Q+A

Mario Small

Within the isolation of the nation's poorest neighborhoods, a sociologist gets to the heart of inequality

Mario Luis Small is a leading investigator of the roots of urban poverty, the nature and effects of social and economic inequality, and the impact of support networks in poor neighborhoods. Small's work has also examined the relationship between qualitative and quantitative social science methods; he has sought to develop alternative ways of thinking about generalizability in case studies, such as ethnographies of a single neighborhood or historical studies of one organization. A recipient of the C. Wright Mills Best Book Award (2005 and 2010), the Robert Park Best Book Award (2005), and the Jane Addams Best Article Award (2004), Small is the author of *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio* (2004, University of Chicago Press), *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life* (2009, Oxford University Press), and numerous articles.

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There's a debate ongoing about what government should do about income inequality, with some arguing that inequality is a fact of life — spurring people to want to do better. How would you respond?
I think it's an extremely important question, and it's the right question to ask. Why is inequality so bad? I would answer that some inequality is probably good. If you can imagine a completely equal society, where everybody had the same income, a lot of economists would argue that people would not feel optimally motivated to compete, to invest in acquiring education and skills, and to perform to the best of their abilities. So we probably need some inequality for the country to keep making progress.

I think the problem comes when inequality is so extensive, when the gap between the richest fifth and poorest fifth of the income distribution is so large that it actually has negative consequences. One of the most important of those negative consequences, which you'd want to worry about regardless of your politics, is the impact on growth.

There's some evidence that high income inequality is bad for growth.

How does income inequality play out in the real world, and how does it hamper growth or mobility?
Think about real estate. In a place like Manhattan, where you have some people with exceptionally large incomes, there are people willing to pay high sums for real estate. When that happens, real estate gets more expensive for everyone, not just the people who are buying the luxury condos. Eventually the effect gets felt across the board, so it gets harder and harder for the middle class and the poor to find decent and affordable housing.

Income inequality has an impact on many other kinds of goods. Higher education, for instance, has become extremely expensive; but at the same time, there are more people willing to pay $50,000 per year for a college education. Because the rise in income inequality has been accompanied by a rise in the rewards of education and skills, you need a college degree, or a master's degree, more than you did in

the past. But it's much more difficult to make the human capital investment required to attain middle class status.

The growing importance of technology is another example. Think of the range of consumer goods that you're expected to possess, just as a function of operating in normal society. You're expected to be accessible in a way you weren't before, which means that you're expected to have a cell phone even to apply for many types of jobs and a computer just to participate in everyday society.

What about for disadvantaged communities, which have been your area of focus?
When you start going down the income distribution, the problems get magnified. The difficulty in finding affordable housing in a major city; the difficulty in finding a realistic path to higher-quality education. The need for consumer goods and technology that make you reachable by potential employers.

But there are also different problems. One of the most important has to do with prolonged exposure to

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high-poverty neighborhoods — neighborhoods in which everyone is poor. The school you are likely to have access to is more likely to be of subpar quality. Your exposure to crime and its negative consequences for health and well-being is greater. The potential for victimization — the stress associated with everyday life, the stress associated with raising your kids — is greater. Many of those secondary effects have been found to be associated with inequality.

Your work has centered on how networks and organizations can ameliorate inequality's effects.
This particular work grew out of thinking about the most disadvantaged members of the population. Not just the poor, but people who are poor and have a criminal record. Or people who are poor and undocumented.

The way we have often focused on this population, in the social sciences, is by looking at them as individuals and seeing how poverty affects their lives, how rising income inequality affects their capacities, and how they decide where to put their kids in school. Recently, with the work of scholars like William Julius Wilson and Robert Sampson, there has been a large focus not just on individuals but on neighborhoods — do they live in high-poverty neighborhoods or low-poverty neighborhoods? Do they live in neighborhoods that are racially segregated or not?

I think these are essential parts of any analysis. What I'm arguing, though, is that people also participate in institutions and systems of various kinds, and those have a big impact on their well-being. So if we take the poor person with a criminal record, for sure you want to study whether that person's going to have a harder time getting a job. And for sure you want to study what's going to happen when they go back to the low-income community that they came from. But you also want to ask, how do regulations about what you can do while you're on parole or probation affect your life chances?

How much power does the judge have to decide whether a minor infraction is consequential or not? These are all based on institutional rules, and the effects are not something you can measure just by asking someone's income.

In a poor community, how do effective organizations help?
Health is a really simple example. At the bottom of the income distribution, your health is a function of the particular health care system in your state, the reinforcements on Medicaid, and the institutional rules governing the system. In the early 2000s, the state of New York was allowed to institute facilitated enrollment for Medicaid, allowing a third-party organization to request the forms for you and fill them out on your behalf. Many of the state-funded childcare centers in New York started doing this for parents when they would come in to enroll their kids, and Medicaid enrollment numbers shot up. That was an institutional and an organizational process, not an individual or neighborhood one.

Say more about childcare centers.
One of the things I was interested in, in this project on networks and institutions, was social support, and how low-income and middle-income parents form social networks. We have a lot of evidence to support the idea that the better connected you are to others, the better you're going to do. So how do you become a person who has a strong support network? I found quite a bit of evidence that the way a childcare center organizes itself and its activities — how effectively it enlists parents as volunteers — had a measurable, observable impact on the extent of social connectedness among the parents. And that this connectedness had an observable impact on their mental and material well-being.

Now you're doing a broader study in three different cities, focusing on low-income mothers.
We're looking at the experience of low-

income mothers in three high-poverty neighborhoods: Central Harlem, in New York; Woodlawn, in Chicago; and Sunnyside, in Houston. Each has a similar high-poverty rate, each is very segregated, and each has the high rates of dependency on unemployment that you would expect — and yet they are extremely different neighborhoods.

> "It's now much more difficult to make the human capital investment required to attain middle class status. "

Woodlawn is a highly isolated neighborhood with a low population density of about 12,000 people per square mile and a low prevalence of everyday organizations. It's hard to find a grocery store, a pharmacy, a childcare center, and so on. Central Harlem has the same poverty rate, the same everything, but the population density ranges from about 55,000 to 130,000 per square mile. It not only has more childcare centers, pharmacies, and grocery stores, but it has more per capita. So the greater density contributes to the flourishing of organizations in a way that doesn't happen in Woodlawn.

Sunnyside is even sparser, more isolated. It has just 6,000 people per square mile on average, and there is almost nothing there, except for churches: There are more churches per capita than in either Woodlawn or Harlem.

What I'm studying is the relationship between networks and neighborhoods today. In a digitally connected world where there's Facebook and mobile technology and you can have a friend anywhere, what is the role that neighborhoods play in people's support networks? How do the differences across these neighborhoods affect the networks of the poor? We're looking at patterns of interaction to see if we can understand what kinds of poor neighborhoods there are out there, and how they affect people in these cities.