



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

“The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis” by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

There have been a lot of explanations for why certain areas of inner cities continue to struggle with poverty. One that has garnered a good deal of attention in the past decade is what has been labeled the *spatial mismatch hypothesis*.

In 1968, scholar John Kain put forward the idea that poverty in African American areas of the inner city was related to a lower number of jobs per worker in these neighborhoods. Because jobs were not as available in black areas as white areas, black workers would have a more difficult time finding jobs, would be paid less if they found a job, or would have to commute greater distances than white workers. This discrepancy between jobs and the location of the labor force came to be known as the spatial mismatch hypothesis (SMH).

The origins of this mismatch lie in the changing location of fac-

ories and industrial jobs in America. Traditionally, factories were located in the central business district, close to rail lines and ports. With the rise of trucking and the building of a national highway system in the mid-20th century, companies chose to move their factories to suburban areas where rents were cheaper, access to highways was easier, and large factories could be built to take advantage of assembly line manufacturing processes.

Many workers from the cities were able to move to the suburbs to follow these jobs. But proponents of the SMH argue that minorities, especially African Americans, faced residential segregation and discriminatory mortgage lending practices that made the move to the suburbs more difficult. Thus, many minority workers were stuck in inner city communities far from available jobs.

Furthermore, SMH theorists argue that getting information about suburban jobs is difficult for urban residents. For example, most suburban newspapers are not sold in the city, but city newspapers are sold in the suburbs.

Even when job information is available, urban residents may



Landsat 7 Image of Detroit, MI Source: NASA

have a difficult time getting to the jobs. Public transportation systems are generally designed to get suburban residents to urban jobs, not the reverse. Thus, more buses and trains run into the city in the morning, not out to the suburbs.

While it can be difficult to get people to jobs, it is also not easy to get companies to bring jobs to inner city residents.

Economic incentives offered by cities to entice companies to return to urban areas are often not enough to counteract the benefits of locating in the suburbs.

While scholars debate the validity of the SMH, it underscores the importance of considering geography when tackling major social issues such as urban poverty.

Further Research

1. Find John Kain's original 1968 article entitled "Housing Segregation, Negro Employment, and Metropolitan Decentralization" in Volume 82 of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.
2. Explore the work of scholars William Julius Wilson, and John Kasarda. Both were pivotal in reviving the SMH in the 1990s.

Links:

- SMH: A Review of Recent Studies
- Article by Keith Ihlanfeldt

<http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/v9i4-ihlanfeldt.shtml>

<http://www.huduser.org/Periodicals/CITYSCPE/VOL1NUM1/ch11.pdf>