The lessons of Pruitt-Igoe

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The Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project is in St. Louis. Built in 1954, the project was the first high-rise public housing in the city. It consists of 33 eleven-story slab-shaped buildings designed to provide housing for about 2800 families. At present, it houses about 10,000 Negroes in 2,000 households. What started out as a precedent-breaking project to improve the lives of the poor in St. Louis, a project hailed not only by the local newspapers but by Architectural Forum, has become an embarrassment to all concerned. In the last few years the project has at all times had a vacancy rate of over 20 percent. News of crime and accidents in the project makes a regular appearance in the newspapers, and the words “Pruitt-Igoe” have become a household term — in lower class Negro homes as well as in the larger community — for the worst in ghetto living.

The description of Pruitt-Igoe which follows and the implications drawn, are based on a three-year study which I, together with a dozen colleagues, have been conducting. Pruitt-Igoe is not offered as typical of slum conditions in the ghetto — no other public housing project in the country approaches it in terms of vacancies, tenant concerns and anxieties, physical deterioration. Rather, Pruitt-Igoe is interesting precisely because it condenses into one 57-acre tract all of the problems and difficulties that arise from race and poverty, and
all of the impotence, indifference, and hostility with which our society has so far dealt with these problems. Processes that are sometimes beneath the surface in less virulent slums are readily apparent in Pruitt-Igoe. And because Pruitt-Igoe exists as one kind of Federal Government response to the problems of poverty, the failure of that response is worth contemplating.

The dumping ground

Pruitt-Igoe houses families for which our society seems to have no other place. The original tenants were drawn very heavily from several land-clearance areas in the inner city. Although there were originally some white tenants (Igoe was built for whites, Pruitt for Negroes, but a Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated public housing resulted in an “integrated” project in its earlier years), all of the whites have moved out and the population is now all Negro. Only those Negroes who are desperate for housing are willing to live in Pruitt-Igoe – over half of the households are headed by women and over half derive their principle income from public assistance of one kind or another. The project has proved particularly unappealing to “average” families, that is, families in which there is both a mother and father and a small number of children. Thus, while the overall vacancy rate has run between 20 and 25 percent for several years, the vacancy rate in two-bedroom apartments has been in the 35-40 percent range.

Life in Pruitt-Igoe, and in the St. Louis ghetto generally, is not quite as flamboyant as in Harlem, but it has the same essential characteristics. As sociologists have discovered each time they have examined a particular lower class community in detail, the lower class lives in “a world of trouble.”

In the slum, people are continually confronted with dangers from both human and non-human sources. Public housing removes some of the non-human sources of danger (like rats, or faulty electrical wiring), but can replace them by others, as when children fall out of windows or into elevator shafts in Pruitt-Igoe’s high-rise buildings, or burn themselves on exposed steam pipes, or cut themselves on the broken glass outside. After about two years of intensive field observation in the Pruitt-Igoe project, our research team administered a questionnaire to a representative sample of tenants to discover how extensive were some of the difficulties we had noticed. Let me list some of the troubles which over half of this representative sample of tenants characterized as “a very big problem” in the project.

A few of these problems had to do with the design and maintenance of the project:

— There’s too much broken glass and trash around outside.
- The elevators are dangerous.
- The elevators don't stop on every floor, so many people have to walk up or down to get to their apartments.
- There are mice and cockroaches in the buildings.
- People use the elevators and halls to go to the bathroom.

However, by far the greatest number of troubles that people complained about had as much to do with the behavior of their fellow tenants as it did with design and maintenance problems per se:

- Bottles and other dangerous things get thrown out of windows and hurt people.
- People who don't live in the project come in and make a lot of trouble with fights, stealing, drinking and the like.
- People don't keep the area around the incinerator clean.
- The laundry rooms aren't safe: clothes get stolen and people get attacked.
- The children run wild and cause all kinds of damage.
- People use the stairwells and laundry rooms for drinking and things like that.
- A woman isn't safe in the halls, stairways or elevators.

Given these kinds of experiences it's hardly surprising that, although the great majority of the tenants feel that their apartments are better than their previous dwelling units, only a minority demonstrate any real attachment to the project community, and most would very much like to move out to a neighborhood that would be nicer and safer.

It is also understandable that a good many of them develop a rather jaundiced view of the public housing program. Thus, when we asked tenants what the government was trying to accomplish by building public housing and how well this had in fact been accomplished, we got answers like these:

"They were trying to put a whole bunch of people in a little bitty space. They did a pretty good job — there's a lot of people here."

"They were trying to better poor people (but) they tore down one slum and built another; put all kinds of people together; made a filthy place and so on."

"They were trying to get rid of the slum, but they didn't accomplish too much. Inside the apartment they did, but not outside."

Other troubles also make life difficult for the project tenants. For example, we asked our sample to indicate from a list of various kinds of aggressive and deviant behaviors how serious and how frequent they felt such behavior to be. One cluster of items turned out to be judged by the tenants as both highly serious and very frequent (over half of the people characterizing these behaviors as very frequent):

- Holding somebody up and robbing them.
- Being a wino or alcoholic.
- Stealing from somebody.
- Teenagers yelling curse words at adults.
- Breaking windows.
- Drinking a lot and fooling around on the streets.
- Teenagers getting in fights.
- Boys or girls having sexual relations with a lot of different boys or girls.

In short, though some social scientists have quarreled with Kenneth Clark's emphasis on the "tangle of pathology" in the ghetto, it would seem that at least this sample from one federally-supported ghetto shares his views.

**The lower class adaptation**

The observer who examines the lower class community in any detail perceives an almost bewildering variety of difficulties that confront its inhabitants. But if one wishes to move from simple observation to understanding and on to practical action, it is necessary to bring some order into this chaos of troubles, problems, pains, and failure. That is, one must move from a description of *what* lower class life is like to an understanding of *why* it is that way.

Let us start with an inventory of behavior in the lower class community that middle class people think of as hallmarks of the "tangle of pathology" of slum and ghetto worlds:

- High rates of school dropouts.
- Poor school accomplishment for those who do stay in.
- Difficulties in establishing stable work habits on the part of those who get jobs.
- High rates of dropping out of the labor force.
- Apathy and passive resistance in contacts with people who are "trying to help" (social workers, teachers, etc.).
- Hostility and distrust toward neighbors.
- Poor consumer skills—carelessness or ignorance in the use of money.
- High rates of mental illness.
- Marital disruptions and female-headed homes.
- Illegitimacy.
- Child abuse or indifference to children's welfare.
- Property and personal crimes.
- Dope addiction, alcoholism.
- Destructiveness and carelessness toward property, one's own and other people's.

All of this behavior is highly disturbing to middle-class people—and most of it is even more disturbing to the lower class people who must live with it. It is not necessary to assume that all lower class families engage in even some of these practices to regard such practices as hallmarks of the pathology of the lower class world. Lower class peo-
ple are forced to live in an environment in which the probability of either becoming involved in such behavior, or being the victim of it, is much higher than it is in other kinds of neighborhoods. From the point of view of social epidemiology, then, this is a high-risk population.

Behavior of this kind is very difficult for most middle class observers to understand. If, however, this behavior is seen in the context of the ways of life lower class people develop in order to cope with their punishing and depriving milieu, then it becomes much easier to understand. Much of the social science research dealing with lower class life in general, or with particular forms of deviant behavior such as juvenile delinquency, has sought to place these kinds of behavior in their contexts. As a result of these studies, we now understand that the "unreasonable" behavior which so often perplexes outsiders generally arises as a logical extension of the styles of life that are available to lower class people in their efforts to adapt to their world.

The ways people live represent their efforts to cope with the predicaments and opportunities that they find in the world as they experience it. The immediately experienced world of lower class adults presents them with two kinds of problems:

1) They are not able to find enough money to live in what they, and everyone else, would regard as the average American way. Because of inability to find work or only work at very low pay, they learn that the best they can hope for if they are "sensible" is despised housing, an inferior diet, a very few pleasures.

2) Because of their poverty, they are constrained to live among other individuals similarly situated — individuals who, the experience of their daily lives teaches them, are dangerous, difficult, out to exploit or hurt them in petty or significant ways. And they learn that in their communities they can expect only poor and inferior service and protection from such institutions as the police, the courts, the schools, the sanitation department, the landlords, and the merchants.

It is to this world that they must adapt. Further, as they grow up, they learn from their experiences with those around them that persons such as they can expect nothing better. From infancy on, they begin to adapt to that world in ways that allow them to sustain themselves — but at the same time often interfere with the possibility of adapting to a different world, should such a different world become available to them. Thus, in Pruitt-Igoe, eight-year old girls are quite competent to inform the field worker that boys and men are no damn good, are not to be trusted, and that it isn’t necessary to listen to or obey your mother because she’s made such a mess of her life.

We know from sociological studies of unemployment that even stable middle or working class persons are likely to begin to show
some of these lower class adaptive techniques under the stress of long-term unemployment. In the lower class itself, there is never a question of responding to the stress of sudden deprivation, since a depriving world is often all that the individual ever experiences in his life, and his whole lifetime is taken up in perfecting his adaptation to it, in striving to protect himself in that world and to squeeze out of it whatever gratification he can.

**Strategies for survival**

It is in terms of these two cardinal characteristics of lower class life—poverty and a potentially destructive community—that lower class individuals work out their strategies for living.

In most of American society two grand strategies seem to attract the allegiance of its members and guide their day-to-day actions. These are the strategies of the good life and of career-success. A good-life strategy involves efforts to get along with others and not to rock the boat; it rests on a comfortable family environment with a stable vocation for husbands which enables them to be good providers. The strategy of career-success is the choice of ambitious men and women who see life as providing opportunities to move from a lower to a higher status, to "accomplish something," to achieve greater than ordinary material well-being, prestige, and social recognition. Both of these strategies are predicated on the assumption that the world is inherently rewarding if one behaves properly and does his part. The rewards of the world may come easily or only at the cost of great effort, but at least they are there for the individual who tries.

In slum worlds, little in the experience that individuals have as they grow up sustains a belief in a rewarding world. The strategies that seem appropriate are strategies for survival.

Three broad categories of lower class survival strategies can be observed. One is the strategy of the expressive life style. In response to the fact that the individual derives little security and reward from his membership in a family which can provide for and protect him, or from his experiences in the institutions in which he is expected to achieve (the school, later the job), individuals develop an exploitative strategy toward others. This strategy seeks to elicit rewards by making oneself interesting and attractive. In its benign forms, the expressive style is what attracts so many middle class people to the lower class—the fun, the singing, the dancing, the lively slang, the spontaneous gratification of impulse. But underneath the apparent spontaneity, the expressive style of lower class people is deadly serious business. It is by virtue of their ability to manipulate others by making themselves interesting and dramatic that the individual has an opportunity to get some of the few rewards that are available to
him — whether these be gifts of money, a gambling bet won, the
affections of a girl, or the right to participate in a community of peers,
to drink with them, bum around with them, gain status in their eyes.
The individual learns by his expressive ability to "work game" on his
peers, to "sound" on them, to "put them in a trick" (thereby raising his
status by lowering the other fellow's). While the expressive style is
central to preserving the stability and sanity of many (particularly
younger) members of the lower class, the pursuit of expressive and
self-dramatizing goals often results in behavior which makes trouble
for the individual both from his own community and from representa-
tives of conventional society. Dope addiction, drunkenness, illegiti-
macy, "spendthrift behavior," lack of interest in school on the part of
adolescents — all can arise in part as a result of commitment to a
strategy of "cool." For example, in Pruitt-Igoe teen-age boys drink,
and some smoke marijuana, in order to be able to loosen up enough to
develop a "strong game" (i.e., a really persuasive line with peers
or girls).

When the expressive strategy fails — because the individual can-
not develop the required skills or because the audience is unapprecia-
tive — there is a great temptation to adopt a violent strategy in which
you force others to give you what you need. The violent strategy is
not a very popular one among lower class people. There is little really
cold-blooded violence either toward persons or property in the slum
world; most of it is undertaken out of a sense of desperation, a sense
of deep insult to the self. Yet this strategy does not seem as distant
and impossible to them as it does to the most prosperous.

Finally, there is the depressive strategy in which goals are in-
creasingly constricted to the bare necessities for survival (not as a
social being, but simply as an organism). This is the strategy of "I
don't bother anybody and I hope nobody's gonna bother me; I'm
simply going through the motions of keeping body (but not soul)
together." Apparently this strategy of retreat and self-isolation is one
that is adopted by more and more lower class men and women as
they grow older, as the pay-offs from more expressive strategies begin
to decline.

**Hopes and aspirations**

And along with these survival strategies, lower class people make
efforts to move in the direction of the more conventional strategies of
the good life or (occasionally) of career-success. One can observe in
the lives of individual families (or in whole groups, during times of
extraordinary demand for lower class labor) a gradual shift away
from the more destructive components of these survival strategies. It
is from observations such as these, as well as from interviews about
lower class people's hopes and aspirations, that one learns that lower
class styles of life are pursued, not because they are viewed as intrin-
sically desirable, but because the people involved feel constrained to
act in those ways given the deprivations and threats to which they find
themselves subject. The lower class does not have a separate system
of basic values. Lower class people do not really "reject middle class
values." It is simply that their whole experience of life teaches them
that it is impossible to achieve a viable sense of self-esteem in terms
of those values.

But lower class people are also intimately alive to how things
might be different. They know what they would like if only they had
the resources of the average working class man — they would want a
quiet, rather "square" life in a quiet neighborhood far from the
dangers, seductions, and insults of the world in which they live. In
the slums, there is no personal preference for — or sociological value
attached to — matrifocal families, or a high incidence of premarital
sexual relations resulting in unwanted pregnancies, or living alone as
a deserted or divorced wife and having a boyfriend because you're
afraid that if you remarry your welfare will be cut off or your new
husband will not prove a stable provider. Lower class people are not
easily confused between how they must live and how they would like
to live. What they might wish to preserve from the expressive heri-
tage of lower class ways (particularly when, as among Negroes, those
ways provide a kind of ethnic identity and not just a class identity)
they feel that they can preserve while living a more stable kind of life
Lower class people would not find it nearly as agonizing as some in-
tellectuals seem to feel they would to try to reconcile their traditions
and their aspirations.

Services or income?

How can we help the slum poor achieve their aspirations? What-
ever our precise answer to this question, it obviously must involve
eliminating these people's poverty.

The elimination of poverty has a very simple referent. Since
poverty is a relative matter — that is, relative to the total resources of
the society to provide a life of particular material quality — the elimi-
nation of poverty means that the present income distribution of the
nation, in which a small group of the population earns a great deal of
money, a large proportion earns a more moderate amount of money,
and a small proportion earns very little money, must be changed by
moving that bottom portion up into the middle category. In short,
the current diamond-shaped income distribution must be changed
into one which has the shape of a pyramid. (I am speaking here about
family income rather than individual income. There is certainly
nothing wrong about a teen-age boy earning $1.50 an hour while he
goes to school, or while he learns a trade. But there is something very
wrong about that kind of an income for a head of the family with two or three children, or for a man who would like to be the head of the family but cannot afford to be.)

But there is disagreement — among experts and ordinary citizens alike — about the best way to achieve this. That is to say, there are basically two competing approaches implicit in the various programs for doing something about poverty. One, by far the most entrenched at present, might be called the services strategy; the other is the income strategy.

The services approach involves the design of special services for the poor. Some of these services have as their goal enabling the poor to earn an income which would make them no longer poor (as in the Job Corps and other job training programs, or over a generation’s time as in Project Head Start). Other services are designed to help poor people more directly — as in special health programs, community action programs, consumer education programs, etc.

The problem with the services approach is that to a considerable extent it carries the latent assumptions either (a) that the poor are going to be permanently poor and therefore must have a vast network of special services, or (b) that the poor can be changed — by learning productive skills, by learning how to use their money more wisely, by developing better attitudes, etc. — while they are still poor, and that once they have changed they will then be able to get rid of their poverty.

I think these assumptions are extremely pernicious ones. Whatever characteristics the poor have which interfere with their upward mobility, they have by virtue of the fact that they are poor. To persuade a housewife harassed by the problems of supporting a family of four on $125 a month that she would be better off if she learned better consumer skills, or even to participate in a job training program for a relatively low-paying and insecure job, is to bring to bear a very weak intervention against the massive problems to which she has to adapt. It may be better than nothing, but it’s certainly not much better than nothing.

A second problem with the services approach is that the priority of needs of the poor is categorically established when the service programs are set up. Even if these service programs are decided with “the maximum participation of the poor,” it is nevertheless true that many poor families might have their own individual priorities. For example, the federal public housing program provides a service to each household in Pruitt-Igoe in the form of a subsidized apartment that costs about $545 a year. This amounts to one-fifth of the mean family income of the tenants in the project. It is very likely that, from the point of view of the needs of many of the families who live in Pruitt-Igoe, this $545 could be put to better use.
It seems to me that one should ask of any comprehensive poverty program what dollar expenditure per poor family served that program represents, and then one should ask further whether the package of services this money represents will accomplish more than would the income itself.

For example, the Council of the White House Conference on “To Fulfill These Rights” recommended that one program to help do away with Negro disadvantage could be to increase the average school expenditure per child by $500 per year. Consider a poor family with three or four school children. Such an increase would mean devoting $1500 to $2000 a year to better educational facilities for that family’s children. Yet might it not be that an increase of $1500 to $2000 in that family’s income would have as much or more educational effect on those children because of its effect on the family environment?

One final problem with the services approach needs to be considered. All that we know so far of our ability to provide services to the poor suggests that it is extremely difficult to design them so that they do not have the effect of emphasizing the stigma of poverty. To provide efficient service which does not stigmatize seems a political and administrative enterprise that is beyond our capabilities. Most current federal thinking in the labor and welfare area seems much too blandly to assume that we have the skills to develop really effective services for such a special population as the poor. (Again, see the report of the Council of the White House Conference “To Fulfill These Rights,” with its proposed “Metropolitan Jobs Councils,” “Rural Jobs Task Force,” “Comprehensive Year-Round Employment, Training and Counseling Programs,” etc.) Yet most of those who have studied the actual operation of service programs for the poor find these programs lacking in both efficiency and humanity.

In contrast, the income approach goes a long way toward avoiding the difficulties that past experience suggests are inherent in the services strategy. Here the task is to develop a set of economic programs that have the direct result of providing poor families and individuals with an adequate income. There are good reasons, from the social science information now available to us, for believing that the most powerful and immediate resource to assist the poor to cope with their problems is money. We know that when a man has a job and an adequate income he is more respected in his home, and he is less likely to desert or divorce his wife. We know that, under these circumstances, parents are more optimistic about their children and more likely to teach the children, by example as well as by words, that they have much to gain from pursuing their educations through high school or beyond. In short, if one wishes to reverse those effects of lower class adaptations that are unconstructive, the most direct way
of doing it is to strike at the root of the problem — at the lack of an income sufficient to live out a stable, "good American life."

Those economists who have pursued this line of thinking have suggested various ways in which the poor can be both given money and encouraged to earn money. I am not an economist and though I have my own preferences in this area, I see no need to express them here. What I do wish to stress, rather, is that a genuine attack on income inequality is a precondition for any serious urban program — whether it be in housing, education, or health. In a good deal of the social planning going on today, the question of providing income for the poor is regarded as subsidiary to the provision of urban services. I would turn the priorities around the other way. It is only when the poor are disentangled from hopeless poverty that we can think creatively about providing services for urban Americans — one kind of service, for all urban Americans.