policies, discriminatory enforcement of regulations and laws, deliberate targeting of minority communities as hazardous waste dumping sites, official sanctioning of dangerous pollutants in minority communities, and the exclusion of people of color from environmental leadership positions (as cited in Schlangen, 2020).

Chavis’s naming helped conceptualize the form of violence that was taking place in Warren County. Prior to the birth of environmental justice and its terminology there were no “formal expressions” of it in environmental law or policy (Carder, n.d). At its core, the environmental justice movement focuses on environmental inequities of risk and vulnerability. The environmental justice movement, which is led primarily by people of color, seeks to advance policies that would address the environmental burdens placed on minority communities. In 1991, leaders from all 50 states convened at the National People of Color Leadership Summit to form the agenda of the environmental justice movement. The summit was the first of its kind and helped to broaden the movement beyond a fight against anti-toxins. The summit eventually led to the creation of guiding principles that informed organizing, networking, and advocacy efforts. This attempt to improve the environmental quality of communities of color was bolstered by President Clinton, who then issued an executive order to address environmental injustice within low income and BIPOC communities through the reform of federal laws and regulations (Bullard, 2008).

Racism within the physical environment is constantly being debated for its legitimacy by individuals who do not identify with environmental justice communities and hold the academic and political power to legitimize or diminish its legality. Within this struggle is a type of violence that is inherently elitist. In 2005, for instance, an administrator from the Environmental Protection Agency attempted to remove race as a priority factor, “scrubbing racial discrimination from the definition of environmental justice” (Huang, 2014). Environmental racism exists because the institutions that govern the environment are racist. The Dakota Access Pipeline provides a recent example. The protests against
the Dakota Access Pipeline began because members of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation were not properly consulted about the pipeline route, which threatened to harm a main water source for the tribe (Hersher, 2017). In response to the tribe’s protest and legal actions, the U.S. government responded with violence. Numerous indigenous activists, protesters, and allies were harmed by the use of brutal police violence. Police used pepper spray and guard dogs to deter the protesters from standing in solidarity against the pipeline.

Along with overt violence, government institutions can yield policy to justify the polluting of low income, Black and Brown communities because they do not always have the economic capital to challenge these policy decisions. At different levels of government policy, decisions are made based on economic frameworks, such as cost and benefit. This analysis may prioritize sustaining a city’s fiscal resources but may do so in a way that divest from creating sustainable communities. An example is the City of Chicago’s plan to move General Iron, a metal shredding plant, to the South Side. The plant has resided in Lincoln Yards, a wealthy, White neighborhood in the city. The community there has been advocating for the removal of the plant, which has numerous environmental violations. It is unfortunate that the plant existed in Lincoln Yards in the first place. No community should be subjected to air and water pollution for the sake of capitalism. The city’s solution to move the plant to South Deering, a South Side neighborhood of the city of predominantly low-income, Black and Latinx residents, is evidence of the unjust burden of environmental hazards that Black and Brown communities face.

Institutions can also frame their actions as sustainable and necessary by demonizing communities of color as incapable of maintaining a clean and safe environment for themselves. This framing can be better understood as White narratives of justification. These cast abusive actions toward people of color as necessary (Diversi, 2016). The justification for moving the plant to South Deering is that it will create jobs for residents. This reasoning is reflective of the ways that marginalized communities and their natural environments are exploited. South Deering residents should not have to choose between their health and employment at a toxic plant. These communities deserve, rather, reparations; reparations for years of economic subjugation and not subjection to environmental racism. Investment in job training and the creation of sustainable, eco-friendly employment can provide communities with the economic power to advocate against the placement of environmental hazards within their community. The police are one such environmental hazard.
Policing as Anti-Black Violence

The anti-Black violence of policing makes the physical environment for Black folks essentially uninhabitable. Like racist environmental policies, policing is deliberately life-threatening. Policing can be wielded by government institutions to incriminate Black and Brown communities in the same way these institutions can pass policies that pollute the local water systems of a community. Policing can penetrate the environment in a way that reflects environmental racism. The system of policing can do this because of the ways in which Blackness itself is seen as a threat to the natural environment. Therefore, government institutions employ police to control the perceived threat. Contextually policing within Black and Brown communities is understood as an act of institutional racism. Institutional racism is reflected in the social laws and customs creating systemic inequalities (Grimshaw, 2020).

Police tend to target poor communities of color leading to higher rates of criminalization and imprisonment and therefore reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black and Brown people as inherently delinquent. The mental associations between race and crime can lead police officers to hold xenophobic and racist attitudes toward people of color (Owusu-Bempah, 2017). The result is over policing, the unjust murders of BIPOC people, and an increased view of these communities as threatening.

What Does It Mean to Defund the Police?

The City of Chicago spends 40% of its general operations budget on policing despite police reports that show violent crime has long been on the decline (Ballesteros, 2020). While violent crime has actually decreased, Chicago is portrayed in the media as a city riddled with excessive gun violence. Due to these narratives, certain neighborhoods within the city are criminalized. They are cast as dangerous, which in turns justifies their surveillance. Rather than invest in these communities through economic development, education, and access to mental health resources, the local government chooses to spend $215 per Chicagoan on the police force (Ballesteros, 2020).

To defund the police is to “reallocate or redirect funding away from police departments to other government agencies” (Ray, 2020). Defunding the police therefore means divesting from massive police budgets and investing in those communities that suffer most from police presence. Defunding the police is controversial because of the perceptions of racialized communities. The police are often called out to “de-escalate” crises around mental health, domestic violence, housing insecurity, and substance abuse cases that often need the expertise of a
social worker or other competent professionals. The police alone cannot create public safety. When they are called out to intervene in these crises, further harm is perpetuated by the criminalization of the individual(s) in need. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a majority of 911 calls about mental health crises are addressed by police, resulting in jails becoming the safety net for the individual in need (SAMHSA, 2020).

It is unreasonable to expect the police to effectively respond to the public safety needs of all citizens when the practice of policing is not based upon protecting all citizens. Predominantly affluent, White neighborhoods tend to feel safe with police officers. A poll by the New York Times found that 45% of Black Americans felt racially targeted by the police as compared to 4% of White Americans (Weitzer & Brunson, 2015).

WHAT DOES DEFUNDING THE POLICE MEAN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

As a Chicago native whose childhood was mostly spent in a neighborhood on the city’s West Side, I know the violence that comes at the hands of the police. One summer, when I was eight-years old, my cousin and I were riding our bikes around our neighborhood—down familiar blocks and across the usual alleyways. A block away from my grandparents’ home, a police car hit my cousin. I can still remember the officers just standing there—no empathy, no remorse. As my outraged uncle challenged the officers about their carelessness, my cousin was cared for by neighbors. Although my experiences with police have been troubling, I would be lying if I said the police have never made me feel safe. This country’s effort to portray them as heroes has only left me conflicted. Who protects me and my community if they are the ones we need protection from? Today, I understand that my community, like many others, will never be able to feel the perceived safety that police forces claim to provide. When police are present in my neighborhood, school, local grocery stores, these spaces instantly become an environment in which my safety feels threatened. It is as if the police act as toxins permeating the air and threatening my ability to breathe.

Environmental racism is by design. Food apartheid, high levels of air pollution, lack of access to green spaces, and police violence all disproportionately impact Black and Brown neighborhoods. These injustices impact the physical and mental wellbeing of entire communities. It is critical to understand that these injustices are a type of state-sanctioned violence connected to the land.
Despite the odds, environmental justice communities continue to pave the way to a more eco-equitable world. Indigenous communities have been prominent environmental justice advocates. Native nations have made great accomplishments in holding federal governments and their co-conspirators accountable for violations against the land. State-sanctioned violence via police brutality has also been used to control their activism efforts. Police threaten the environmental justice movement and act as weapons against communities that speak out on violations of the right to clean air, water, and land. Policing creates an environment that is inaccessible to those who do not benefit from whiteness. They excessively patrol the streets of minority communities which only further contributes to the depiction of them as inherently violent and endangers the psychological and physical well-being of residents. Policing is a socially constructed environmental hazard and defunding the police is necessary to the creation of a safe environment for minority communities.

The protests of summer 2020 was evidence that through solidarity, we can effectively advocate for a cleaner, safer, and healthier environment. Solidarity is critical to defunding the police and promoting environmental justice. BIPOC-led organizations, activists, community members and leaders, politicians and artists can collaborate to call on local governments to eradicate anti-Black violence, environmental injustice, and recognition of Indigenous lands. Cities across the nation are slowly realizing the potential of defunding police departments. Last year the city of Austin cut their police budget by $150 million (Venkataramanan, 2020) and then utilized the reallocated funds to purchase a hotel to create transitional housing for people experiencing housing insecurity. San Francisco plans to cut $120 million from the police budget to reinvest in Black communities, fund COVID-19 response, as well as other initiatives. These are just a few examples of the potential of defunding the police. If municipal governments continue to follow suit and invest in creating resilient, green, and equitable communities, we can rest in knowing that the safety of our world has never depended upon police. Rather, the safety comes from the ways in which we care for one another and this Earth.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

In this paper I attempted to connect two movements. Environmental justice is a movement that is traditionally focused on the natural environment, while “defund the police” is a movement centered in the socially constructed environment. Together these movements aim to make geographic space physically safer for Black and Brown people. Social workers study the environment, its layers, and how social
inequalities within them impact human development. However, it appears that the natural environment is a layer that the field has not studied in a meaningful way. I would like to bring attention to the lack of social workers in the environmental field and encourage students and professionals to engage with environmental justice, policy, and advocacy.

Matters of police violence are not ignored by the field of social work. Social workers have had a role in addressing racist policing policies primarily through decarceration advocacy and research. In the summer of 2020, in response to the national protests, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) showed support for redirecting police funding into social services. However, the organization avoided using the language of “defund the police.” Instead, the language used, and the proposals offered, were around police reform, dismantling racism within policing, and community policing. As a student of social work, I was disappointed by this conservative approach to addressing policing. This language reflects the profession’s enmeshment in systems and institutions that will continue to uphold policing for as long as it is profitable.

Social workers are known to “wear many hats.” The field is intersectional and therefore social workers can take on a variety of roles to promote social justice. This is an important aspect of the discipline. Yet, some social issues fail to receive attention from the field even when these issues impact the vulnerable communities’ social workers serve. Environmental justice is an issue that has not been prioritized in the social work agenda. Climate change, air and water pollution, and food scarcity are issues that impact the most vulnerable. The causes of these global threats can be understood through a variety of lenses, such as geography, policy, and economics. These disciplines do an efficient job of framing, evaluating, and measuring these environmental hazards. For example, many environmental justice scholars within the field of geography are critical about the discipline’s roots in Eurocentric, colonial values. According to Pulido (2000), the field of geography fails to include the “role of structural and hegemonic forms of racism in contributing to such inequalities” (p. 1). White privilege is so prominent within the field of geography that the field has relied upon a narrow understanding of racism (Pulido, 2000).

At the same time, social work can find its niche within the environmental field by lending it an anti-oppressive framework. This framework could potentially bring nuance to the environmental field, providing policy makers, climate scientists, economists, and other professionals with a rigorous trauma-informed and equity-focused lens. Social workers already seek to understand the environment and its layers to better address the needs of individuals and communities. The
discipline’s framework of the social environment could be enhanced by a comprehensive understanding of the natural environment.

In the past, the field of social work has had a reputation of “supporting the status quo” as it tends to give people tools to cope with, rather than address, systemic issues (Muldoon, 2006). Over the years, social work has grown to take a macro-level approach. Adopting a focus on environmental issues can be an opportunity for the profession to continue its expansion. Environmental issues will disproportionately impact those who experience poverty, homelessness, and Black and Brown communities and women (the populations with which social workers tend to work). If social workers fail to meet the moment in addressing environmental issues, will it truly be able claim its mission to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people” (National Association, 2017)? A focus on environmental issues is the way forward for social work.

REFERENCES


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KATY IBUR (she/her/hers) is a second-year clinical student at the Crown Family School with an emphasis in studying trauma. She has a BA from Macalester College, where she studied psychology, women/gender/sexuality studies, and community and global health. Her current field placement is at Formative Psychological Services, a Chicago-based private practice. Katy plans on specializing in clinical treatment related to couples and family systems, as well as utilizing spirituality to aid in the healing process.
HANNAH INGERSOLL is a second-year social administration student at the Crown Family School as is in the Global Social Development Practice program of study. After completing a BA in International Politics and Human Rights at the UC San Diego, Hannah worked in refugee resettlement where structural gaps prompted an interest in learning more about the process of program development, evaluation and grant making. Currently, Hannah serves as a grant writer for a nonprofit supporting women entrepreneurs in El Salvador. Upon graduation, Hannah will be returning to San Diego to continue working with migrant and refugee communities as a Clinical Case Manager with Survivors of Torture International.

CAROLINE KELLY is a second-year social administration student at the Crown Family School and is in the Graduate Program in Health Administration and Policy program of study. She has a BA from the University of Michigan where she studied Public Policy and Social Work. She is passionate about expanding mental health services access among low-income children and youth. She is currently completing her second-year field placement at the University of Chicago Health Lab.

MOLLY LUBETKIN is a first-year clinical student at the Crown Family School and takes part in the Transformative Justice Practice and Policy program of study. Molly attended the University of Iowa where she received a BA in English and Nonfiction Creative Writing and was drawn to the concept that we tell ourselves stories to live. As a budding social worker, Molly hopes to apply this meaning making within context. Previously, Molly has worked at the National Runaway Safeline, in day programs for adults with neurodegenerative disorders, as a mental health specialist in an acute children’s psychiatric unit and has taught yoga and mindfulness with youth and adults across Seattle. Molly is drawn to Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, Narrative Therapy and Queer theory, which she hopes to integrate into her clinical work.

MANSI MEHTA is a first-year clinical student at the Crown Family School. She has a BA in English and International Relations from the University of Texas at Austin and has a MS in Education from St. John’s University in New York City. She is a former NYC middle school English teacher and worked for various non-profits serving many populations before deciding to pursue a master’s degree in social work. She has experience with non-profit management, education technology for SEL, natural disaster recovery, workforce development and counseling. She currently interns with the Working on Womanhood program at Youth
Guidance and is looking forward to her internship next year with the Replogle Center for Counseling and Well-Being. Though she has many interests, she hopes to combine her passion for youth, meditation/mindfulness, and contextual-behavioral therapies in her work as a future therapist.

MATTHEW TEETERS is a second-year clinical student in the Contextual Behavioral Practice program of study at the Crown Family School. He has a BA from the Ohio State University where he studied psychology and religious studies, and his research interests center around the connection between place, culture, and identity in mental health, especially regarding cultural embodiment and complex trauma. Before coming to the Crown Family School, Matthew edited various materials for nonprofits, and joined the Advocates’ Forum to be involved in the collaborative process of producing an academic journal. He is currently completing his clinical internship at Columbia College Chicago.