GROWTH AND SUCCESS OF TWO PREDOMINATELY BLACK METROPOLITAN AREAS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SHELBY COUNTY, TENNESSEE AND PRINCE GEORGES COUNTY, MARYLAND

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GROWTH AND SUCCESS OF TWO PREDOMINATELY BLACK METROPOLITAN AREAS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SHELBY COUNTY, TENNESSEE AND PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY, MARYLAND

by

Aisha Naantaanbuu

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Abstract

In this paper, I address the following question(s): what does inequality look like in Shelby County, Tennessee, and how does it differ from Prince George’s County, Maryland? I compare these two places because of the overall Black affluence and Black poverty of Prince George’s County and Shelby County, respectively. I am interested in finding what is different about Prince George’s County that results in a starkly contrasting level of prosperity compared with Shelby County. The Black population of Prince George’s County has managed to gain and maintain affluence where wealth, income, employment, and education gaps compromise Black Americans’ quality of living. A comparison of socioeconomic characteristics between these two counties that are both predominantly black but with different levels of black affluence may show whether components of Prince George’s County’s success could be implemented in Memphis in order to lessen some of the disparities that a large number of Black Memphians face. I find larger disparities in Black and white educational attainment, income, and poverty status in Shelby County than in Prince George’s County. Though Black residents of Prince George’s County still experience gaps in income and education, they are still faring better with educational success, income, and having a much lower poverty rate than in Shelby County.
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INTRODUCTION

Racial differences in concentrated poverty remain a defining sociological challenge in the United States. Given the expansion of low-paying jobs that lack fringe benefits and the polarization between high-paying and low-paying jobs, higher educational attainment is even more crucial to advance socially in today’s labor market (Wilson 2013). The unfavorable effects of deindustrialization on Black employment in the inner-city is a persistent issue (Wilson 2013). Individual poverty and unemployment rates have risen since 2000 (Wilson 2013). Racial employment disparities have continued, and the dilemma of joblessness has become worse for Black workers that do not have many technical and professional skills that the workforce deems useful. The Black unemployment rate has been at least two times higher than the white unemployment rate, even during economic upswings and plunges (Wilson 2013). Concentrated neighborhood poverty escalates the likelihood of social isolation from mainstream institutions, and it also increases joblessness, the probability of dropping out of school, lower educational attainment, involvement in criminal activity, unsuccessful behavioral development and delinquency among adolescents, nonmarital childbirth, and family dissolution (Wilson 2013). The current Black inner-city that is riddled with various types of disadvantages is a part of the legacy of historical racial subjugation in the United States (Wilson 2013).

Observed differences in poverty across communities of differing racial and ethnic composition are rooted in the highly distinct social and economic circumstances of racially segregated neighborhoods occupied by Black, Latinx, white, and other groups of people (Peterson and Krivo 2009). Loss of income and increased poverty are associated with higher crime rates (Massey 1990). How these structural conditions that are observed within neighborhoods that are racially segregated give recognizable settings for social disadvantage.
Peterson and Krivo (2009) argue that in a given neighborhood, the rate or amount of poverty, criminal violence, and social disadvantage in general partially depends on the levels of criminal conditions in adjacent neighborhoods. This physical, spatial positioning results in either more or less disadvantage than one would expect from internal conditions to the neighborhood (Peterson and Krivo 2009). One of the common characteristics of many Black neighborhoods, is their proximity to other communities with features that are generally associated with increased disadvantage, regardless of the internal character of the neighborhood. These features include high levels of disadvantage and residential turnover (Peterson and Krivo 2009). This can be observed in Memphis with the predominately Black areas. For the communities in North Memphis, South Memphis, Orange Mound, Westwood, Hickory Hill, Parkway Village, and Whitehaven, Black neighborhoods that are in proximity of each other share similar characteristics concerning poverty, school inequality, joblessness or underemployment, and crime. White neighborhoods on the other hand are relatively more often surrounded by areas where the same crime-promoting circumstances are almost absent, and the circumstances that deter violence, such as outside community investments, are common (Peterson and Krivo 2009). This can also be observed in the (suburban) Greater Memphis area in the suburbs of Collierville, Germantown, Arlington, Lakeland, and Bartlett. According to Peterson and Krivo (2009), the lack of balance in the proximity of neighborhoods could possibly provide an explanation for the large gap in the amount of criminal violence between Black and white neighborhoods and also between residential areas that are predominately non-white and white.

Memphis reelected Mayor Jim Strickland on Thursday, October 3, 2019. Strickland has voiced that crime in Memphis is one of his biggest concerns, and he has also mentioned that more police is a solution to Memphis’ crime problem. Strickland’s logic that an increase in law
enforcement is the answer to Memphis’ crime rate is shared by many voters throughout the city. Memphis is regularly included on lists of America’s most dangerous cities to live in. What critics often fail to do is critically analyze the factors that contribute to the city’s poverty and crime rates and its growth.

In this paper, I address the following question(s): what does racial inequality in socioeconomic status look like in Shelby County, Tennessee, and how does it differ from other metropolitan cities like Prince George’s County, Maryland? I compare these two places because of the overall Black affluence and Black poverty of Prince George’s County and Shelby County, respectively. I am interested in finding what is different about Prince George’s County that results in a starkly contrasting level of prosperity compared to Shelby County. I think it is worth looking at how the Black population of Prince George’s County has managed to gain and maintain affluence where wealth, income, employment, and education gaps compromise Black Americans’ quality of living. A comparison of socioeconomic characteristics between these two cities that are both predominantly Black but with different levels of Black affluence may show whether components of Prince George’s County’s success that could be implemented in Memphis in order to lessen some of the disparities that a large number of Black Memphians face. It is critical for policymakers to enact the necessary policies that would improve life for the most vulnerable populations since education, income, and poverty are reinforcing conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial Disparities in Economic Well-being

The year 1965 was a vital point of the battle against racial injustice in America. Major civil rights gains were made such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which made discrimination employment and most public place administration illegal. Voting rights were now also legally
protected, so it appeared that racial inequality was finally starting to transition into a concrete direction of improvement; however, the hatred that is indoctrinated in America’s fabric could not help but rear its ugly head and in turn, continue the oppression of non-white groups. Hardly five days after then-President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, chaos broke out in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles (Bobo 2011). The National Guard along with almost 15,000 troops were deployed to re-establish order, and this uproar resulted in 34 deaths, more than 3,000 arrests, and $35 million of property damage (Bobo 2011). Studies following this event documented police brutality, political marginalization, accelerated poverty, and forms of housing, social, and economic discrimination as components that led up to the uproar (Bobo 2011). Bobo (2011) also makes note that racial conflict was not exclusive to the South; many Northern white Americans resented Black presence in the Northeast and Midwest.

The character of poverty in America changed dramatically during the 1970s; poor Americans became even more immersed in poverty compared to the rest of American society, and income inequality rose (Massey 1990). However, Black Americans often ended up in financial peril due to white community leaders either creating barriers that blocked Black wealth building or took that wealth. Sociologist and anthropologist St. Clair Drake outlined a contrast between two concepts: primary victimization and indirect victimization (Bobo 2011). Primary victimization is comprised of overt discrimination. For example, obvious labor market discrimination created glass ceilings for Black workers in conjunction with housing inequality and residential segregation that created neighborhoods marked as the “urban ghetto” (Bobo 2011). Subprime lending and redlining are two examples of discriminatory measures that were enacted to cripple Black wealth. Redlining is the process that banks and other lending institutions use to systematically refuse to give mortgages and make home improvement loans in specific
“urban neighborhoods” (Pol, Guy and Bush 1982). This targeted practice makes conventional mortgages hard to attain in these neighborhoods, regardless of the borrower’s creditworthiness or the condition of their home (Pol, Guy and Bush 1982). Subprime lending on the other hand, changed traditional lending for non-white neighborhoods from redlining to reverse redlining, or intentionally targeting these neighborhoods for more expensive and risky home loans (Stein 2008). Studies have demonstrated that non-white Americans are much more likely to have more expensive subprime home loans than white Americans (Stein 2008). In 2006, Black and Latinx Californians had more than 45 percent and 43 percent of higher priced subprime loans, respectively (Stein 2008). Only 19 percent of white Californians had these predatory loans (Stein 2008). In California, non-white neighborhoods were 2.7 times as likely to get subprime loans as white neighborhoods (Stein 2008).

Many Black American communities have been able to achieve a level of prosperity in the face of discrimination, but then faced retaliation from the white establishment. The 1921 race riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma is an example of a Black, prosperous community being destroyed by white vigilantism. After World War I, the Greenwood District was nationally known for its affluent Black community (Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 2019). It was one of the most disastrous incidents of racial conflict in the post-slavery United States (Messer and Bell 2010). According to reported events, the riot began after a Black man, Dick Rowland, was accused of assault by Sara Page, a white woman. There were rumors that Rowland would be lynched, and a group of armed Black citizens arrived at the courthouse Rowland was being held at to protect him from the white mob that had gathered (Messer and Bell 2010). Shots ensued, and outnumbered Black Tulsans returned to the Greenwood District (Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 2019). Greenwood was burned and looted by white rioters; churches, schools, businesses, a hospital and
a library were destroyed (Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 2019). Property loss from the riot was at least $1.8 million (Messer and Bell 2010). Black Tulsans were left virtually homeless, and the community they built and sustained was charred. Law enforcement helped supply the mob with weapons and also commissioned them to attack Black residents (Messer and Bell 2010). Cities outside offered assistance to Black victims, but city leaders refused the assistance and denied the victims of proper compensation (Messer and Bell 2010).

Poverty likewise became more geographically concentrated within inner-city neighborhoods (Massey 1990). Massey supplements Wilson’s (1987) argument by including residential segregation as a principal conditioning variable in the social transformation of inner-cities and demonstrating how important it was in creating the underclass and concentrating poverty (Massey 1990). Enforcement of racial segregation on residential areas that are also segregated by class is detrimental to poor Black Americans but beneficial for poor white Americans (Massey 1990). According to a simulation with hypothetical neighborhoods that Massey created to show the effects of racial segregation, all poor Black people being confined to neighborhoods with a high poverty rate of .283, and some poor white people living in racially homogenous neighborhoods that are secluded from the larger pervasiveness of poverty among Black people, have a poverty rate of only .150 (Massey 1990). Since racial segregation accumulates poverty in one place, it also exacerbates any economic change that occurs within marginalized groups (Massey 1990). In an already segregated environment, any external changes that result in a downwards change in the distribution of income of minorities—for example, when factories close, production is mechanized, and employment is suburbanized (Massey 1990). This not only results in an increase in the poverty rate for a group as a whole, but it also results in an increase in the geographic concentration of poverty (Massey 1990). When shifts in
the distribution of non-white income happens within a racially segregated environment, these fluctuations have the power to quickly and dramatically alter the socioeconomic environment that poor non-white families experience (Massey 1990). Under these circumstances, the change in distribution of Black incomes is confined to Black neighborhoods, and so the shift in the neighborhood environment becomes more dramatic for Black people and less noticeable for white people (Massey 1990). In a city that is segregated by both class and race, any increase in Black poverty is taken in by poor Black residential areas (Massey 1990). Contrarily, poor white Americans are insulated from the negative outcomes of Black incomes decreasing. White and Black Americans end up being exposed to starkly different socioeconomic environments, and the economic base of the Black community is left vulnerable to any economic decline (Massey 1990).

Racial neighborhood segregation is also frequently the result of white homeowners thinking that their property value will decrease when Black families start to settle into white neighborhoods (Morris 2000). This racist ideology results in racial inequality; it is likely for white residents to resist integration which blocks Black people’s access to better houses that create better equity, schools, and neighborhood services (Morris 2000). When integration cannot be stopped, white flight is the next step of action. When Black families move into previously all-white neighborhoods, credit agencies and banks in turn lower the value of property, city services become sparse, and the tax base is weakened (Morris 2000). Morris (2000) explains that white people’s fear is self-fulfilling since white flight creates a sharp decrease in profit value—which in actuality, their beliefs prompted the process of inequality.

Returning to the concept termed by Drake, secondary victimization involves intricate and aggregate disadvantages that arise from primary victimization (Bobo 2011). In conjunction with
high poverty rates come a myriad of forms of social and economic inequality such as reduced buying power, increased dependence on social services, high rates of family disruption, increased crime rates, housing deterioration, elevated infant mortality rates, and decreased educational quality (Massey 1990). These detrimental results are mutually reinforcing conditions (Massey 1990). To establish class segregation shifts the strain of Black poverty from rich to poor neighborhoods, so without racial segregation, poor Black and white people would experience this equally; adding the element of racial segregation changes the case completely (Massey 1990). Under that circumstance, the median Black income falls 25.5 percent. This could result in a loss of income up to $11.1 million (Massey 1990). From an economic loss like this, stores will vacate, services will leave as well, and neighborhood investments will decrease. This happened in the Parkway Village neighborhood of Memphis within the last 13 to 14 years; the closing of the Mall of Memphis was arguably the larger-scale economic disruption, and various other businesses followed suit, leaving the area destitute. As neighborhood income decreases, homeowners are not as able to maintain and repair their homes. Housing dilapidation spreads, and the presence of boarded-up houses becomes more common. These kinds of consequences are the crippling disadvantages that social scientist Drake detailed (Bobo 2011). Primary and secondary victimization work together in ways that continue to reproduce inequality between Black and white Americans while simultaneously reinforcing racial disparities.

The concentrated poverty that comes from racial segregation also strongly affects mortality risks that poor Black Americans face (Massey 1990). This can be produced directly and indirectly. Directly, poor people cannot afford medical services. It is also likely that they may engage in health-risking habits like substance abuse (Massey 1990). These behaviors could be attributable to coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma that is related to being both poor
and Black. Indirectly, the loss of income in these neighborhoods brings on the departure of health services, hospitals, and clinics (Massey 1990). The services that do remain are probably of a lesser quality than ones that are present in nonpoor, white neighborhoods (Massey 1990).

In the United States, Black households only have one-tenth the median net worth of white households and also have almost no liquidity (Davis 2018). Since the Great Depression and the economic recovery that followed, inequality in wealth has increased even more along racial and ethnic lines (Kochhar and Fry 2019). In 2013, the wealth of white households was 13 times the median wealth of Black households, and in 2010, white household wealth was eight times that of Black households (Kochhar and Fry 2019). When comparing Hispanic and white households, white household wealth is 10 times more, an increase from 9 times the wealth in 2010. A multitude of factors seem to be the causes of increasing the wealth gap during the recovery from the Great Depression. According to the Federal Reserve, the median income of non-white households fell 9 percent compared to a 1 percent drop for white households (Kochhar and Fry 2019).

Even though opportunities for the Black middle class has improved, research provides two leading explanations for maintained inequality: the constant of low income across generations and the development of offset trends that promote labor-market equality but also family structure inequality (Bloome 2014). The socioeconomic predicament of a family recurs because of the cultural and material resources available to children shape their marriage and labor-market chances (Bloome 2014). Historically influenced disadvantage may remain since “rags to riches”success stories of upward social mobility are not common. On the other hand, inequality can be continued by discontinuity. If economic advantages disappear across generations and leaves children downwardly mobile, then broadly-based economic and family
trends may place more pressure on racial inequality trends than continuity does within families (Bloome 2014). Since family income comes from individual earnings coming together, disruptions in family composition can counteract shifts in a person’s economic chances. Bloome argues that racial inequality may have continued because single-parent homes in Black American families became increasingly common. As the resource pool for men and women shrank, family incomes may have not fully reflected labor-market gains (Bloome 2014).

Past systemic discrimination and denial of opportunity constructed large differences between Black and white family incomes. In this way, intergenerational continuity reproduces inequality because parents’ resources affect child’s ability to acquire resources. Also, Black children are more likely to inherit poor backgrounds, which negatively affects their chance of becoming high-earning adults (Bloome 2014). Moreover, the degree of mobility dictates how long initial inequalities remain (Bloome 2014). If upward mobility is high, then primary racial disparities disappear quickly; if not, disparities persist because of the continuity of low income (Bloome 2014). When initial group differences in initial socioeconomic positions come together with how those positions remain shows how racial inequality is perpetuated (Bloome 2014).

Racial income disproportion may be especially constant when income mobility patterns vary by race (Bloome 2014). If it is especially hard for Black children to depart from low incomes, then the prevalence of low-earning Black adults will be higher than expected based on racial inequality in family background alone (Bloome 2014). Right at half of Black children but only one-fourth of white children raised in the bottom income quintile are still there throughout adulthood; Black people’s upward percentile gains are also smaller (Bloome 2014).

Numerous studies report the relationship between the socioeconomic makeup of schools and students’ academic achievement, following the Coleman Report (1966) (Saporito and Sohoni
2007). The Report yielded that the class composition of students is more relevant to their achievement, not including a students’ background, than any school factor (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). This applies across races; Black and white students showed higher performance when they attended schools where larger percentages of their peers were from households with a lower socioeconomic status (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). Studies more recent than the Coleman Report validated the results of prior research. Studies by Rusk and Mosley (1994) and Schellenberg (1999) concluded that economically disadvantaged children that attend schools with little poverty perform better than poor children who attend schools with a lot of poverty (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). Other studies further confirm Coleman’s findings. Chubb and Moe (1997) reported that the socioeconomic status of students has more influence than racial composition concerning student trajectories (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). In a study by Rumberger and Palardy (2005), they found that for high school students, the overall student body socioeconomic status has as much of an impact on their performance as their individual socioeconomic status (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). After studying segregation patterns across highly populated urban school districts, Saponito and Sohoni (2007) found that economic segregation in public schools was higher than expected, considering the distribution of poverty across neighborhoods. Their results showed that gaps in poverty rates between schools and their neighborhoods is higher at schools with more non-white children (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). Typically speaking, white children enrolled in public schools are amongst children where most of them live above the poverty line (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). However, the typical Black or Brown child attends a public school where most of the population lives in poverty (Saporito and Sohoni 2007). This educational imbalance is an indicator of a larger-scale injustice— the systemic oppression that is reproduced and remains a crippling factor in Black (and Brown) advancement.
Shelby County, Tennessee

In a 20-year time span, Memphis, Tennessee was in the top three metropolitan cities that had the least income for Black men relative to white men (Grant and Parcel 1990). Atlanta, Georgia and Nashville, Tennessee, two cities that are relatively close to Memphis, were among the cities where Black men had the biggest gains in income relative to white men in 1960 and 1980—while Memphis did not appear on this list of gains (Grant and Parcel 1990). In 1960, incomes of Black men in Memphis were 46.7% of white men’s incomes, and in 1980, incomes of Black men in Memphis were 48.7% of white men’s incomes (Grant and Parcel 1990). Income gains for Black women in Memphis fared even worse than Black men in 1960 and 1980. Memphis was the top metropolitan city in both years where Black women had the least income relative to white women (Grant and Parcel 1990). Chattanooga, Tennessee was on the list of metropolitan cities that had the biggest gains in relative income for Black women; once again, Memphis was not a metro city in Tennessee that made the list (Grant and Parcel 1990). All tables in these comparisons included the 100 largest MSAs in 1960 and 1980.

The tables indicated that areas in the west and south are where Black people made the greatest gains, partially because there was an extreme level of inequality in these regions in the first place, which provides a greater opportunity for some kind of progress (Grant and Parcel 1990). Even with this being the case, Memphis still lagged behind other cities income gains. In the analysis of this study, the authors focus on job market instability, firm size, and unionization as primary resources that affect racial income inequality. Dual labor market theory distinguishes between “good” and “bad” jobs; “good” primary market jobs are more stable, pay better wages, and are safer, while “bad” secondary market jobs pay poorly and have unsafe working conditions.
These theorists argue that Black workers are overrepresented in the secondary labor market, thus suffering economically (Grant and Parcel 1990). The authors of this study predicted that in areas with a highly unstable job market, fewer stable jobs will be available to Black people, and their income will be lower relative to white workers, compared to areas or cities with stable job markets (Grant and Parcel 1990). Their hypothesis can be observed in Memphis since the city offers many jobs through temp agencies, and these jobs may not always turn into a permanent position, the hours are often long, and while some of these jobs provide a livable wage, the working conditions are not always the safest. Memphis also is a city with a large amount of warehouse jobs. There the hours are again long, and the work often involves manual labor.

Memphis, Tennessee has the highest rate of childhood poverty in the country, and according to University of Memphis professor Elena Delavega, 48.3 percent of all Black kids in Memphis live in inadequacy (Davis 2018). Delavega conducted an illustration at THE POVERTY REPORT: MEMPHIS SINCE MLK; this particular forum was presented by the National Civil Rights Museum and in partnership with the University of Memphis Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social change. The report’s purpose was to discuss how Black Americans and poor individuals have managed in Memphis and Shelby County over the past 50 years, according to the MLK50 official website. In Delavega’s illustration, she called on the audience to visualize a Black child. She then explained that they could flip a coin to demonstrate the “yes or no” nature of the economic security in Memphis (Davis 2018).

Even though Black poverty in the city has declined from its highest point in 1960, the poverty rate is still two and a half times higher than white Memphis residents (Davis 2018). The median household income for non-Hispanic white Memphians is $71,158, while the amount for
Black homes is $35,632 (Davis 2018). The amount for white families is also just at 11.2 percent higher than the national median (Davis 2018).

Prince George’s County, Maryland

Prince George’s County, Maryland is well-known for its abundance of middle- and upper-class Black Americans (Pattilo 2003). It is the only suburban county in the United States that is majority Black (The JBHE Foundation Inc. 1995).

Five Prince George’s County neighborhoods were named on a list of the wealthiest Black communities in the United States by the Atlanta Black Star; these neighborhoods were Fort Washington, Friendly, Kettering, Mitchellville and Woodmore (Brown 2015). The writers of the Atlanta Black Star article described the Woodmore neighborhood as having a family income of $103,438 and Fort Washington as an upper-middle class Black community where over a third of people living there have a bachelor’s or an advanced college degree (Brown 2015).

In 2017, Prince George’s County, Maryland had a median household income of $81,240, and between 2016 and 2017, the median household income grew 2.6 percent from $79,184 to $81,240; this is larger than the national median annual income, which is $60,336 (Anon. n.d. 2018). The population is 62 percent Black or African American, 12.6 percent white, and 18.5 percent Hispanic or Latinx (Anon. n.d. 2018).

A large number of Black residents are employed with the federal government and left Washington in search of safer neighborhoods for their families and better schools for their children (The JBHE Foundation Inc. 1995). Around 1975, the county’s population was majority-white and rural with a strong presence of racial subordination (The JBHE Foundation Inc. 1995). Neighborhoods were racially segregated and so were schools; after the federal government ordered school integration, the demographics of Prince George’s County shifted drastically (The
JBHE Foundation Inc. 1995). Just like observed in Memphis public schools, busing often resulted in white parents enrolling their children in private schools. Therefore, the county’s public schools became progressively Black.

By utilizing Census and IRS migration data, DeRenzis and Rivlin (2007) were able to conclude that racial demographics of Prince George’s County and Washington, D.C. have shifted in opposite directions in the past 15 years. The Black population became less concentrated in Washington, D.C. and more in Prince George’s County; though in 2005, while Montgomery, Charles, Howard, and Anne Arundel counties still had a majority-white population, these counties have also become progressively diverse (DeRenzis and Rivlin 2007). From the years of 1989 to 1999, Prince George’s County’s population was steadily middle-class, while the number of middle-class households in Washington, D.C. decreased (DeRenzis and Rivlin 2007). Therefore, Prince George’s County poverty rate was lower than D.C.’s but higher than the more affluent nearby Maryland areas. People migrating in and out of Prince George’s County impacted the county’s population composition but not so much the total population size (DeRenzis and Rivlin 2007). Each year, about 46,000 people moved into Prince George’s County and 49,000 moved out (DeRenzis and Rivlin 2007). Almost 60 percent of the incoming population was Black; the population leaving was more likely to be white (DeRenzis and Rivlin 2007). Families with lower incomes who are looking for affordable housing, better education, or safety may consider relocating to Prince George’s County as an avenue to middle-class status (DeRenzis and Rivlin 2007).

Even this community that is known for its affluent Black population has its issues. Political scientist Valerie Johnson presents that the progress of Black Americans has been hindered (Pattilo 2003). Politically, Black people only made up 47 percent of elected officials
while making up 63 percent of the population, in 2000 (Pattilo 2003). Johnson suggests several reasons for this struggle to gain political power. There is a poor Black population that is located primarily in an area called The Beltway; the variation of socioeconomic status has been a dominant reason for the failure of Black residents to take political power from the declining white population— even though Pattilo did not go into detail about what Johnson meant by this (Pattilo 2003). She also claimed that as a result of differing socioeconomic statuses, there have been issues with uniting around candidates and policies (Pattilo 2003). As a result, Black residents have struggled with electing officials at a rate that corresponds with the Black voting population (Pattilo 2003). Finally, white residents have not been eager to surrender, nor share, power with the expanding Black population (Pattilo 2003). In Pattilo’s review of Johnson’s book, she includes that the median family income in Prince George’s County lags behind all of the other counties in the Washington metropolitan area. It also has the region’s second largest welfare caseload, trailing Washington, D.C. (Pattilo 2003). Johnson also claims that there is a large gap in test scores between Black and white Prince George’s County students (Pattilo 2003). This suggests that even in communities with large amounts of seemingly prosperous Black people, power dynamics still give room for inequality.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

I took a quantitative approach and used data from the American Community Survey through IPUMS-USA (Ruggles et al. 2019). I looked at the race, education, income, and poverty status variables in the 2017 datasets for Shelby County, Tennessee and Prince George’s County, Maryland. I created a series of tables that show statistics of various variables that have an effect on the quality of life of residents of Shelby County and Prince George’s County. IPUMS-USA is
the ideal data source for this project because it harmonizes data from the American Community Survey. Importantly, the data include State FIPS codes and County FIPS codes to allow description and comparison of socioeconomic characteristics of individual counties.

Measures

Analyses compare non-Hispanic black households and non-Hispanic white households in Shelby County and Prince George’s County. Race was measured as [RACE] and was recoded as non-Hispanic Black or African American and non-Hispanic white. Other racial/ethnic groups were excluded. Education was measured as years of education [EDUC] and was recoded as less than high school, high school diploma, some college, and college graduate. Income was measured as the total pre-tax money income earned by one’s family from all sources for the previous year [FTOTINC] and was recoded as $0 to $29,999, $30,000 to $49,999, $50,000 to $69,999, $70,000 to $89,999, and $90,000 or more. Poverty status was measured as each family’s total income for the previous year as a percentage of the poverty threshold established by the Social Security Administration [POVERTY] and was recoded as below the poverty line and above the poverty line.

Analytic Approach

I present a series of cross-tabulation tables that show how SES outcomes (educational attainment, household income, and household poverty statuses) vary by race/ethnicity in Shelby County, in Prince George’s County, and in both counties combined. Chi-square tests were used to determine whether the distributions of each SES outcome differ significantly.

RESULTS

For education (Table 1), there are higher percentages of non-Hispanic white people than non-Hispanic Black people in both Prince George’s County, Maryland and in Shelby County,
Tennessee at the college graduate level. However, there is a much bigger achievement gap between Black and white people in Shelby County. In Prince George’s County, 22.9 percent of Black residents graduate from college while 37 percent of white residents earn a college degree. In Shelby County, 35.5 percent of white residents are college graduates while only 11.9 percent of Black residents are college graduates. The percent of adults with a college degree is about the same among white adults in the two counties but, among black adults, the percent with a college degree is nearly twice as high in Prince Georgie’s County as in Shelby County. Though the chi-square test shows significance between the educational attainment of Black and white people in both counties, there is clearly a larger disparity in Shelby County. There is a lesser disparity between white graduates in both counties, and there is a much larger gap between the number of Black graduates.

For family income (Table 2), in Prince George’s County, there is not much of a Black-white difference in the categories of $0 to $29,999, $30,000 to $49,999, $50,000 to $69,999, and $70,000 to $89,999; the largest percent of the population in these brackets does not exceed 15 percent. The largest race-income difference is in the $90,000 and more group, and it is only a 4.3 percentage point difference, with 46.3 percent of Black residents earning at least $90,000. This shows that even though 14.1 percentage point more white people in Prince George’s County have at least a bachelor’s degree, Black households are still largely faring well in their ability to earn in the upper income bracket. In Shelby County on the other hand, we see a stark difference in the distribution of wealth. In the $0 to $29,999 range, 44 percent of the Black population has a family income totaling somewhere in this range while only 16.7 percent of the white population falls in this category. The amount of Black households in Shelby County that earn in the lowest income range is more than three times the amount of Black households in Prince George’s
County. There is a much smaller gap in the Black-white household income in the $30,000 to $49,999 range in Shelby County; 19.7 percent of Black households earn within this range. Even though the gap is much smaller here, there are still more Black families earning in the second-lowest income bracket than white families. There starts to be a shift at the $50,000 to $69,999 household income range. This bracket is the first time where a higher percentage of white households is seen with 14.1 percent earning $50,000 to $69,999 and 12.9 percent of Black families earning in this range. In the second highest income range, 11.5 percent of white families earn $70,000 to $89,999 while only 8.8 percent of Black families earn at the same level. At the $90,000 and more range, 44.2 percent of white families in Shelby County are earning at least $90,000 a year. In a stark comparison, only 14.5 percent of Black families are earning at least $90,000 a year. There is an even higher income disparity here than at the $0 to $29,999 level; there is a 27.3 percent difference at the lowest range and a 29.7 percent difference at the highest range, in favor for white families. In the family income table, there is a flip in Shelby County of the amount of Black and white families represented at the lowest and highest level of household income. Over 40 percent of Black families earn at least $90,000. The income disparities in Shelby County give some insight about the amount of Black residents that live below or right at the poverty line. The large concentration of almost 50 percent of Black Prince George’s County at the $90,000 and up range strongly suggests that Black people in the Maryland County are able to gain and accumulate wealth at a much better rate than Black people in Shelby County.

The poverty analysis (Table 3) yielded some very interesting results. In Prince George’s County, there is no significant difference in the Black-white percentage that live in poverty and no difference in the percentage that do not live in poverty. 92 percent of both Black and white populations in Prince George’s County do not live in poverty. The amount of both races living in
poverty being identical was unexpected. Shelby County’s percentage breakdown paints a completely different picture; 92.2 percent of white Shelby County residents are not living in poverty, while Black residents lag behind at 71.6 percent. The amount of white people in Shelby County not living in poverty is 0.2 percentage points higher than the Black and white people not living in poverty in Prince George’s County, while not even three-fourths of the Black Shelby County population is living above the poverty threshold. While only 7.8 percent of Shelby County’s white residents live in poverty, 28.4 of the county’s Black population lives in poverty. Therefore, more than one-third of Black people in Shelby County live below the poverty threshold, and that number is more than three times the amount of Black Prince George’s County residents that live in poverty.

In sum, these three crosstabulation tables show that there is a noticeable inequality in education, total family income, and poverty statues in Shelby County.

DISCUSSION

Study Purpose and Findings

The purpose of this study was to compare two predominately Black metropolitan areas and examine what inequality looks like in these areas and how they differ from each other. This study also examined what components of Prince George’s County’s success can be implemented to improve Shelby County. My findings are that there are larger disparities in Black and white educational attainment, income, and poverty status in Shelby County than in Prince George’s County. Although Black residents of Prince George’s County still experience gaps in income and education, they are still faring well with educational success, income, and having a much lower poverty rate than in Shelby County.
Various studies show that middle-class Black people have more advantageous residential results, when compared to poorer Black people, but also live in poorer neighborhoods than most white people, on all measures (Pattillo 2005). Even still, Black Americans who come from a middle-class background enjoy short-term and far-reaching benefits. Concerning education, the annual Survey of Earned Doctorates reports that 56 percent of Black Americans who earned a doctorate during 2002 were first-generation college students compared to 78 percent who earned a doctorate in 1977 (Pattillo 2005). In 1999, 60 percent of Black college freshmen had fathers who were college graduates, with one-fourth of them coming from households earning more than $100,000 annually (Pattillo 2005). This implies that the benefit of having access to improved education, social and financial support, and overall physical safety, can establish and continue stability and accumulation of wealth.

Contributions and Limitations

My analysis contributes to existing literature by further validating prior research on racial inequality in America. It builds upon studies that examine how underemployment and employment discrimination affects Black Americans, and in turn, contributes to racial gaps in income. However, my analysis also contributes to literature by spotlighting an African American community that is very prosperous and despite facing systemic oppression, the majority of its residents are faring well in educational attainment, income, and having a low poverty rate.

Some limitations of my study are that my analysis does not look at the employment status and health disparities of each county. Further, this study does not analyze disparities across gender nor gender and race simultaneously. Also, there is limited academic research on Prince George’s County, Maryland.
Future Research

I recommend that future researchers study other Black, affluent communities, in addition to continuing research on Prince George’s County, and analyze how those communities gain and maintain success. I also recommend that future researchers exploring this topic should analyze inequality on a gender-race level to see what roles gender and race together play in resulting in inequality. Using findings from these potential studies could give policymakers and their communities some perspective on what less successful Black communities need.

Policy Implications

In Shelby County, Tennessee specifically, policymakers could use this study to advocate for the importance of investing in Black neighborhood schools. In addition, policymakers could utilize the findings from this study to plan for better quality neighborhood services, reducing food scarcity, and more sustainable job opportunities for low income families. They could also use this study as motivation to diversify the job market in Shelby County, especially for residents that are college graduates; the abundance of warehouse, retail, and food service jobs discourages many degree holders from seeking long-term employment in Shelby County and often results in relocation. Giving those residents an incentive to remain in Shelby County would benefit the economy. With improved education comes enhanced career opportunities with benefits and a chance to earn an efficient income.

CONCLUSION

This project was to produce information about one of the most successful Black communities in America and also compare it to another Black community that struggles greatly with low wages, high poverty, and low educational performance and success. The remarkable success that Black citizens of Prince George’s County not only disproves the narrative that Black
Americans are poor and uneducated with little to no wealth or property, but to also be a resource for legislative committees to begin the work that would decrease gaps of inequality in Shelby County. Since education, income, and poverty are reinforcing conditions, it is important for governing bodies to implement the necessary policies that would improve life for the most vulnerable populations.
REFERENCES


DeRenzis, Brooke and Alice M. Rivlin. 2007. “A Pathway to the Middle Class: Migration and Demographic Change in Prince George’s County.” *Brookings*.


Saporito, Salvatore and Deenesh Sohoni. 2007. “Mapping Educational Inequality: Concentrations of Poverty among Poor and Minority Students in Public Schools.” *Social Forces* 85(3):1227–53.


Table 1. Association between race/ethnicity and educational attainment in Prince George's County, MD and Shelby County, TN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Less than high school</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Some college</th>
<th>College graduate</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George's</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 = 1492.7, \ p = 0.000$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>30.3%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 = 5464.5, \ p = 0.000$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 = 5430.9, \ p = 0.000$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 2017 American Community Survey data.*
Table 2. Association between race/ethnicity and family income in Prince George's County, Maryland and Shelby County, TN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>0 to 29999</th>
<th>30000 to 49999</th>
<th>50000 to 69999</th>
<th>70000 to 89999</th>
<th>90000+</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prince George's</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 = 114.9, p = 0.000$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 = 8881.1, p = 0.000$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>$\chi^2 = 2771.7, p = 0.000$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2017 American Community Survey data.
Table 3. Association between race/ethnicity and poverty status in Prince George's County, Maryland and Shelby County, TN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Poverty status</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not in poverty</td>
<td>in poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George's</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>92.2%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>92.2%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2017 American Community Survey data.