**Segregation: Definition and trends.** Massey, Rothwell, and Domina (2009) define segregation as the separation of socially defined groups in space, such that members of one group are disproportionally concentrated in one set to geographical units compared to others in the population. Segregation is generally measured in terms of five aspects:

* **clustering**, the tendency of geographical units to cluster in space
* **centralization**: the tendency of them to be located around a single point
* **concentration**: refers to the amount of physical space they occupy
* **evenness**: the degree to which two or more groups are evenly distributed
* **isolation**: the degree to which individuals inhabit areas that are primarily inhabited by people from their own group

In *American Apartheid*, Massey and Denton (1993) argue that until the 1980s, blacks were “not only more segregated than any other group on any one of these measures, but they were also more segregated on all dimensions simultaneously” (74). For this reason, they argue that blacks are hypersegregated in US metropolitan areas, meaning that they are very highly segregated on four of the five aforementioned measures. They conclude that racial segregation “is the key organization feature of American society” and has played the key role in shaping the transmission of intergenerational outcomes and opportunities of black Americans more than anything else (9).

Post 1980s, these trends slightly change. Specifically, Massey et al. (2009) argue that the first 60 years of the 20th century was dominated by racial segregation, primarily black-white segregation, while the last 30 years was dominated by a new segregation regime characterized by socioeconomic status. The salience of black-white segregation is most clear in that even with the massive in-migration of Hispanics and Asians after 1965, levels of black segregation remained much higher while it generally did not change for Hispanics and Asians—in fact it remained at moderate levels across time. However, from 1980 to 2000, a new segregation regime of socioeconomic status took hold, where segregation by race for all groups slightly declined but segregation by income, occupation, education, and political ideology grew dramatically. In my opinion, this argument is not all that convincing—while it is true that socioeconomic segregation is on the rise, most measures in 2000 do not approach moderate levels and yet all levels of racial segregation are still nearly double and considered very high. For me, segregation along racial lines is still a more important factor in understanding the structural implications of inequality, poverty, and intergenerational transmission of opportunity and outcome.

**The Ghetto Underclass and Competing Explanations.** Competing explanations surround the creation and perpetuation of what has been deemed as the ghetto underclass, contemporarily referred to as concentrated poverty. The debates arise from a nexus of literature (the Daniel Moynihan Report, Oscar Lewis, Charles Murray, and Lawrence Mead) that diagnosed the problems of inner-city, black poverty as the result of a tangle of pathologies or a culture of poverty. These authors saw the endemic unemployment and chronic social immobility associated with inner-city blacks as incompatible with socioeconomic advancement and development. Over time, these arguments morphed into a focus on concentrated poverty that reduced the structural factors and saw the culture of the poor as the source and independent cause of the persistent poverty of individuals. Wilson wrote *The Truly Disadvantaged* in 1987 to challenge that conceptual framework and to take seriously the economic conditions and cultural environments of the urban poor. He argues that the creation of the *underclass*, a highly concentrated and disadvantaged class of inner-city blacks, is the result of historical discrimination, concentrated migration to metro areas, poor labor market attachment, macro-level changes to labor markets, the suburbanization of jobs, and the resulting creation of social environments that do not promote success in mainstream labor markets.

Wilson draws on arguments like spatial mismatch theory—the jobs are located where the employees are not, structural racism, residential segregation, technological change, and migration patterns to explain why the effects of poverty have so dramatically affected the underclass. While Wilson recognizes the impact of structural, macro-level processes, his argument shifts to discussing how the out-migration of middle-class blacks has propagated social and cultural conditions that have prevented economic integration with mainstream society. He argues that the central problem of the underclass is joblessness reinforced by increasing social isolation in impoverished neighborhoods, reflected in the decline in access to job information network systems or access to good jobs. Wilson did not see interpretations of this argument as binary. He did not view underclass behavior as *only* a result of either economic conditions or cultural commitments to irrational behavior, but rather he has argued that it is about seeing the importance of macro-level constraints while appreciating the subtler cultural analysis of life in poverty. The underclass is a new type of poverty, characterized by extreme economic deprivation and before unseen levels of social isolation.

In responding to Wilson, Massey and Denton do not necessarily disagree with the overall thrust of Wilson’s argument, mostly just the mechanism that causes it. While Wilson focuses on the structural conditions that lead to the out-migration of middle-class blacks and the resulting social and cultural conditions of the ghetto, Massey and Denton argue that segregation heightened the consequences of the structural transformations of urban black communities and concentrated those effects in a smaller number of neighborhoods that exacerbated the effects of economic restructuring and negative economic downturns. While they are open to Wilson’s class-selective out-migration, they argue that focus on outmigration misses that most blacks—even the middle class—were limited by residential segregation. In rejecting Wilson’s arguments, they argue that (1) the numbers of middle-class blacks that could have moved out of ghetto is not a sufficient explanation for the rise in poverty levels experienced by those that would have stayed, (2) that poverty levels during the Great Depression were as high as post-civil rights movement, and (3) class segregation rates for blacks is still much lower than for other groups. Instead they argue that segregation is the enduring mechanism that accounts for enduring inequalities between blacks and whites because: (1) levels of segregation for blacks remained high while segregation remained moderate for Hispanics and Asians despite large influxes as a result of post 1965 immigration, (2) blacks are unambiguously the most segregated and isolated group on multiple dimensions, and (3) that blacks are equally segregated across the income spectrum.

In my mind, Massey and Denton provide a forceful structural argument that takes racism and segregation seriously as structural mechanisms that create and perpetuate poor black poverty, while refuting the conservative “culture of poverty” argument and Wilson’s “desertion of black middle class” thesis. My central question or critique of their work is that the thrust of their argument depends on an explanation of how segregation works to concentrate poverty, which relies on an assumption that blacks have higher rates of poverty (see pages 120-121). While I can see how Massey and Denton would argue for systemic racism, does that imply that poverty is solely a result of structural processes that individuals then take with them regardless of their social context? This seems to be a major critique of neighborhood effects literature: that spatial attributes are attributed to individuals.

**Questions, Concerns, and Debate.** How do we take seriously the dire effects of spatially concentrated poverty without leaning on stereotypes that color the way that we think about the world? In part, this is the point of Anderson’s paper, “The White Space.” He argues that the iconic ghetto serves as a strong, negative image on which whites draw to justify the normative sensibilities of white space, forcing blacks to either perform the dance, be vouched for by others, or removed from spaces that are normatively understood to be white. Taken a step further, Wacquant argues that the hyperghetto and the expansion of the carceral state work together in a deadly symbiosis to encode color as a proxy for criminality and dangerousness on black bodies. Steinberg and Small interrogate these connections, asking to what extent our own assumptions as researchers and the symbolism of urban poverty are reflected in our scholarship? Small can’t find empirical evidence of the existence of Marcuse’s outcast ghetto and argues that most blacks don’t live or come from the ghetto—it’s a stereotype. So, does it exist? Or is it simply our racist assumptions as researchers that lead us to search for a fetishized vision of black urban poverty that isn’t representative of the lives of most blacks. This is hard to hold in tension with the wealth and inequality literature that consistently sees blacks and holding small fraction of wealth or much lower incomes when compared to whites. And what about concentrated poverty? What is magical about concentrating poor people in the same place? Steinberg calls it myth, arguing that the academic embrace of the concept of “concentrated poverty” is the result of collapsing the structural forces that create poverty into an idea that then becomes the central problem of social policy analysis. The answer becomes moving poor individuals out of concentrated poverty but does little to address the structural forces that landed them in poverty in the first place. That said, how do we take the role of space seriously in exacerbating conditions of poverty? This is especially prudent given Wilson’s spatial mismatch theory suggests that part of the reason that these people find themselves in poverty is because they do not live where there are jobs for them—space is part of the problem.