**The intersection of race, place, and multidimensional poverty**

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**Introduction**

For many poor people in the United States, narrow income measures of poverty fail to reflect the multiple barriers and challenges that can often complicate their path out of poverty. Disadvantages beyond (although often related to) low incomes, like [lack of training and skills](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/2193-9004-1-5/fulltext.html), unemployment, [poor health](http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301420), and living in a [distressed and high-poverty community](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2016/03/31-concentrated-poverty-recession-kneebone-holmes), can make it harder for poor individuals and families to work their way out of poverty over time.

In the paper “Five Evils: Multidimensional poverty and race in America,**”** we explored the ways in which multiple disadvantages often cluster together for certain people or groups. Specifically, we examined five dimensions of disadvantage: low household income, lack of employment, limited education, lack of health insurance, and living in a poor area.[[2]](#endnote-2) In that analysis, we found that 16 percent of the working-age adult population in the United States—more than 24.4 million people—not only struggle with low incomes, but also face at least one additional disadvantage. Millions experience three or four of these challenges at the same time.

These disadvantages do not cluster evenly across racial and ethnic lines. African Americans and Hispanics are twice as likely as whites to be low income in the first place, and the racial and ethnic gaps only widen as the number of disadvantages climbs.

But just as race affects one’s likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantages, so does place. Disadvantages cluster to differing degrees and in different ways across places, affecting not only the size of the disadvantaged population but also shaping who is disadvantaged and how, depending on the community. Understanding these differences is a critical first step to crafting effective policies aimed at “de-clustering” the multiple disadvantages that can hinder upward mobility.

**A note on methods**

In this analysis, we assess patterns of disadvantage in metropolitan areas and rural communities in the United States, paying particular attention to the 100 largest metro areas, which account for two-thirds of the nation’s population. Given marked economic and demographic differences across urban and suburban communities within the 100 largest metro areas, we also analyze differences between the cities that anchor those regions and their surrounding suburbs.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As we discuss in “Five evils,” disadvantages can cluster in many different ways across the five dimensions considered, and the combinations only multiply when assessed through the lens of race and place. But while the challenges of poverty often extend beyond a simple measure of income, lack of income remains central to the understanding of economic disadvantage in the United States. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, we treat low income as a necessary condition of multidimensional poverty. That means, when referring to the doubly disadvantaged, for example, low income would by definition be one of the two disadvantages captured.

**Nearly two-thirds of low-income adults facing multiple disadvantages live in the nation’s 100 largest metro areas.**

Of the 31.7 million working-age adults in the United States who are low income, 64 percent live in the nation’s 100 largest metro areas—similar to the share of the population as a whole. Major metro areas are also home to nearly two-thirds of adults facing at least two, three, or four disadvantages, although the total number of people affected diminishes as additional disadvantages layer on top of low incomes (Figure 1).[[4]](#endnote-4)

[Figure 1. Geographic distribution of disadvantaged adults]

However, the landscape of multidimensional poverty changes depending on the race and ethnicity of the disadvantaged. Disadvantaged blacks and Latinos concentrate more heavily in major metropolitan areas: 70 percent of low-income blacks with at least one additional disadvantage live in the top 100 metro areas, while fully 79 percent of Latinos in that category do so. Only 13 percent of blacks and 6 percent of Hispanics who are least doubly disadvantaged live in rural communities.

[Figure 2. Geographic distribution of individuals with multiple disadvantages by race and ethnicity]

In contrast, less than half (49 percent) of low-income whites with at least one other disadvantage live in major metro areas—a much lower share compared to the overall population of white adults in the top 100 metro areas. Low-income whites skew more rural the more disadvantages they face, more so than other groups: 38 percent of whites with at least four disadvantages live in rural areas, compared to 19 percent of blacks in that category and just 7 percent of Hispanics.

**Among the 100 largest metro areas, regions in the South and West have the highest rates of multidimensional disadvantage.**

While the share of major metro area residents experiencing at least two disadvantages (15 percent) hews closely to the national average (16 percent), great disparities exist across individual metropolitan areas. Because this analysis treats low-income status as a necessary condition of multidimensional poverty, it is not surprising that poorer regions fare worse than wealthier metro areas. However, the ways in which disadvantages cluster together differ from region to region.

[Interactive 100 metro map of share of adults with at least two disadvantages]

The highest rates of multidimensional poverty are found in southern and western metro areas like Memphis, Birmingham, and Miami, where more than 1 in 5 low-income adults live with multiple disadvantages (Map 1). The McAllen region exhibits the highest rate of multidimensional poverty overall (41 percent), followed by metropolitan Fresno, where one-third of adults are at least doubly disadvantaged. In each of the regions mentioned, living in a poor area is the most likely additional disadvantage experienced by low-income residents. But in other high-ranking metro areas, different disadvantages come to the fore, like limited education in Stockton, lack of health insurance in Deltona, and lack of employment in Lakeland.

[Interactive feature showing rates of disadvantage in individual metro areas by race]

In contrast, regions with lower rates of multidimensional disadvantage tend to be stronger markets that have lower shares of low-income adults to begin with, like metro Boston, San Jose, Seattle, and Washington, DC, each of which has less than 10 percent of the adult population living with low incomes and at least one additional disadvantage.

In keeping with the national patterns explored in the previous paper, rates of multidimensional disadvantage run much higher for Hispanic and blacks in major metro areas than for whites. Overall, 28 percent of low-income Hispanics and 24 percent of low-income blacks in the top 100 metro areas live with at least one additional disadvantage, compared to just 9 percent of whites. Among individual metro areas, rates of multidimensional poverty for whites range from just 3 percent (Washington, DC) to 22 percent (McAllen). For African Americans, those shares range from 6 percent (Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura) to 45 percent (Grand Rapids), while the rates span from 7 percent for Latinos (Honolulu) to 58 percent (Birmingham).

Regions that rank the highest for shares of low-income whites living with multiple disadvantages tend to fall in the South and West (e.g., Knoxville, Albuquerque, Birmingham), in keeping with the overall findings for major metro areas. In contrast, for African Americans, the top-ranking regions are more likely to fall in the Midwest and Northeast (e.g., Grand Rapids, Milwaukee, Cleveland), while for Latinos, the highest-ranking metros cover a diverse array of places (e.g., Winston-Salem; Springfield, MA; Indianapolis; Providence). Although some regions show up highly ranked for more than one group, only Fresno ranks in the top 20 overall and for all races and ethnicities.

**Urban and rural low-income adults are the most likely to experience multidimensional disadvantage of any kind, but the specific disadvantages they face differ from each other.**

The metropolitan findings demonstrate the wide variation that exists in the extent to which disadvantages cluster across places, but disparities exist within metropolitan areas as well, both in the share of residents facing multiple disadvantages and in the types of disadvantages that are most prevalent.

Within the nation’s largest metro areas, low-income adults in cities are twice as likely as low-income suburban residents to face multiple disadvantages (Table 1). Across the spectrum of geography types, ranging from the most urbanized to the least, residents at either end face the highest rates of multidimensional poverty. Roughly 1 in 5 residents in cities and in rural areas are at least doubly disadvantaged. But the types of disadvantages are somewhat different depending on the type of community.

[Table 1. Share of adults who are at least doubly disadvantaged, by geography]

Low-income city residents are much more likely to be disadvantaged by living in a poor community. That’s the least likely disadvantage in suburbs and small metro areas (although [recent evidence](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2016/03/31-concentrated-poverty-recession-kneebone-holmes) shows concentrated disadvantaged is a fast-growing challenge in those communities). Instead, low-income suburban residents are more likely to struggle with lack of health insurance. For low-income residents in small metro and rural areas, lack of employment is more likely to be the additional burden borne by those facing multiple disadvantages.

Greater variations emerge within places across races and ethnicities. City residents, regardless of race, are most likely to be additionally disadvantaged by living in a poor area, but the shares for blacks and Hispanics are roughly 4 times that for whites. Lack of employment is the leading disadvantage for low-income whites outside of big cities, and for low-income blacks in suburbs and small metro areas. In rural communities, however, by far the biggest additional disadvantage experienced by low-income blacks is living in a poor community. For low-income Hispanics outside of big cities, limited education and lack of health insurance are the most prevalent additional challenges.

[Table 2. Share of adults who are at least doubly disadvantaged, by geography and race/ethnicity]

Once again, disparities by race only grow as the number of disadvantages increases, but the magnitude of the gap depends on the type of community. For African Americans, the deepest disparities exist in cities, where they are more than twice as likely as whites to be low-income and nearly four times as likely to face at least three disadvantages. For Hispanics, the gaps are starkest in suburbs, where they are two and half times as likely as whites to be low-income and five times as likely to experience three or more disadvantages.

[Figure 3 a/b]

**The makeup of the multidimensional poor population changes markedly from urban to rural communities.**

While cities and rural areas exhibit the highest rates of multidimensional disadvantage, the largest number of adults who are at least doubly disadvantaged live in the nation’s suburbs. Of the more than 24 million people who are low income and face at least one other disadvantage, more than one-third (8.3 million) are suburban residents (Figure 4). The geographic balance shifts somewhat as additional disadvantages are layered on, with cities overtaking suburbs for the number of adults living with three or more disadvantages.

[Figure 4. Racial and ethnic makeup of the adult population with multiple disadvantages, by geography]

What is more, the makeup of the disadvantaged population varies considerably depending on the type of community. Nationally, half of the population who is at least doubly disadvantaged is white, 18 percent is black, and 23 percent is Hispanic. But looking beneath the national average reveals that the doubly-disadvantaged population skews whiter the less urbanized the place. In cities, the population that is at least doubly disadvantaged is only 23 percent white. That share ticks up to 41 percent in suburbs, 54 percent in small metro areas, and reaches two-thirds in rural areas.

Not surprisingly, the balance shifts in the other direction for disadvantaged minorities. Hispanics makeup just 12 percent of the population that is at least doubly disadvantaged in rural communities but 38 percent of that population in big cities. African Americans comprise 29 percent of the multidimensional poor in cities compared to just 15 percent in rural areas.

Given the much higher propensity of blacks and Hispanics to experience more than two, three, or four disadvantages, the share of the disadvantaged population that is white declines in all geography types as additional disadvantages are layered on, and minority shares increase. For the population experiencing four or more disadvantages, just 14 percent of urban residents are white. However, whites continue to makeup more than half (55 percent) of the multidimensional rural poor.

**Conclusion**

“Five evils” offered a lens through which to better understand multidimensional poverty in the United States, and underscored the stark racial and ethnic disparities that exist in who is likely to experience multiple disadvantages and what kinds of disadvantages they are likely to face.

This analysis makes clear that, just as race influences the experience of multidimensional disadvantage, so does place. Disadvantages do not cluster evenly or in the same ways across different regions or types of communities, nor does the population struggling with multiple disadvantages look the same from place to place.

Understanding multidimensional disadvantage through a place-based lens carries important implications for the way policymakers at the federal, state, and local level think about interventions aimed at “de-clustering” disadvantage. The diversity of needs and challenges—as well as capacity and resources—different communities and regions bring to bear call for policy responses that can be flexible and responsive to the most pressing concerns in each community and to the landscape in which those interventions are being delivered. For instance what works in an urban context to connect unemployed residents to training programs and local employment opportunities may not translate easily to a suburban or rural community, where nearby job options are often fewer and more spread out and the network of safety net organizations and programs tend to be thinner.

A more nuanced and multidimensional assessment of the geography of disadvantage in the United States, like the one offered here, can help to inform efforts to de-cluster disadvantage through more targeted, integrated, and place-conscious solutions.

1. We would like to thank Edward Rodrigue and Natalie Holmes for the excellent research assistance and contributions to this analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The working-age adult population is defined as those aged 25 to 61. Adults in households with incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty line are considered low income. A poor area is defined as a Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) with a poverty rate of 20 percent or more. For more information on the methods, see “Five Evils.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In this analysis, we use detailed data on individuals and households from the 2014 American Community Survey microdata. These data are compiled and released at the Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) level. PUMAs are statistical entities built based on census tracts and counties and contain populations of at least 100,000. We use 2013 metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) definitions determined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Census Bureau. We assign PUMAs to metropolitan areas if at least half of the PUMA population falls within a given metro area. PUMAs in the top 100 metro areas are assigned to cities if more than half of the population in the PUMA falls within a primary city’s borders. A primary city is the first named-city in the official MSA name and any other city in the MSA title with a population of 100,000 or more. PUMAs in the top 100 metro areas not assigned to a city are considered suburban. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As in the previous paper, the population experiencing all five disadvantages is small enough that we do not break them out here. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)