



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community Action

The power of place in modeling the prosperity of Minnesota families

January 5, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 1

Across the United States, the likelihood that poor children will eventually rise into the middle class or beyond depends heavily on where they live.

- Adam Belz

During the final week of 2016, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* published an in-depth three-part series titled *Rising from Poverty*. Written by *Star Tribune* Business Reporter Adam Belz, these insightful articles touch on a myriad of poverty-related issues including education, employment, crime, housing, race relations, and social policy. Yet the prevailing theme tackled in this series was that of place; Or, in other words, the differences between urban versus suburban versus rural communities.

Part one of the series suggests that for those living in poverty “moving to the suburbs is the route up the income ladder.” This article chronicles the journey of Ethrophic Burnett, a native of Chicago’s South Side. In the late 1990s, Burnett, relocated to north Minneapolis before a twist of fate led to subsidized housing in suburban Chaska. Although the transition came with its share of struggles, Burnett acknowledges that her children were afforded opportunities they likely could not have accessed in the city.

Nonetheless, fate interceded once again and after more than a decade in the suburbs, Burnett and her children found themselves back in north Minneapolis. Their unique circumstances have provided the Burnett’s a window through which to view urban and suburban living and some of the fundamental differences in both.

In citing a collaborative study between economists at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, Belz notes that America’s most significant measure of income mobility “where poor children grow up to be more affluent than their parents were, are in rural Minnesota and nearby states. Poor children in Minneapolis and St. Paul tend to stay poor, just as in most other big cities across the county.”

Such data is reflected in the second part of the *Star Tribune* series “Prosperity grows out of small-town America.” In this article, Belz reports on the experiences of Sylvia Hilgeman who was raised in Red Lake County, the third least populous county in all of Minnesota. After graduating from college, Hilgeman became an accountant before joining the FBI. Research demonstrates that this type of educational and career arc are not uncommon in Red Lake County, where even children born into the lower socio-economic strata tend to earn more as adults than the majority of their peer group throughout the United States.

When comparing the median income of adults who grew up poor in Hennepin County, the Harvard-Berkeley study reveals that it is only slightly higher than those who grew up poor in places such

as Chicago (Cook County) and New York City (Kings County). On the contrary, the average adult income of poor children growing up in Red Lake County and comparable rural areas in the upper Midwest is roughly 20% higher than the national median household income. Furthermore, the average income of adults living in poverty as kids in Red Lake County is approximately 60% higher than that of adults who were poor children in Hennepin County.

The third entry in the series focusses on the issue of affordable housing and its proximity to good schools and living wage jobs. This article follows Mississippi native and current Minnesota resident Kendrick Bates. As he nears the completion of his college degree and straddles the line between poverty and the middle class, Bates struggles to find an apartment he can afford. The lack of affordable, quality housing continues to be one of the most critical challenges facing low and moderate income households in the Twin Cities and urban areas throughout the nation.

Along with his acute research, insight and analysis, one of the most poignant things Belz's achieves in this series is putting a face, or faces, to the larger issues of poverty and place. What this also accomplishes is giving a voice to the people who

struggle to find adequate housing, jobs, schools, and other resources where they live. And to that end, the series raises an even greater question. Why should the residents of north Minneapolis and other urban communities have to consider sending their children to suburban schools or moving to the suburbs altogether in an effort to achieve some semblance of economic security? What if we adequately invested in employment, education, housing, healthcare, childcare, and other vital resources in our cities?

Then as author and law professor Myron Orfield, Director of the University of Minnesota's Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity tells the *Star Tribune*, "There would be no need to send our children from north Minneapolis to Hopkins and Minnetonka and St. Louis Park."

Indeed.

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