

Transcript for Institute for Research on Poverty Podcast featuring Katherine Curtis

Hosted by David Chancellor

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[Chancellor] For this podcast, I talked with Katherine Curtis of UW-Madison's department of Community and Environmental Sociology. Broadly speaking, Curtis' work looks at the demography of inequality across space and time.

In a recent paper, Curtis, along with Paul Voss and David Long, looked at the way that racial and ethnic composition and economic structure are spread across space and how those factors relate to child poverty. Let's turn to Professor Curtis for more.

[Curtis] The focus of this paper was to take a look at how relationships vary across space. So, there has been this evolution, I think, in county analysis or analyses of poverty. And so there have been analyses that look at the county as the unit of analysis and there has been quite a literature on that and more recently there have been some efforts to use more spatially informed models that take a look at the spatial relationships. But these models are all talking about the relationship between county attributes and poverty as an average, which is to say it's generalized across all counties. And so what is missing, we think, in that approach, is a consideration of the way in which relationships vary according to the local context.

[Chancellor] As I was talking with Curtis, I initially stumbled with this distinction of looking at relationships across space because it seemed to me that so many poverty-relevant statistics, which are available at the county or subregion level, were effectively already showing "spatial" difference. So how is it that the work that Curtis is doing is different?

[Curtis] I'm interested in space not in the sense of space as a purely locational quality but what it is about space so when I talk to folks I often think of telling them 'well, sometimes we're interested in time, right?' And so we're interested in how time is a factor in some trend or some process. And the question is, 'well, what does time actually represent? Oh, well there was a this policy shift, or, oh, there was this war, this conflict, or something happened at that point in time and the same logic where we think about—there's this container of space, but what does space actually represent?' And so this is where we start and we start the analysis by adopting a perspective that's pretty easily found in the literature which is talking about the South. Right? The South is distinct from the rest of the United States or the non-South.

[Chancellor] Curtis says that the question here is 'ok, what about the South makes it so distinct?' She says that when they look at the distribution of various attributes or county characteristics that are often associated with poverty, they see a high concentration of racial or ethnic minority populations as well as a high concentration of particular industries that are often associated with higher child poverty rates.

[Curtis] So, when we think about space in these terms or the South in these terms, we can think 'Huh, well is it the South or some unmeasured quality of the South or is it actually something that we can measure in the South and then when we think about it, we know that racial concepts—that populations of color are not

exclusively concentrated in the South, but they're distributed in other places that also tend to be highly—tend to report higher child poverty rates. And the specific industries like agriculture, service industries, are also not exclusive to the South. They're found outside the South. And so, then we ask the question, well, is it more useful to think about it, or is it useful to think about space in these social-defined terms. And so, redefining space in these social terms—so moving from the South/Non-south geographical difference to qualities of the South that are highly concentrated but not exclusive to the South.

[Chancellor] I asked Professor Curtis for an example of how two spatial areas might have different drivers of poverty depending on the racial or economic concentration of each. She said that unemployment is a good example to look at—poverty is mostly measured by income so a family facing unemployment is going to have less income, thus leading to a higher risk of child poverty. But, that relationship varies depending on spatially measureable demographic factors.

[Curtis] When we look at the relationship between unemployment and child poverty, we find a much more pronounced relationship in the low racial concentrated communities—counties and a weaker association in the high concentrated communities but what we see in communities with a high racial concentration is that the proportion non-employed—so those who are actually not engaged in the labor market—that factor is a strong factor in places with a high racial concentration as compared to places with a low racial concentration. Right? So what is all that to say? All that is to say that unemployment seems to be an issue—a stronger issue—in places with predominantly white population. Whereas nonemployment, or, a lack of engagement in the labor force appears to be an issue in communities with a high racial concentration. So, the way that one would approach unemployment is different than the way that one would approach non-employment. They're certainly related, but they're not the same thing. And why a population is not employed is different from why a population is unemployed.

[Chancellor] Ok, so we can see that it's important to take local factors into account when you're trying to understand the drivers of poverty or child poverty but what sort of real world application might these kinds of ideas have? Curtis says that the study has two main aims:

[Curtis] . . . One is that folks who are interested in policy will pick this up and either pause and think about 'Oh! Maybe we should take a look at state-level or federal-level policies aimed at poverty and think about how they can be more effective.' Or, for some, they may pick it up and say, 'Yes, Exactly! I've been saying this for quite some time!' and in fact part of my work with extension—with UW-Extension, when we're talking with people at the county level, there's an obvious recognition that what is going on in Kenosha County is something different than what is going on in Rusk County.

[Chancellor] Curtis says that there is a lot of appreciation for local variation—it's not a surprise to people that relationships between social characteristics change from place to place. However, as, she noted that places where the average level of education was higher had lower rates of child poverty everywhere they looked. Still, places don't exist in a bubble - there are common patterns.

[Curtis] It's not as though every place is unique and that's certainly not what we are arguing or necessarily what we are finding. But what we are trying to do is find what, I think, what we are finding is that while no place is unique, there are different types of places. And so, ok, Kenosha County, what type of place are you? And who else is similar to you, and so what is the best policy strategy for this type of place?

That is really, I think, the important policy implication of the work and, as far as basic research is concerned, as we move forward and continue to develop-to push forward on theories of poverty again, thinking about the spatial qualities of these processes—any inequality-generating processes—and rather than, I think, gearing towards a generalized theory, maybe a generalized theory that accommodates local level variation.

[Chancellor] Curtis says that the bottom line here is that relationships vary across space. So, something that clearly contributes to child poverty in one area isn't necessarily going to have the same importance in another county or another region in the U.S.

Many thanks to Katherine Curtis for taking the time to talk about this interesting work. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.