Macro Case Study of Lowell Massachusetts

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HCOL 186K: (In)equality in P-16 American Education

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Lowell Massachusetts is a city located in the northern part of Middlesex County, a few miles northwest of the capital city of Boston. The city has been an integral part of Massachusetts production since its early days as a mill city in the American Industrial Revolution. Throughout the years it has risen as a city dominating the textile industry, falling with the Great Depression, and returning again with new jobs and factories. Lowell would become home for many immigrants in the 1900s and these changes throughout the city's tenure have established it as a vibrant and bustling melting pot. This, however, leads to an interesting demographic makeup which has resulted in a high number of minority groups, including Cambodians and Hispanic/Latino people, comprising low-income, high-risk neighborhoods as a result of gradual social change over the last 100 years.

The city of Lowell has a strong history in its millwork. Beginning back in the 1820s through the 1880s and 1890s textile mills were a large part of the Lowell area. Many people worked in the mills including women, Irish, Canadian, Greek, Polish, and Portuguese immigrants. The inclusion of women is mentioned because it marks, around the 1820s, when the mills needed workers and began recruiting women from New England farms. This is part of the development and industrialization of Lowell as a city as many cities in America rose during the industrial revolution (Lowell Historical Society, 2005). By the 1920s however the last of the Lowell mills, the textile mills that had been so integral in the creation and rise of the city, had finally closed (Lowell Historical Society, n.d.). Lowell was no less lucky than any of its national counterparts and felt the Great Depression just as intensely. This sharp decline in production and capital would hold Lowell until the start of World War II. Leaning into World War II, the total war tactics of the United States called for greater production and opened new factories in Lowell.

These factories, mostly electronics factories, brought life back to a suffering city like a miracle (Miller, 1988).

Despite this wartime prosperity, the post-war decline would remain in effect in Lowell until the arrival of tech companies in the 1970s. By this time new companies had come to the city bringing jobs with them (Lowell Historical Society, n.d.). These new jobs revitalized Lowell. Soon immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, would bring people to stabilize the population of the declining city. In the 1960s the city's population had been 92,107 people which had been on a steady decline from its relative peak in the 1920 census at 112,759. In 1970 and 1980 the populations were 94,280 and 92,418 respectively. Despite this relative decrease from the 1970s to the 1980s, the population was more stable than before and only 9% of the Lowell city residents were foreign born compared to 20% in 1950 and 34% in 1920. This number indicates that people are settling and generations are being raised in Lowell (United States Census Bureau, 2020). For example, in the 1980s a large wave of Cambodian immigrants arrived fleeing the genocide of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The following generation of children would not be included in that statistic but would contribute to the diversity, and unfortunately poverty statistics, of Lowell (Peterman et al., 2012).

The immigrants who arrived in Lowell escaping genocide were at a high risk for low quality of life given the tumultuous experience of their immigration. The circumstances were stacked against them as many of the people who arrived were widows. Khmer's killings in Cambodia disproportionately targeted men leaving their wives alone. Those who ended up in the American city of Lowell were now struggling to raise their kids alone. This is a factor often associated with low food stability and security (Peterman et al., 2012). A study by Peterman et al. found that there are higher rates of depression among members of the refugee communities

which is posited as a result of the upheaval of life that comes with immigration and genocide (2012). Peterman also found high rates of food insecurity among the Cambodian refugees which was 50% higher than that of the Massachusetts average: it was also higher in the 80s with the first arriving waves of refugees relative to the later arrivals in the 90s (Peterman et al., 2012). Cambodian refugees from the 80s often described not being able to find Cambodian foods or not knowing what to do with the American foods that they could find, however, this was not the case for the refugees interviewed from the 90s who were able to find Cambodian food (Peterman et al., 2012). This could be a result of the previous generation establishing its presence in the decade preceding the second group of immigrants interviewed. Therefore the first generation would have had to bear the burden of paving the way for the later generations contributing to their increased food security. This, however, is not to diminish the burden that the first immigrants would have felt, and a heavy one at that. Food insecurity has a high comorbidity with low income and depression and has been directly correlated with poorer education outcomes (Cady, 2014)(Hadley & Sellen, 2006)(Hadley et al., 2007). Therefore the burden on the first groups of Cambodians to arrive in Lowell should not be discounted and the long-term effects should be considered. The lower food security in the population, as well as the lower income, higher depression, and lower educational outcomes even if only for the first generation put all following generations at a potential deficit relative to their food secure, average income, and educational successful peers in Lowell.

A minor note to add in the evolution of Lowell to the city it is today is the establishment of the Middlesex Community College permanent Lowell campus and the induction of the University of Lowell to the University of Massachusetts coalition (Lowell Historical Society, n.d.). This was at the same time that the population of Lowell reached 105,167 (United States

Census Bureau, 2020). By 2010 the population of Lowell was 106,519 which is the highest it has been since its peak in the 1920s and its lowest point in the 1960s. Of the people living in Lowell presently around 68% were white, 16% were Asian, 4% were black, and 11% were mixed race with 14% of those residents considering themselves Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The median household income for Lowell was about $39,000 which is roughly ten thousand dollars lower than the average Massachusetts income. These demographics are on par with other small cities in Massachusetts. One other statistic pertinent but grimmer is the rate of homicide in the city. Lowell Massachusetts has a homicide rate of 5.8 per 100,000 which is less than Boston at 10.7 but still similar to other cities its size in Massachusetts. Another statistic related to homicide is that 70.5% of homicides and 35.3% of aggravated gun assaults were gang-related, which identifies gang presence as a serious factor in the city (Braga et al., 2006).

Much has changed in Lowell since the early 2000s but a study from that time examined the effectiveness of Lowell Police Department's tactics against gang violence providing interesting insights into the gang culture of the city. It is very difficult for police departments to identify gangs on the street as there are more than can be known and identifying affiliated members can be difficult given the lack of centralization. Despite this, the Lowell Police Department estimated at the time that there were 19 gangs present in the streets with between 650 and 750 members. As stated, gang violence does provide enough of a threat to the safety of the city that its prevention has caught the attention of authorities (Braga et al., 2006). In fact, in a study performed about the quality of life in the 80s and 90s in Lowell, lower-income areas of Lowell were considered to have a lower quality of life and were perceived as less safe by those in Lowell (Mulvey, 2002). One way the police attempted to diffuse the gang violence was a method called "pulling levers." which included taking every course of action possible to put

pressure on the gangs (Braga et al., 2006). For most gangs, any violence was met with an immediate increase in police presence in the neighborhood as well as prosecution and clamping down on any of the members convicted. For Asian gangs there was a specific protocol that included the raiding of gambling dens as well. Likely a result of cultural influence, Asian gangs had a greater hierarchy than their, often Hispanic, counterparts. This meant that younger kids were usually the ones committing street crimes while their older gang members were running gambling rings in the city. Gang activity on the street can be hard to track but the police were able to find gambling dens with relative ease given the access to surveillance. Thus, in response to the street violence from the youth of the gang, the police would "pull levers" increasing their presence in the neighborhood as well as breaking up, and arresting, people who were running the gambling dens. There is not much research about the direct implication of this on education, only that it was effective at stopping gang violence (Braga et al., 2006). These violent crimes often occur in the poorer parts of Lowell as can be seen in the map from this study (Figure 1). The question still remains, however, what impact these tactics had on Lowell beyond decreasing gang presence. This is something I will look at with a closer eye in the Lowell Public Schools.

Moving back to the demographics of the city, another factor to consider is race distribution among different regions of Lowell. The topic of white flight has been discussed thoroughly by people such as Myron Orfield in his book *American Metropolitics*. This phenomenon is something that has not garnered much academic analysis in the city of Lowell, but as Rothstein argues in *Color of Law*, it can happen anywhere (Rothstein, 2017). Before I begin discussing the census maps and how they may inform white flight, I'd like to preface it with the fact that census data can be precarious. In recent years, the census has allowed people to identify as "Hispanic or Latino" as well as any combination of other descriptive races. The

further back the census goes, the fewer these options become. For example, in 1990 the census only asked about “Hipsanic” origin, and not “Latino” origin. In 1980 the term “Spanish Origin” was used along with other descriptors such as “American Indian” and “Eskimo.” Even worse in the 1970s, the options were “Spanish Origin or Descent” with race being categorized as “White,” “Black,” and “Some Other Race.” Unfortunately, this is the data that we have to draw conclusions from, but it is important to note that they are limiting. To assume that indigenous people would have chosen “American Indian” or “Eskimo” is a big assumption, and prior to the 1980 census, they were not even considered. There is nothing we can do about the blatant racism of the past statistics other than recognize their limitations and strive to do better in the future. With this having been said, I will use the Census statistics available to analyze the possible presence of white flight in Lowell. Comparing maps of Lowell from the previous decades shows an increase in the percentage of Hispanic/Latino people in very specific regions. For example, the neighborhood called Census Tract 3124, is one of these places. Census Tract 3124, commonly referred to as East Gorham, had a 34.7% Hispanic/Latino population in 2019. In 2010 it was 36.4%, in 2000 it was 31.9%, 29.2% in 1990, 17.4% in 1980, and finally 4.6% in 1970. Clearly, the density of Hispanic or Latino people over the last 50 years in these areas has substantially increased (United States Census Bureau, 2020). As well as this, according to the average Lowell property value, the places that have the highest rates of Hispanic/Latino people, and highest poverty, are also the places with the lowest property values (Figure 2). In Orfield’s book *American Metropolitics,* he describes this by saying, “when black and Latino residents reach a critical mass, white home buyers perceive the community as in decline, and soon white residents also move away” (Orfield, p. 11). The data here is compelling for white flight and it's not surprising. Unfortunately, a correlated number is the poverty rate in Lowell. Overall Lowell’s

poverty rates have been around 10% to 20% for the last decade. These numbers, however, are substantially higher in the Hispanic and Latino communities, with the numbers being closer to 30%. In 2010 the number was 31.9%, in 2015 the number was 36.3%, and in 2019 the number was 22.2%. These are the highest percentages of any other isolated statistic showing the severity of this poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

These statistics paint a very stark picture, Hispanic and Latino people have become an underprivileged group as a result of white flight, and increasing poverty. As well as this, the crime rates are higher in these neighborhoods. The maps of crime rate overlap dramatically with both poverty and Hispanic/Latino populations (Figure 3). This is no coincidence given the data presented. To further support this conclusion I will point to another point regarding education. As I stated, the rate of poverty is highest among Hispanic/Latino people, it is also highest among people who have less than a high school degree. In 2019, 71.7% of Hispanic or Latino men in Lowell had graduated high school while 89.4% of the White men had (United States Census Bureau, 2020). This contrast is not as severe as the 74%/49% split in the 2012 analysis performed by Torres but it is still telling (Fergus, 2012). Hispanic and Latino people are being left behind. They are not performing as well in schools, they are living in poorer conditions, both socially and economically, and the white people are rapidly leaving them to get worse.

Looking at the education system in Lowell, this system is also underperforming. Despite its “No Child Left Behind” policy, children are being left behind. About 90.8% of Massachusetts residents have a high school diploma, but for Lowell, that number is closer to 81.9%. This is in tune with the lower graduation rates of Hispanic/Latino and White men. Not only are all kids in Lowell graduating at a lower rate than the state average, but within that group minority groups are graduating at an even lower rate. The reported test scores for the Lowell Public Schools are

also lower than the state average. With the NCLB policy, the average test scores for reading and math in the state as a whole was 51% and that number was 39% for the district of Lowell (Neighborhood Scout, 2021c). Variables such as food insecurity, high poverty, and low quality of life, spurred on by white flight, are decisive factors in these outcomes.

One way that the education system as a whole has attempted to improve is the support the University of Massachusetts Lowell and Middlesex Community College have provided the city's students. UMass Lowell has programs in place to aid students in getting to college even if they are not immediately ready for it at graduation. For example, the Horizon Program for neurodivergent students. This program allows students to be partnered with a mentor for 7 weeks who works on a curriculum with them to help show them what college is like as well as academically prepare them. The MCC Connections Program allows students to attend Middlesex Community College to build the academic standing necessary to matriculate to UMass Lowell in the future. Even more definitive is the Reserved Placement program which allows for guaranteed spring admission following one successful semester at community college. These programs are an intentional start at recognizing the difficulty present in applying to, attending, and succeeding in college and a strong attempt to begin breaking down these barriers (UMass Lowell Admissions, n.d.).

Lowell's tumultuous but rich history has led it to be the diverse and interesting city that it is today. Some of this history has manifested itself in problematic ways such as the disproportionate poverty among Hispanic/Latino people, its disproportionate crime, property values, and education among these communities as well. Through years of immigration and social shifts, new people have arrived, bore the burden of food insecurity, high crime rates, and low educational outcomes, and those who were there have left to more affluent places leaving

their previous neighbors to fend for themselves. Policy has become more aware of this today as we see the US Census has become more sensitive to race categorization, and the educational institutions in the city have begun reform to assist in elevating students to higher levels of education. This picture of Lowell is galvanic and nerve-racking; the history of the city and how it got where it is can be disheartening, but the prospect of looking forward, taking what we have learned, and applying it to uplift the city and its forgotten people gleans excitement. In the future I will follow these trends to analyze in what ways they impact the educational outcomes of the Lowell Public School students and how policy may have aided in the creation, but also the abolition, of these issues.

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Figure 1

Map of gang related violence in Lowell Massachusetts

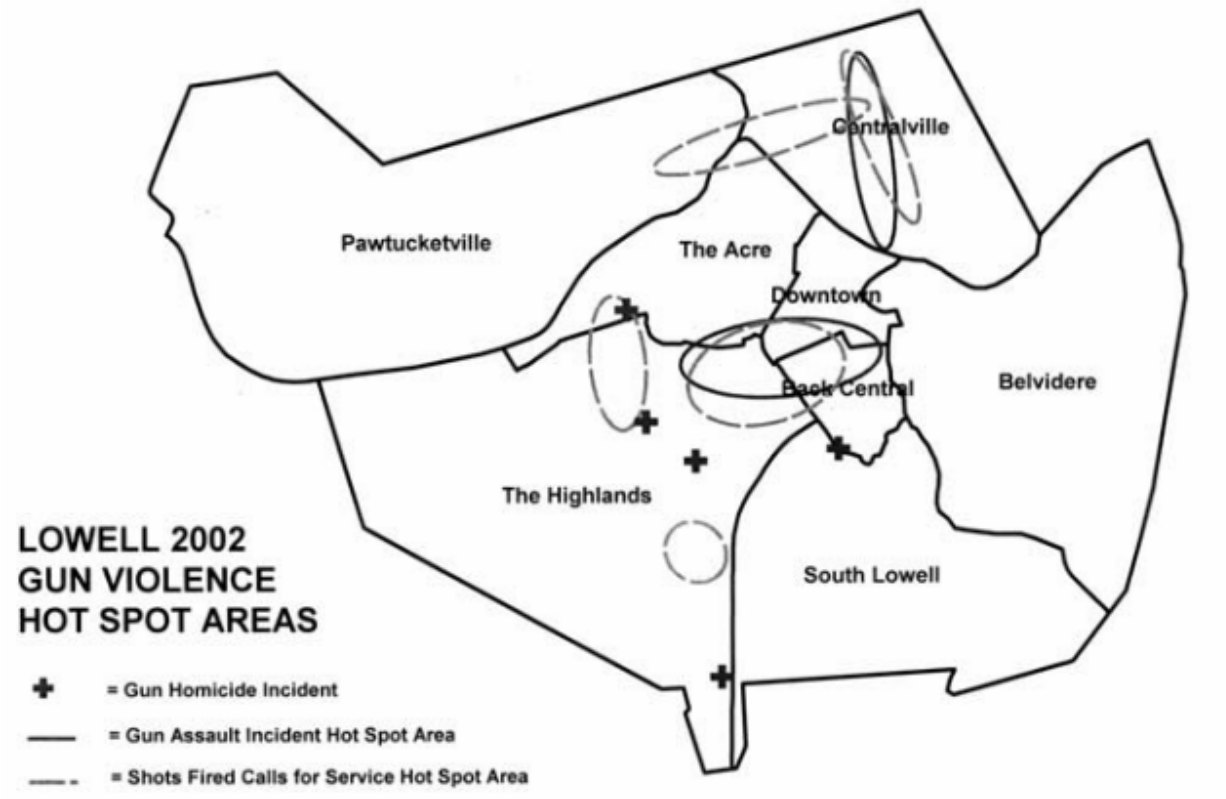

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Figure 2

Property values of homes in Lowell Massachusetts

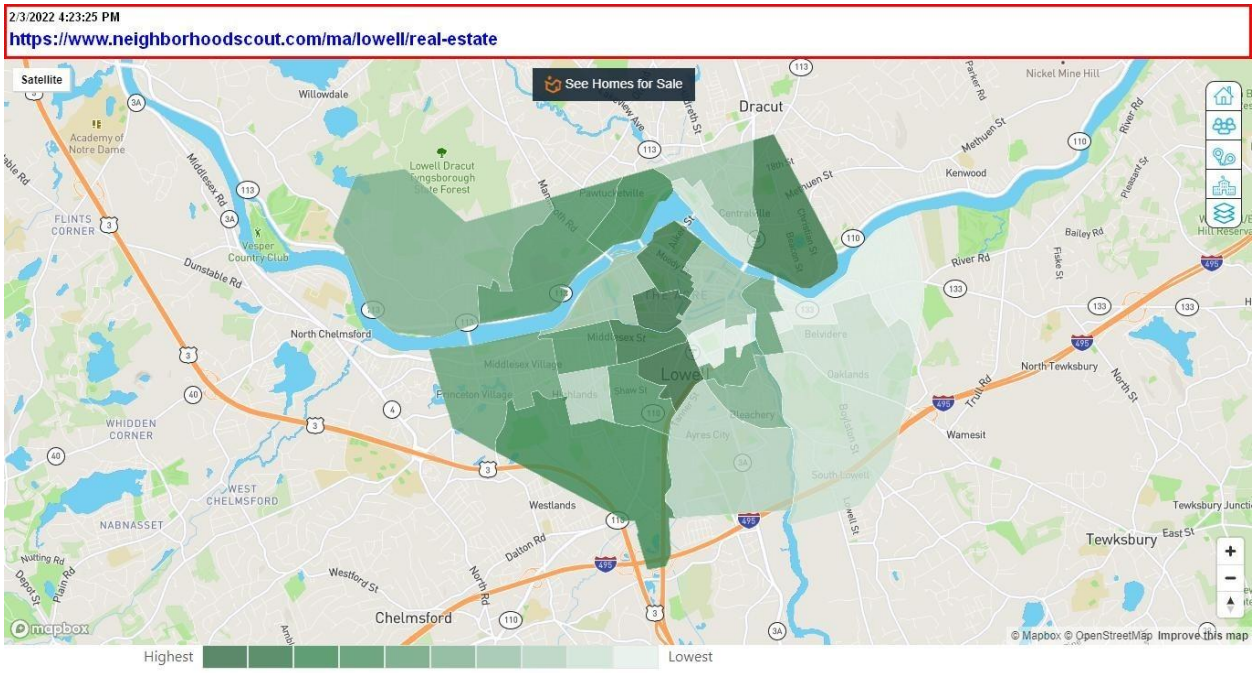

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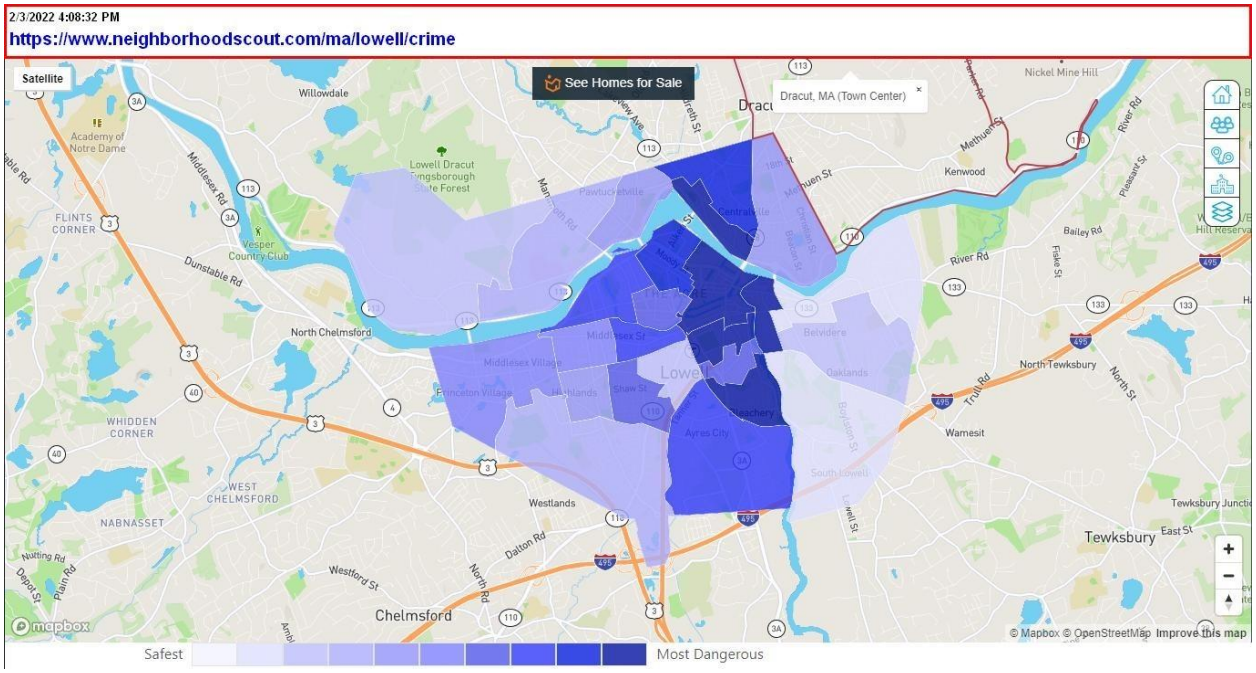
Figure 3

Map of the crime rate in Lowell Massachusetts by census tract



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