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## Roxbury, Boston, and the Boston SMSA: Socioeconomic Trends 1960-1985

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# Roxbury, Boston, and the Boston SMSA:

## Socioeconomic Trends 1960–1985

*Sally Brewster Moulton*

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*Socioeconomic trends for a primarily black and poor urban area, Roxbury, Massachusetts, are compared to those of the surrounding city of Boston and the Boston Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) for the period 1960 to 1985. Patterns in income, poverty, labor force participation, educational attainment, and racial composition are examined for each of the three areas. The chief purpose of the analysis is to determine the nature of gaps between Roxbury residents and the rest of the metropolitan area as well as the ways in which such gaps have changed over time.*

*The findings indicate that, despite growth in income, labor force participation, and educational achievement and the presence of a black middle class, Roxbury residents on the whole have tended to fall further behind residents in the city and the SMSA. The income gap in particular has widened substantially, and the incidence of poverty remains at an extremely high level. There is also evidence of an underclass. Structural explanations are offered for the existence of and increase in poverty, and policy implications are explored.*

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### Introduction

Every Major American city contains slums, symbols of social and economic inequality. Slums are areas “characterized by poverty, poor housing, and squalor.”<sup>1</sup> Popular belief holds that these characteristics plus crime and pervasive social disintegration are the norm in such areas. Once labeled as poor, run-down, and crime-ridden, these areas seem to be forgotten except in occasional news coverage focusing on their undesirable conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Many, though by no means all, slum residents fall at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy and consequently have extremely limited access to and benefit from educational, economic, political, and health resources. They are therefore limited in their ability to participate in various aspects of society. Despite a long history of efforts in the United States to improve slum conditions, ranging from the work of social reformers such as Jane Addams in turn-of-the-century Chicago to the 1960s War on Poverty, those conditions remain. Recent studies have noted the emergence of a more or less permanent underclass — a subgroup of slum dwellers that is socially and economically far removed from the

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mainstream and unlikely to catch up under present circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

This article investigates socioeconomic trends from 1960 to 1985 in a primarily black urban area, Roxbury, Massachusetts, parts of which fit the definition of a slum. The analysis has two main purposes. The first is to examine patterns in Roxbury's income, poverty, labor force participation, and educational attainment as well as in its racial composition. Race is an important aspect of this study not only because blacks constitute the majority of Roxbury's population but also because race is a significant factor in discrimination and therefore in poverty. The profile for Roxbury is then contrasted with that of the city of Boston and the Boston Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses are used to explore the nature of gaps between Roxbury and the rest of the metropolitan area and to determine if and how such gaps have changed over time.

The second purpose of the study is to explore the existence of an underclass among Roxbury's poor and to determine just how far removed from the mainstream such a group might be. A key question is how to explain the presence of such a group in the midst of a strong local economy. The concluding section of the article focuses on the study's implications for the poor, for Roxbury, and for policy formulation.

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### **Theoretical Background**

Social scientists describing the slum have frequently applied the social disorganization perspective.<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, the slum is a pathological environment, a social jungle, typified by limited social integration, a wide range of ubiquitous deviant behaviors, and little if any respect for dominant social values. In the 1920s, for example, the urban sociologist Zorbaugh studied a Chicago slum and wrote,

The slum is a distinctive area of disintegration and disorganization . . . of dilapidated dwellings . . . of freedom and individualism. Over large stretches of the slum men neither know nor trust their neighbors. . . . A large part of the native population is transient: prostitutes, criminals, outlaws, hobos. And here are congregated the "undesirable" alien groups, such as the Chinese and the Negro. . . . A cumulative process of natural selection is continually going on as the more ambitious and energetic keep moving out and the unadjusted, the dregs, and the outlaws accumulate. . . . The slum comes to be characterized, then, not only by mean streets and ramshackle buildings, but by well-defined types of submerged humanity. . . . The life of the slum is lived almost entirely [outside] the conventional world. . . . The slum is a confused social world to those who grow up in it [partly because of its] cosmopolitan nature . . . but . . . more directly [because of] the [mal]functioning of the slum family and the slum community.<sup>5</sup>

Similar points have been made in one way or another ever since. Take, for example, this very recent description by R. C. Longworth of another Chicago slum:

North Lawndale is the end of the road. Many of its residents, perhaps most, have lost hope for something better. Trapped by a disappearing economy and a malignant way of life, mired in welfare dependence, illegitimacy and violent crime, they are unable or unwilling to escape.<sup>6</sup>

Although sixty years and a variety of social programs separate these two accounts, they have many similarities. Both focus on pathological aspects, presenting slums as the end of the road populated by the dregs of society and as malignant places largely beyond the

conventional world. While Zorbaugh's description strictly reflects a social disorganization perspective, Longworth's injects something of a structural explanation as well ("trapped by a disappearing economy"). Although the ethnic and racial composition of American slums has changed over the course of this century (blacks and Hispanics now predominate) and the causal explanations have shifted, the problems remain much the same.<sup>7</sup>

Explanations for the perpetuation of slums and poverty (and their perpetual existence seems taken for granted) have not been limited to the social disorganization perspective. Indeed, the social disorganization view has been dismissed on the basis that it ignores an often high level of social organization that simply does not correspond to middle-class ways.<sup>8</sup>

The culture of poverty thesis, advanced in the late 1950s, suggests that the poor are set apart from the rest of society by distinct cultural values that are at odds with mainstream beliefs in hard work, ambition, and short-term sacrifice as a way to reach desired long-term goals.<sup>9</sup> Not only are the values of the poor different, according to this view, but they are passed from one generation to the next, thus ensuring that — and explaining why — "the poor are always with us."

Yet another type of explanation, the structural, looks beyond the individual to society as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Structural analysis assumes that the individual is subject to the constraints of social circumstances that are not fully under his or her control. Personal choices, in other words, are affected by one's position in the social system. No individual is literally free to chart any life course whatsoever, but rather must choose between socially structured (and limited) alternatives. Those with fewer personal resources generally have less access to socially desired goods and services and consequently have fewer options with respect to education, work, political participation, lifestyle, and so on.

From this perspective the poor are responsible neither for becoming poor nor for ceasing to be so. Poverty is not seen as simply a matter of individual will. Rather, it is believed to result from the way in which social, economic, and political activities are structured, which in turn affects the points at which their benefits and rewards are accessible to different segments of society.

Structural analysis therefore seeks to explain how the social structure causes and perpetuates poverty, that is, how social institutions such as education preserve a particular socioeconomic hierarchy. In the United States, for example, the quality of education and the range of educational choices generally available to different economic and racial groups vary significantly. As a result, the level of educational attainment also tends to vary among groups, and educational level in turn determines the types of jobs that members of the groups are most likely to obtain.

It also has been suggested that the structure of education is closely tied to the demand of the economy. Historically, changes in the organization of work and industry have preceded changes in the structure of education. The linking force is that education plays a socially integrative function by preparing students to assume positions in the economy as it exists (or as the owners and managers of work organizations anticipate that it will exist in the near term).<sup>11</sup> Education thus inevitably helps to maintain the status quo, even as it produces a small minority of individuals who will subsequently hold positions in which it is possible to initiate change.

The structure of the economy, politics, and health care can be investigated in a similar fashion. It can be shown that the point at which the individual is able to tie into each structure determines much about that person's options and life chances.<sup>12</sup>



The applicability of the social disorganization, culture of poverty, and structural perspectives will be explored in the conclusion. Clearly, they are based on very different sets of assumptions, which determine the kinds of questions that are asked as well as the types of solutions likely to be identified.

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## **Methodology**

To describe socioeconomic trends in Roxbury and to contrast them with those of the surrounding city and metropolitan area, data from two sources were used. Data for Roxbury census tracts as well as for Boston and the SMSA for 1960, 1970, and 1980 were taken from the U.S. census. However, because the latest census figures were eight years old at the time of this writing, Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) data are used where possible to show trends through 1985.

In selecting and analyzing data, attention was paid to income, poverty, labor force participation, education, and racial composition. Poverty was defined according to the official poverty level, which in 1981 was \$9,287 for a family of four.<sup>13</sup> However, use of this definition results in an extremely limited view that seems to say that those living above the poverty line are not in serious trouble. A strong argument can be made to the contrary.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of labor force participation designates as labor force participants the employed as well as the unemployed who are available for and seeking work. Those considered not in the labor force include such groups as discouraged workers who have given up looking for a job, the retired, and the institutionalized.

Where possible, Roxbury data were compared with similar information for the city of Boston and the Boston SMSA to show what types of differences exist. Comparisons were made between (1) the total populations of Roxbury, Boston, and the SMSA; (2) the black population in each of the three areas; and (3) Roxbury's blacks and the total Boston and SMSA populations.

The discussion, however, does not deal with statements of causality (e.g., because the proportion of blacks in Roxbury increased, the income gap between Roxbury and the SMSA grew) but with statements of association (e.g., as the proportion of blacks in Roxbury increased, the income gap between Roxbury and the SMSA also increased). The identification of such associations is the heart of exploratory analysis and serves to focus attention on issues requiring causal explanation.

The analysis has three parts. First, 1980 census data are presented for all twenty-one Roxbury census tracts to determine the extent of homogeneity within the area and to compare Roxbury to the city and SMSA in which it is located. Second, data from the three decennial censuses — 1960, 1970, and 1980 — are analyzed for two Roxbury tracts, numbers 812 and 818. These two tracts were chosen at random from among the nine in Roxbury whose boundaries did not change between 1960 and 1980 (see Appendix A). Their social and economic trends are discussed and contrasted with those of Boston and the Boston SMSA. Finally, Boston Redevelopment Authority data for the total Roxbury and Boston populations are described, and the analysis of trends is updated through 1985.

Both the census and the BRA data have some limitations. Between 1970 and 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau changed its method of classifying the population of Spanish origin.<sup>15</sup> In addition, different aggregate measures of education were used over time (shown later in Table 9). Consequently, these types of data are not strictly comparable across all three censuses. Census tract data in 1960 and 1970 were rarely broken down by race, so it is not

possible to analyze trends from 1960 to 1980 for Roxbury blacks versus the total and black populations of Boston and the metropolitan area. In addition, data often were not published for tracts if there were fewer than 400 individuals in the category of interest.<sup>16</sup>

BRA surveys cover Boston and its neighborhoods, but not the SMSA. Furthermore, city data are not broken down by census tract and are broken down only rarely by race. This limits the extent of comparisons that can be made between data from the 1980 census and the BRA surveys.<sup>17</sup>

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## History of Roxbury

Roxbury's history reaches back to 1639, almost to the beginning of European settlement in New England. Just over one hundred years ago, it was a quiet village on the outskirts of Boston. By the turn of the century, it had become a fashionable, white, Protestant suburb. During the next several decades, its population gradually changed to Irish Catholic, then Jewish, and finally black.<sup>18</sup> Six of Roxbury's twenty-one census tracts were already over 50% black by 1950.<sup>19</sup> By 1980, this was true for fourteen of the tracts, of which eleven were 80% to 95% black (Table 1). While Roxbury continues to be a primarily black area, recently Hispanics have been increasing as a percentage of its population.<sup>20</sup>

Lower Roxbury, adjacent to downtown Boston, had become the city's black slum by the early 1950s while Upper Roxbury was then home to the black middle class. In the 1980s, Roxbury still exhibits this diversity. Although on the whole its socioeconomic status has declined sharply over the last century, today its residents range from the middle or upper middle to the underclass.

With the shift to an increasingly black population, a large percentage of which lived in or near poverty, Roxbury's public services and its housing stock deteriorated. A study conducted in the late 1960s described the area by saying that "most of the elegant homes had become crumbling hulks, and the old trees shaded vacant, littered lots."<sup>21</sup> Another study from the same period reported that the area had "a disproportionate share of Boston's housing dilapidation, school deterioration, reported crime, AFDC, and reported juvenile delinquency."<sup>22</sup> Whatever the 1960s War on Poverty attempted to do for the area, it was still possible in 1985 to describe Roxbury as "the city's poorest neighborhood," which "for the past 30 years . . . has contained pockets of poverty that rival parts of the rural South."<sup>23</sup>

While the black middle class in Roxbury and Boston has grown in recent years and blacks as a whole have made some economic gains, major disparities remain. A 1985 report, "The Emerging Black Community of Boston," prepared by eight black faculty members of Boston area colleges, found that the city's blacks (and this certainly includes those living in Roxbury, which has become the center of Boston's black community) continued to experience economic and political disadvantage to a disproportionate degree.<sup>24</sup> Boston's mayor, Raymond Flynn, publicly objected that the study was based on outdated (i.e., 1980) census information and that conditions had changed.<sup>25</sup>

Although this report's chapter on the economic status of Boston blacks used 1980 census data for poverty and income, it also presented more recent information concerning the sectoral location of jobs being created by the economic boom in Boston. By and large, new jobs have been created in industrial sectors in which black employment has been disproportionately low, because of factors such as inadequate education, the geographical location of firms in the growth industries, and lack of transportation. Thus the black pop-

Table 1

**Population by Race and Ethnic Origin in the Boston  
SMSA, the City of Boston, and the 21 Roxbury  
Census Tracts, 1980**

	Total	Black		Spanish Origin	
		%	Number	%	Number
SMSA	2,763,357	6	160,658	2	66,786
Boston	562,994	23	126,438	7	36,430
Roxbury	55,567	69	38,192*	—	4,752*
Roxbury Census Tract					
801	311	—†	—	—	—
802	1,420	44	622	29	413
803	2,384	80	1,915	17	405
804	1,679	92	1,546	—	—
805	4,236	89	3,775	—	—
806	1,033	86	887	—	—
807	309	—	—	—	—
808	1,977	43	858	53	1,053
809	3,102	13	391	14	426
810	4,737	25	1,175	11	501
811	2,709	22	590	—	—
812	4,131	63	2,590	28	1,165
813	4,094	72	2,954	19	789
814	1,719	62	1,061	—	—
815	2,545	88	2,238	—	—
816	651	79	513	—	—
817	3,576	94	3,355	—	—
818	2,642	90	2,375	—	—
819	3,157	92	2,908	—	—
820	3,450	88	3,024	—	—
821	5,705	95	5,415	—	—

\*This is an approximate total. Percentages based on this number also are approximate.

†Data not published for tracts in which blacks and Spanish-origin individuals numbered less than 400.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1983), Table P-1: "General Characteristics of Persons: 1980"; Table P-14: "Social and Labor Force Characteristics of Black Persons: 1980"; Table P-20: "Social and Labor Force Characteristics of Spanish Origin Persons: 1980."

ulation has encountered structural barriers to full participation in the growth of the local economy. It is unlikely that recent economic growth will have had much effect on the gap between blacks and the total population.

The most recent available data substantiates this interpretation. From 1979 to 1984, Roxbury's median family income grew far more slowly than Boston's (9% versus 38%), and as a result the already considerable income gap widened. At the same time, family poverty increased in both Roxbury and Boston (to 32% and 22%, respectively) while Boston's black poverty rate continued unchanged at 29%.<sup>26</sup>

As if to underscore these dismal statistics, a recent though unsuccessful movement was mounted by some minority residents of Roxbury and several adjacent areas to secede from the city of Boston. Secession was seen as the only way for residents to gain control over land use decisions that affect them. They particularly feared the sort of sweeping displacement by city development projects that had occurred in the poor West End and South End neighborhoods in previous decades.<sup>27</sup> Even though the secession plan was voted



down, the choice of such a solution indicates the extent to which minorities in this area felt shut out of effective participation in the political process as well as their desire to correct the situation.

It can be seen that great disparities existed as recently as 1985 between the poor and the not-poor, between the majority of blacks and the general population, and therefore between Roxbury and the city of Boston. The following data show these differences in greater detail.

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## **1980 Cross-Sectional Analysis: Roxbury Compared to the City of Boston and the Boston SMSA**

### *Population by Race*

In 1980, Roxbury's population of 55,567 was spread over twenty-one census tracts (Table 1 and Appendix A). Blacks accounted for about 69% of its population versus 23% of Boston's and 6% of the SMSA's. Note that there were roughly 161,000 blacks in the SMSA, the majority of whom (126,000) lived in Boston. Of these, 38,000 lived in Roxbury. So although Roxbury had a much higher concentration of blacks than Boston, and more especially than the SMSA, it contained only about a third of Boston's and a quarter of the SMSA's black population.

Roxbury's tracts were 13% to 95% black. A quarter were less than 50% black while half were over 80% black. More than a tenth of Boston's Spanish-origin population lived in Roxbury in 1980.<sup>28</sup> They were located primarily in seven tracts, where they made up 11% to 53% of the population. Nowhere in Roxbury did the Spanish-origin population reach the high levels of concentration found for blacks.

### *Median Family Income*

In 1980, median family income in the SMSA as a whole was \$22,848 while in Boston it was \$16,062. By contrast, it ranged from \$6,487 to \$14,267 in all but one of the Roxbury census tracts (Table 2). The remaining tract, with a median family income of \$19,063, was the only one that exceeded the Boston median. None of the tracts had a median as high as that for the entire SMSA.

Within the Roxbury tracts, there was some diversity. The highest median family income was three times the size of the lowest one. However, there was a considerable gap between the highest and second highest median — almost \$5,000. With one exception, median income in Roxbury was equal to 40% to 89% of the Boston median, but only 28% to 62% of the SMSA's. The highest median in Roxbury (\$19,063) was 20% greater than that in Boston, but still only 83% of that in the SMSA. The lowest in Roxbury (\$6,487) was little more than a quarter of the lowest in the SMSA.

These figures should cause considerable concern as they show a very unequal distribution of income. The median for Boston as a whole was only 70% of that for the entire SMSA, while the Roxbury medians with one exception were much lower than Boston's. Neither Boston nor Roxbury compares well by this measure to the metropolitan area as a whole. Roxbury, however, has fared especially poorly, and many of its tracts contain a large proportion of very poor families.

Making a similar analysis using data for only black families is more sobering still. In 1980, the median income for black families was \$12,775 in the SMSA and \$11,724 in Boston. By contrast, it ranged from \$6,250 to \$13,816 in the Roxbury census tracts.



Table 2

**Median Family Income, Percentage of Families  
Below the Poverty Line, Labor Force Status, and  
Education in the Boston SMSA, the City of Boston,  
and the 21 Roxbury Census Tracts, for the Total and  
Black Populations, 1980**

	Median Family Income		% of Families Below Poverty Line		% of Persons 16 + Years Old in Labor Force		% of Persons 16 + Years Old Unemployed		% of Persons 25 + Years Old Graduated from High School	
	Total	Black	Total	Black	Total	Black	Total	Black	Total	Black
SMSA	\$22,848	\$12,775	7%	25%	64%	61%	5%	8%	77%	65%
Boston	16,062	11,724	17	28	60	59	6	9	68	62
Roxbury Census Tract										
801	7,083	—*	46	—	68	—	5	—	36	—
802	14,267	12,898	22	22	61	67	3	—	49	64
803	6,768	7,591	49	45	48	50	16	18	52	55
804	11,090	11,210	29	27	65	66	17	17	47	48
805	8,285	8,244	26	26	47	47	10	11	61	59
806	6,487	6,250	57	57	56	61	17	19	39	42
807	19,063	—	—	—	69	—	14	—	77	—
808	7,045	6,515	46	44	47	38	11	10	42	42
809	12,907	11,776	20	28	60	62	7	7	82	86
810	10,371	8,350	32	36	60	68	6	11	70	66
811	12,731	11,437	17	17	54	65	7	13	70	66
812	9,351	8,488	37	37	52	48	10	13	45	44
813	8,242	10,181	43	36	44	49	12	12	50	50
814	7,969	8,828	37	32	48	48	7	—	53	46
815	13,194	13,194	21	21	49	53	11	11	62	62
816	13,571	13,816	12	14	62	60	16	10	71	66
817	13,498	13,379	18	19	54	55	7	6	60	60
818	11,321	11,536	27	24	55	57	6	6	54	53
819	13,012	13,488	13	11	62	64	7	7	57	59
820	11,630	12,083	28	25	53	57	10	10	60	62
821	9,664	9,453	33	35	53	53	13	13	57	56

\*Data not published for tracts in which blacks and Spanish-origin individuals numbered less than 400.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1983), Table P-9: "Social Characteristics of Persons: 1980"; Table P-10: "Labor Force and Disability Characteristics of Persons: 1980"; Table P-11: "Income and Poverty Status in 1979: 1980"; Table P-14: "Social and Labor Force Characteristics of Black Persons: 1980"; Table P-15: "Occupation, Income in 1979, and Poverty Status in 1979 of Black Persons: 1980."

While the Boston median was 92% of the SMSA median for black families, five of the Roxbury tracts had medians that were higher than the SMSA's. This is somewhat misleading as it gives the impression that black families fared better economically in Roxbury than elsewhere in the SMSA. In a few of the SMSA towns, the median income for black families was much higher than in Roxbury. In Peabody, it was \$41,239 and in Newton it was \$31,611, but these are rare exceptions.<sup>29</sup>

In thirteen (or 62%) of the Roxbury tracts the median black family income was less than that for all black families in the SMSA. In eight tracts, the median income for black families was less than three-fourths of the SMSA's median for this group. Overall, Roxbury's

black families tended to fall somewhat below black families in the SMSA as a whole. There was less discrepancy between black families in Roxbury and those in Boston as a whole.

The median for black families in the SMSA (\$12,775) was only 56% of the median for all SMSA families combined (\$22,848). The median family income for black families in Boston (\$11,724) was 73% of the median for all Boston families but just 51% of the SMSA's median for all families. While these numbers make it appear that black families were relatively better off in Boston than in the SMSA, it should be remembered that Boston families as a whole did not fare as well as those in the SMSA as a whole. These comparisons, particularly those between black families and all families combined, show very clearly the immense gap that existed in 1980 between the majority of blacks in Roxbury, Boston, and the SMSA and the rest of the population.

### *Families Below the Poverty Line*

The data given in Table 2 and analyzed in the previous section suggest that the rate of poverty in Roxbury should be higher than in Boston and the SMSA; indeed, that was the case. Census poverty data from 1980 (adjusted by family size) show the proportion of families falling below the poverty line (Table 2): 7% in the SMSA, 17% in Boston, and 12% to 57% in the Roxbury tracts. Only three tracts had a poverty rate equal to or lower than Boston's and none had one as low as that in the SMSA. Eighty percent of the tracts had poverty rates higher than for either Boston or the SMSA. Seventy percent had rates at least three times that of the SMSA (i.e., 21% or higher). In a quarter of the tracts, more than 40% met the official poverty criteria. That is approximately six or more times the rate for the SMSA. Roxbury families were thus more likely to live in poverty than families in either Boston or the SMSA as a whole.

Table 3 breaks down the family poverty data according to total, black, and Spanish-origin population. In 1980, 25% of the SMSA's black families and 28% of Boston's fell below the poverty line. This translates into rates that are roughly three to four times that for the total SMSA population (7%) and about two-thirds greater than that for the total Boston population. Thus, throughout the metropolitan area, black families were disproportionately likely to live in poverty.

By contrast, there was very little difference in Roxbury between black and total poverty rates, largely because of the high proportion of blacks in many tracts. However, in five tracts blacks accounted for less than 50% of the population. In three of these, the poverty rate for black families was the same as or slightly lower than that for nonblacks, while in two of the tracts it was four to eight percentage points higher. Thus in Roxbury there was a less consistent pattern of disadvantage among blacks compared to nonblacks.

However, comparing poverty among black families in Roxbury, Boston, and the SMSA shows a different picture. In the Roxbury tracts, the percentage of black families living below the poverty line varied from 11% to 57%. In one-third of the tracts, the poverty rate for black families was lower than the rate in the SMSA for black families. In half the tracts the rate was lower than the Boston rate for black families. Since the Boston and SMSA rates were fairly similar (28% and 25%, respectively), it is reasonably accurate to say that in half of the Roxbury tracts poverty was less frequent among black families than it was among black families in Boston and the SMSA as a whole. It is also true that poverty was more common among black families in 38% of the tracts than it was among black families in Boston and the SMSA. Thus, in 1980, Roxbury tracts were by no means homogeneous with respect to the economic status of their residents.

Table 3

**Families Below the Poverty Line in the Total, Black,  
and Spanish-Origin Populations in the Boston  
SMSA, the City of Boston, and the 21 Roxbury  
Census Tracts, 1980**

	% of All Families Below Poverty Line	% of Black Families Below Poverty Line	% of Spanish-Origin Families Below Poverty Line
SMSA	7%	25%	33%
Boston	17	28	41
Roxbury Census Tract			
801	46	—*	—
802	22	22	37
803	49	45	79
804	29	27	—
805	26	26	—
806	57	57	—
807	—	—	—
808	46	44	47
809	20	28	48
810	32	36	50
811	17	17	—
812	37	37	41
813	43	36	64
814	37	32	—
815	21	21	—
816	12	14	—
817	18	19	—
818	27	24	—
819	13	11	—
820	28	25	—
821	33	35	—

\*Data not published for tracts in which blacks and Spanish-origin individuals numbered less than 400.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1983), Table P-11: "Income and Poverty Status in 1979: 1980"; Table P-15: "Occupation, Income in 1979, and Poverty Status in 1979 of Black Persons: 1980"; Table P-21: "Occupation, Income in 1979, and Poverty Status in 1979 of Spanish Origin Persons: 1980."

Compared to black families, a considerably higher percentage of Spanish-origin families fell below the poverty line in 1980 (Table 3). In the SMSA as a whole, the rate was 33%, compared to 25% for black families and 7% for all families. It was thus one-third higher than the black rate and 4.5 times the rate for the total SMSA population. In Boston, the poverty rate for Spanish-origin families was 41%, compared to 28% for black families and 17% for all families combined. The rate in Boston for Spanish-origin families was 46% higher than that for black families and 2.5 times the rate for all families. Furthermore, the 41% poverty rate for Boston's Spanish-origin population is almost six times higher than the 7% rate for SMSA families as a whole.

This pattern continued in the seven Roxbury tracts for which data are available concerning Spanish-origin families. Their poverty rate varied from 37% to 79%, compared to 11% to 57% for black families, and families of Spanish origin were from 6% to 76%



more likely to live in poverty than blacks in the same census tract. Clearly, as of 1980, those of Spanish origin tended to be much more economically disadvantaged than blacks in the population as a whole, not only in the SMSA and Boston but in Roxbury as well.

Economic disadvantage very clearly was a common feature of life in Roxbury in 1980. If it is assumed that lack of education and work contribute significantly to economic disadvantage, then one should find lower levels of education and labor force participation in Roxbury than in Boston and the SMSA. This did not always prove to be the case.

### *Education*

The rate of high school completion among all individuals aged twenty-five and older was 77% in the SMSA, 68% in Boston, and 36% to 82% in the Roxbury tracts (Table 2). In three-fourths (16) of the Roxbury tracts, the high school completion rate was 6 to 32 percentage points lower than that for either the SMSA or Boston.

The proportion of the total population that had completed four or more years of college was 25% in the SMSA, 20% in Boston, and from 2% to 18% in the Roxbury tracts, except tract 809, which had a rate of 32% (Table 4). In ten of the tracts, the percentage of individuals with four or more years of college was less than half the rate for either the SMSA or Boston.

At first glance, the generally lower levels of educational attainment might seem to explain the income disparity previously described. However, in a quarter of the tracts the high school completion rate exceeded Boston's rate and in two of these the rate was equal to or greater than that for the SMSA. These tracts also tended to have among the highest rates of college completion in Roxbury, rates that were close to or above those for Boston. Only one tract (809) had a rate that exceeded the SMSA's. If educational attainment were the sole factor affecting income distribution, then a quarter (i.e., five) of the Roxbury tracts should have had a median family income roughly equal to Boston's and one should have equaled or exceeded the SMSA's. This was not the case, as only one tract had a median income greater than Boston's and none equaled or exceeded the SMSA's.

It is interesting that among the five tracts with the highest high school completion rates for the population as a whole, three had a very low percentage of black residents. Only two ranked in the top five with respect to median family income (and one of these was 79% black). The others placed seventh, eighth, and twelfth on income.

The rate of high school completion among blacks aged twenty-five and over was 65% in the SMSA, 62% in Boston, and from 42% to 66% in the Roxbury tracts, with one exception (in tract 809, 86% of black adults had finished high school). Black high school completion rates tended to lag behind those for the total Boston and SMSA populations. Furthermore, blacks in the majority of Roxbury tracts were less likely to have finished high school than blacks in Boston or the SMSA as a whole. However, in one-third (or seven) of the tracts, black high school completion rates were equal to or greater than the black rate for Boston, and four of these also exceeded the black rate for the SMSA.

The rate of college completion among blacks was 12% in the SMSA, 9% in Boston, and from 2% to 17% in the Roxbury tracts (again with the exception of tract 809, in which the rate was 31%). Nine of the tracts had black college graduation rates that exceeded the rate for blacks in Boston, while six had rates that exceeded the rate for blacks in the SMSA.

Of the seven tracts with the highest median income for black families, five also ranked among the top seven with respect to black high school and college completion rates. Thus education and income were more closely related when controlling for race than when considering the population as a whole.

Table 4

**Educational Attainment for the Total and Black  
Populations in the Boston SMSA, the City of Boston,  
and the 21 Roxbury Census Tracts, 1980**

	Less than High School		High School plus 1-3 Years of College*		4 Years or More of College	
	Total	Black	Total	Black	Total	Black
SMSA	23%	35%	52%	53%	25%	12%
Boston	32	39	48	53	20	9
Roxbury Census Tract						
801	64	—	36	—	—	—
802	51	36	38	51	11	13
803	48	44	43	46	9	10
804	53	52	44	45	3	3
805	39	41	54	53	7	6
806	61	59	37	39	2	2
807	23	—	59	—	18	—
808	58	58	26	25	16	17
809	19	14	49	65	32	31
810	29	33	53	57	18	10
811	30	33	53	52	17	15
812	55	56	41	41	4	3
813	50	49	47	48	3	3
814	47	54	35	38	18	8
815	38	38	49	50	13	12
816	29	33	56	56	15	11
817	41	40	53	55	6	5
818	46	47	47	46	7	7
819	43	41	45	47	12	12
820	40	38	52	54	8	8
821	43	43	45	49	8	8

\*High school and 1 to 3 years of college have been combined into one category because, with few exceptions, the major differences appear to occur in the groups "Less than High School" and "4 Years or More of College."

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1983), Table P-9: "Social Characteristics of Persons: 1980"; Table P-14: "Social and Labor Force Characteristics of Black Persons: 1980."

Striking differences exist between the educational attainment of blacks and that of the total population. In only one tract (809) did the black high school completion rate equal or exceed that for the total population in either Boston or the SMSA, while in 43 % of the tracts it was 10 percentage points or more below Boston's and 20 percentage points or more below the SMSA's. With respect to college completion, only one tract (809) had a rate greater than the rates for the total populations of the SMSA and Boston. In three-fourths of the Roxbury tracts, the percentage of blacks graduating from college was less than half the total SMSA rate, while in 60 % it was less than half the total Boston rate. If black educational attainment in the Roxbury tracts sometimes lagged behind that for blacks in Boston and the SMSA, it generally lagged far behind that for the total population.

It also should be noted that in almost one-third of the Roxbury tracts, less than 50 % of adults had finished high school. In about half, less than 55 % had finished. Generally, these tracts also had the greatest rates of poverty. Yet two of the five tracts with greater total high

school completion rates than Boston's (809 and 810) also had greater poverty rates than Boston. The poverty rate in tract 810 was almost twice that in Boston.

Compared to Boston, tract 810 had a slightly lower percentage of adults who had not finished high school, a slightly higher percentage of high school graduates, and a slightly lower percentage of college graduates. In other words, the tract had slightly less disadvantage at the lower end of the educational attainment scale and slightly less advantage at the upper end. It also had high labor force participation and average unemployment. The percentage of its population made up of blacks (25%) and Hispanics (11%) was a little higher than Boston's. Overall, tract 810 and Boston were fairly similar, yet they differed substantially with regard to poverty, and the question is why. Factors that were beyond the scope of this study, such as the distribution by industry and occupation of the jobs held by Roxbury residents and the type of transportation to which residents have access, are among the probable explanations.

### ***Labor Force Participation in the Total Population***

Among individuals aged sixteen and older, the 1980 labor force participation rate was 64% in the SMSA, 60% in Boston, and 44% to 69% in the Roxbury tracts (Table 2). In 40% of the Roxbury tracts, the labor force participation rate was equal to or greater than Boston's. In approximately another third, less than half the population aged sixteen and over was in the labor force. A fairly similar picture emerges from the black labor force participation data in Table 2. In sixteen (76%) of the tracts, black labor force participation was equal to or greater than participation for the tract population as a whole.

While there was a tendency for tracts with higher individual labor force participation rates to have higher median family incomes and lower rates of family poverty, in some cases this association was not present. For example, for the population as a whole, the tracts with the second and third highest labor force participation rates (tracts 801 and 804) had the eleventh and eighteenth highest median family incomes and the fourth and tenth highest family poverty rates. Tract 801, with a labor force participation rate of 68%, which was higher than that of either the SMSA or Boston, and a low unemployment rate of 5% nevertheless had a very low median family income (\$7,083), and 46% of its families were below the poverty line. Compared to tract 801, tract 804 had a slightly lower labor force participation rate (65%) and a very high unemployment rate (17%), yet its median family income (\$11,090) was higher and its poverty rate (29%) was much lower (though in an absolute sense still very high). Possibly, the low income and high poverty in tract 801 occurred because, despite its high labor force participation rate and low unemployment, labor force participation among a disproportionate number of family heads was lower and/or less frequent and/or less well paid than among family heads in tract 804.

The data for these two tracts clearly indicate that simply having a job is not necessarily sufficient to solve the problem of poverty. The income associated with the job and, in the long run, the level of job security and opportunities for advancement are crucial factors that help determine the job's economic impact on its holder.

### ***Total Unemployment***

The unemployment rate for all individuals aged sixteen and older was 5% in the SMSA, 6% in Boston, and 3% to 17% in the Roxbury tracts (Table 2). Only four of the tracts (about 20%) had total unemployment rates as low as or lower than Boston's or the SMSA's. Two-thirds had rates that were close to or more than twice Boston's and the SMSA's.



The black unemployment rate was 8% in the SMSA and 9% in Boston. In the SMSA, unemployment was 60% higher for blacks than for the population as a whole; in Boston, it was 50% higher. Black unemployment ranged from 6% to 19% in the seventeen Roxbury tracts for which such data were published. In thirteen of these tracts (62%), black unemployment exceeded the rate for blacks in both the SMSA and Boston. These disparities (between blacks and the total population as well as between blacks in Roxbury and those in Boston and the larger metropolitan area) may stem from unequal preparation for and access to jobs, and they indicate a more uncertain existence and a potentially bleaker future.

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### **1960–1980: Trends in Roxbury Tracts 812 and 818 Compared to the Boston SMSA and the City of Boston**

Having considered selected socioeconomic factors for one point in time, it is now useful to look at trends over the twenty years from 1960 to 1980. For this section, two Roxbury tracts, 812 and 818, were chosen at random and followed from 1960 to 1980 (see map in Appendix A). Unfortunately, it was rare for census data for 1960 and 1970 to be broken down by race. However, since the concentration of blacks in both tracts increased substantially and reached very high levels during this period, trends for the overall population of the tracts will suggest what was happening to their black populations.

#### ***Population by Race***

From 1960 to 1980, the total population rose by 7% in the SMSA but declined by 19% in Boston and 33% to 48% in tracts 812 and 818 (Table 5). This pattern of a sharp population loss in the central city combined with growth in the greater metropolitan area was, of course, typical of large, older cities around the country during this period.

Black population trends showed a different pattern. In general, the rate of growth in the black population was much greater than that of the population as a whole. As a result, blacks increased in absolute numbers as well as in proportion to the total population in the SMSA, Boston, and tract 812. Although the black population doubled in both the SMSA and Boston, blacks remained a very small part of the total SMSA population, accounting for only 3% in 1960 and 6% in 1980. In Boston, the total population declined as the black population grew, and the black share of the population rose from 9% to 23%. The Boston trend was repeated in tract 812 but in a much exaggerated fashion. Although the total population in tract 812 fell by one-third, the number of blacks tripled, and blacks increased from 13% to 63% of the population. Tract 818 presented a contrasting picture. Not only did its total population decline (by 48%) but so too did its black population (by 27%). However, since the decline for the total was much greater than for blacks, the proportion of blacks increased from 64% to 90%.

The shift in the population composition of these two tracts is striking. In both, the concentration of blacks grew substantially even though in tract 812 the size of the black population rose while in tract 818 it fell. The key to an analysis of these shifts is to consider what was happening concurrently. How did Boston and the two tracts fare over time, compared to one another and to the SMSA with respect to income, poverty, education, and labor force participation?

#### ***Median Family Income***

Median family income more than doubled in tracts 812 and 818 and in Boston between 1960 and 1980, yet in each case it decreased sharply as a percentage of the SMSA median

Table 5

**Distribution of Population by Race\* for the Boston  
SMSA, the City of Boston, and Roxbury Census  
Tracts 812 and 818, 1960–1980**

		SMSA	Boston	Tract 812	Tract 818
Total Population	1960	2,589,301	697,197	6,155	5,115
	1970	2,753,700	641,071	5,048	3,811
	1980	2,763,357	562,994	4,131	2,642
% Change	1960–1980	+ 7%	– 19%	– 33%	– 48%
Black Population	1960	77,781	63,165	790	3,266
	1970	127,035	104,707	2,927	3,340
	1980	160,658	126,438	2,590	2,375
% Change	1960–1980	+ 107%	+ 100%	+ 228%	– 27%
Blacks as % of Total Population	1960	3%	9%	13%	64%
	1970	5%	16%	58%	88%
	1980	6%	23%	63%	90%

\*Data on people of Spanish origin are largely not available for these tracts. Also, the measures used have not been comparable across these three censuses.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population and Housing: 1960, Census Tracts*, Final Report PHC(1)-18, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962), Table P-1: "General Characteristics of the Population, by Census Tracts: 1960." U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population and Housing: 1970, Census Tracts*, PHC(1)-29, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1972), Table P-1: "General Characteristics of the Population: 1970." For 1980 data, see Table 1 in this article.

(Tables 6 and 7). What this means, of course, is that during this period median family income was growing at a faster rate in the SMSA than in Boston and the two tracts. Median family income in tracts 812 and 818 also declined relative to the Boston median. Table 6 shows how the four areas compared in rate of income growth. It also can be seen that tract 812 consistently was the poorer of the two.

During the twenty years in question, economic gains were unequally distributed across the geographic segments of the SMSA population. All four areas under consideration experienced income growth, but the rate of growth as well as the starting points varied greatly. As a result, the twenty-year trend was one of increasing disparity not only between the central city and the greater metropolitan area but also between tracts 812 and 818 and the city in which they were located. Since tract data were not available for blacks in 1960 and 1970, trends in median family income for blacks cannot be discussed. However, as the proportion of blacks in the Boston and tract populations grew, so did the income disparity between these areas and the SMSA as a whole. Given the nature of the analysis performed here, this is simply a statement of association (i.e., of concurrent trends) and not one of cause and effect. It is, however, a very significant point and, if the necessary data for blacks were available, one could establish which racial or ethnic segments of the population were, in fact, most likely to have low incomes.

***Families Below the Poverty Line***

The percentage of families below the poverty line in the SMSA declined from 1960 to 1980 but showed no overall change in Boston and the two tracts (Table 8). Consequently, the disparity between the SMSA and the latter three areas grew. In 1960, Boston's poverty rate was 1.5 times that for the SMSA as a whole, while the tract rates were 2.5 to 3.4

Table 6

**Median Family Income for the Boston SMSA, City of  
Boston, and Roxbury Census Tracts 812 and 818,  
1960–1980**

	SMSA	Boston	Tract 812	Tract 818
1960	\$ 6,687	\$ 5,747	\$3,807	\$ 5,047
1970	11,449	9,133	4,099	6,277
1980	22,848	16,062	9,351	11,321
% Change 1960–1980	+ 242%	+ 180%	+ 146%	+ 124%

*Source:* See previously cited publications by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For 1960, Final Report PHC(1)-18, Table P-1: "General Characteristics of the Population, by Census Tracts: 1960." For 1970, Report PHC(1)-29, Table P-4: "Income Characteristics of the Population: 1970." For 1980, report PHC80-2-98, Table P-11: "Income and Poverty Status in 1979: 1980."

Table 7

**Median Family Income for the City of Boston and  
Roxbury Census Tracts 812 and 818 as a Percentage  
of the Median Family Income for the Boston SMSA,  
1960–1980**

	Boston	Tract 812	Tract 818
1960	86%	57%	76%
1970	80	36	55
1980	70	41	50

*Source:* See previously cited publications by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For 1960, Final Report PHC(1)-18, Table P-1: "General Characteristics of the Population, by Census Tracts: 1960." For 1970, Report PHC(1)-29, Table P-4: "Income Characteristics of the Population: 1970." For 1980, report PHC80-2-98, Table P-11: "Income and Poverty Status in 1979: 1980."

times the SMSA's. By 1980, Boston's poverty rate was 2.4 times and the tract rates were 3.9 to 5.3 times the SMSA's. The factor(s) that reduced poverty in the SMSA as a whole did not have the same effect (or had no effect at all) on poverty in Boston and in tracts 812 and 818, at least so far as one can determine from the aggregate data presented here.

### **Education**

Unfortunately, educational attainment data are not comparable over the three time periods. No measure covers all three census dates. Also, in 1970, when the two educational attainment measures overlap, tracts 812 and 818 are the same in median school years completed, yet tract 812 has a lower percentage of high school graduates among adults twenty-five years and older.

The two measures in Table 9 do indicate that the level of education increased steadily in the SMSA, Boston, and the two tracts between 1960 and 1980. Nevertheless, by 1980, for adults aged twenty-five and older just 45% in tract 812 and 54% in tract of 818 had finished high school, compared to 68% in Boston and 77% in the SMSA. Adults in these tracts thus tended to have considerably less education than was typical of adults in Boston and the SMSA as a whole, a situation with serious implications for their ability to compete in the job market. Furthermore, despite the gains made by 1980, the education gap between the tracts and the larger areas had widened for tract 812 and decreased very slightly



for tract 818. This should partially explain the worsening income picture in the two Roxbury tracts.

**Labor Force Participation in the Total Population**

From 1960 to 1980, labor force participation rose steadily in the SMSA and Boston, with the greater increase (8 percentage points) occurring in the SMSA (Table 10). Rates in the SMSA and Boston were essentially the same at the first two census dates, but by 1980 the SMSA clearly had pulled ahead. Labor force participation fluctuated in tracts 812 and 818, showing at the end of twenty years a slight gain in tract 812 and a slight loss in tract 818. Overall, the two tracts fell further behind the SMSA.

Total labor force participation in the SMSA and Boston was, on the whole, somewhat to much higher than in the two tracts. The greatest discrepancy occurred in 1970 when labor force participation rates in the SMSA and Boston were 50% higher than in tract 812 and 15% higher than in tract 818. By 1980, the gap had narrowed, with labor force participation in Boston and the SMSA 15% to 23% higher than in tract 812 and 9% to 16% higher than in tract 818. The gap between the two tracts had also narrowed, from 8 percentage points in 1960 to 3 in 1980.

Table 8

**Percentage of Families Below the Poverty Line for  
the Boston SMSA, City of Boston, and Roxbury  
Census Tracts 812 and 818, 1960–1980**

	SMSA	Boston	Tract 812	Tract 818
1960*	11%	17%	37%	27%
1970	6	12	43	22
1980	7	17	37	27

\*All families with less than \$3,000 income.

Source: See previously cited publications by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For 1960, Final Report PHC(1)-18, Table P-1: "General Characteristics of the Population, by Census Tracts: 1960." For 1970, Report PHC(1)-29, Table P-4: "Income Characteristics of the Population: 1970." For 1980, report PHC80-2-98, Table P-11: "Income and Poverty Status in 1979: 1980."

Table 9

**Educational Attainment for the Boston SMSA, City  
of Boston, and Roxbury Census Tracts 812 and 818,  
1960–1980**

		SMSA	Boston	Tract 812	Tract 818
Median School Years Completed by Persons Aged 25 +	1960	12.1	11.2	10.0	9.9
	1970	12.4	12.1	10.5	10.5
	1980	—*	—	—	—
% of Persons Aged 25 + Years Who Are High School Graduates	1960	—	—	—	—
	1970	64	54	35	39
	1980	77	68	45	54

\*Data not available.

Source: See previously cited publications by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For 1960, Final Report PHC(1)-18, Table P-1: "General Characteristics of the Population, by Census Tracts: 1960." For 1970, Report PHC(1)-29, Table P-2: "Social Characteristics of the Population: 1970." For 1980, Report PHC80-2-98, Table P-9: "Social Characteristics of Persons: 1980."

Table 10

**Labor Force and Unemployment Status for the Total  
Population Aged 16 Years and Over for the Boston  
SMSA, City of Boston, and Roxbury Census Tracts  
812 and 818, 1960–1980\***

		SMSA	Boston	Tract 812	Tract 818
Labor Force Participation	1960	56%	57%	49%	57%
	1970	60	59	40	52
	1980	64	60	52	55
Unemployment	1960	4	5	7	6
	1970	4	4	5	8
	1980	5	6	10	6

\*Data from 1960 cover persons 14 years and over and thus reflect a somewhat different age group than data for 1970 and 1980.

Source: See previously cited publications by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For 1960, Final Report PHC(1)-18, Table P-3: "Labor Force Characteristics of the Population, by Census Tracts: 1960." For 1970, Report PHC(1)-29, Table P-3: "Labor Force Characteristics of the Population: 1970." For 1980, Report PHC80-2-98, Table P-10: "Labor Force and Disability Characteristics of Persons: 1980."

### *Total Unemployment*

From 1960 to 1980, unemployment rose slightly in the SMSA and Boston, increased substantially in tract 812, and, despite fluctuation, showed no overall change in tract 818. The unemployment rate in the SMSA tended to be 1 point lower than in Boston and from 1 to 5 points lower than in the two tracts. The gap between the SMSA and Boston on the one hand and tracts 812 and 818 on the other varied over time, showing overall a substantial increase with respect to tract 812 and a decrease with respect to tract 818.

In the SMSA, Boston, and tract 818, unemployment varied by 1 to 2 percentage points over the 1960–1980 period. These apparently small changes nonetheless resulted in the unemployment rate rising or falling by anywhere from 20% to 50%. Thus, for example, between 1970 and 1980, unemployment rose from 4% to 5% in the SMSA and from 6% to 8% in tract 818 (a 25% increase in both cases) and from 4% to 6% in Boston (a 50% increase). Most striking, however, was the situation in tract 812, where unemployment doubled, rising from 5% to 10%.

### **1985 Update of Socioeconomic Trends in Boston and Roxbury**

Because the most recent census data are from 1980, the Boston Redevelopment Authority's 1985 Household Survey was used to update the analysis of socioeconomic trends. Using the BRA survey, however, means that data are available only for Boston and Roxbury as a whole. Census tract and SMSA data are not available and there is relatively little disaggregation by race.

Table 11 shows that, overall, Roxbury did not fare well compared to Boston in the 1980–1985 period. Median family income grew 38% in Boston, but only 9% in Roxbury. Thus, whereas Roxbury's median family income was 67% of Boston's in 1979, by 1984 it was only 53% of Boston's. Family poverty grew much more rapidly in Boston than in Roxbury (29% versus 6%), but Roxbury's rate was still 45% higher than Boston's in

Table 11

**Median Family Income, Percentage of Families  
Below the Poverty Line, Labor Force Status, and  
Education \* for the Total Population in Boston and  
Roxbury, 1980–1985**

	Median Family Income†	% of Families Below Poverty Line†	% of Persons Aged 16 + Years in Labor Force**	% of Persons Aged 16 + Years Unemployed**	% of Persons Aged 25 + Years Graduated from High School	College
Boston						
1980	\$16,062	17%	62%	6%	68%	20%
1985	22,200	22	67	6	77	28
Roxbury						
1980	10,773	30	56	7	55	8
1985	11,750	32	63	14	62	14
% of Change 1980–1985						
Boston	38%	29%	8%	0%	13%	40%
Roxbury	9	6	13	100	13	75

\* The percentages given for high school and college completion are not mutually exclusive. For example, 68% of Boston's adults graduated from high school and 20% graduated from college. That is, 20% of all adults graduated from college, not 20% of those who graduated from high school.

† Data for median family income and family poverty are for 1979 and 1984. Source tables gave 1984 dollar amounts in rounded form only.

\*\* Rates for 1980 differ from those given in the U.S. Census, which shows slightly lower labor force participation and higher unemployment rates for Boston and Roxbury.

Source: All documents listed here are from the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Boston. Margaret C. O'Brien, *Diversity and Change in Boston's Neighborhoods, 1970-80*, Document No. 169, 1985; Gregory Perkins, *Roxbury Neighborhood Profile, 1987*, Document No. 265, February 1987; Margaret C. O'Brien and Deborah A. Oriola, *Boston at Mid-Decade: Results of the 1985 Household Survey, II: Income and Poverty*, Document No. 290, May 1987; Ann Hafrey, *Boston at Mid-Decade: Results of the 1985 Household Survey, III: Labor Force*, Document No. 291, 1987; *Roxbury Neighborhood Profile, 1988*, Document No. 323, 1988.

1984. Labor force participation grew more slowly in Boston than in Roxbury, but in 1984 Boston's labor force participation rate was still 4 points higher than Roxbury's. Furthermore, Roxbury's unemployment had doubled, from 7% to 14%, while Boston's had remained the same. Thus Roxbury's gains in labor force participation would appear to have been offset by the rise in its unemployment. Finally, as Boston and Roxbury experienced equal rates of growth in the percentage of adults aged twenty-five and over who had completed high school, the gap widened very slightly (but this does not show in Table 11, due to rounding). Both experienced rapid growth in the proportion of college graduates. Roxbury's growth was nearly twice Boston's, so the gap between them was reduced. Yet the percentage of college graduates in Roxbury in 1985 was still only half that in Boston.

**Summary**

Roxbury has been populated by a succession of ethnic and racial groups over the last century. Simultaneously, it has become increasingly poor, despite the continued presence of a middle class. In 1980, Roxbury was predominantly black, containing one-third of Boston's and one-quarter of the SMSA's black population. Although the majority of its twenty-one



census tracts were more than 50% black, they were by no means uniform with respect to racial composition. Some tracts had sizable white and Spanish-origin groups, the latter of which tended to be extremely poor, even by Roxbury standards.

In 1980, Roxbury showed considerable diversity with respect to education, labor force participation, and income. Nevertheless, a large proportion of its population lacked a variety of essential resources. Compared to the total Boston and SMSA populations, Roxbury inhabitants generally were less likely to have finished high school, and even less likely to have finished college. They also were less likely to be in the labor force but, if they were in it, were more likely to be unemployed. They also had substantially lower incomes and higher rates of poverty. In over half the tracts, for example, median family income was less than half the SMSA median. In almost one-third, 30% or more of the families lived below the poverty line, versus 7% in the SMSA as a whole. Roxbury clearly was disadvantaged in comparison to the city and metropolitan area surrounding it.

To put this cross-sectional description into perspective, trends over twenty years were analyzed as well. Longitudinal data for the total population in the two Roxbury tracts show that, between 1960 and 1980, tract 812 increasingly fell behind the SMSA in income, education, and labor force participation, while its poverty and unemployment rates pulled further ahead of the SMSA's. On every count, then, tract 812's level of disadvantage increased. Tract 818's experience was different. Compared to the SMSA, its education and unemployment gaps narrowed slightly, yet its income and labor force participation increasingly fell behind and its poverty rate did not change. Furthermore, poverty rates in tracts 812 and 818, at 37% and 27%, respectively, were extremely high. Thus, despite registering some absolute gains (i.e., increased educational attainment and income), on most counts these two tracts fell further behind; by 1980, they were less well off relative to the SMSA and Boston than they had been in 1960.

Since Roxbury has been a black area for some decades, merely comparing its tracts' total populations and those of Boston and the SMSA would have presented an inadequate picture. It was therefore important to compare data for Roxbury blacks with data for the black and total populations of Boston and the SMSA.

A very great disparity existed in income and poverty between blacks and the population as a whole in the SMSA in 1980 and smaller, though still important, differences existed in education and unemployment. A similar though less pronounced pattern of differences was evident within the Boston population as well. Interestingly, black labor force participation rates were quite similar to those for the total population. Within the five Roxbury tracts whose populations were less than 50% black, median family income was much lower for blacks than for the tract as a whole, even though black labor force participation and educational attainment tended to be higher than they were for the population of the tract as a whole. The recurring theme is that equal or greater levels of labor force participation (and in some cases education) were not sufficient to raise black median family income to the level found in the general population.

A very different result emerges from comparing the median family income for blacks in Roxbury with the medians for black families in the SMSA and Boston. It has been shown that the median family income for each tract's total population was much lower than the medians for the total population in the SMSA and Boston. By contrast, the median family income for black families exceeded the Boston median for black families in one-third of the tracts and the SMSA median in one-quarter of the tracts. Whereas Roxbury families in general were worse off than families living elsewhere in the SMSA, Roxbury's black families were not necessarily worse off than black families living elsewhere.

While to some it might seem counterintuitive, tract 818, with its substantially higher concentration of blacks than tract 812 (64% in 1960 versus 13% in tract 812 and 90% in 1980 versus 63% in tract 812), fared somewhat better than tract 812 with respect to income, poverty, education, labor force participation, and unemployment. This finding holds up for the tracts' total population as well as their black populations.

It is also true that the proportion of blacks in both tracts increased substantially from 1960 to 1980 and that, concurrently, the gap in education, labor force participation, income, and poverty between the two tracts and the total SMSA and Boston populations for the most part widened. Here, then, was a predominantly black area, a significant proportion of which was in some degree cut off from the economic forces benefiting most of the population. Indeed, those factors that led to an improving picture for the SMSA as a whole (e.g., an expanding local economy driven by growth in high technology, finance, and services) did not reach equally into these Roxbury tracts.<sup>30</sup> Nor, for that matter, did they reach equally into Boston, which also fell behind the SMSA during this period with respect to income and labor force participation.

Most recently, from 1980 to 1985, Roxbury's median family income fell further behind that of Boston. Its poverty rate increased. Its actual employment (i.e., labor force participation minus unemployment) declined. Its educational attainment levels rose but still remained well below Boston's. In short, the gains that were made, even where they narrowed the gap between Roxbury and Boston, scarcely suggest a major improvement in the competitiveness of Roxbury's residents in the city's (much less the SMSA's) labor market.

Despite exceptions, Roxbury's population as a whole has not caught up with the populations of the city of Boston and the Boston SMSA. Indeed, it appears that an underclass does exist in Roxbury and is, perhaps, increasing. Part of the explanation for why some of Roxbury's population belongs to the underclass lies in the widening educational and economic gaps illustrated here. It is particularly striking that such gaps should occur and remain in a metropolitan area with so many educational resources and so broad an economic base. Yet it is evident that a substantial proportion of Roxbury residents have been limited in their access to and benefit from education, work, and political participation.

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## Conclusions

The data presented in the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses are open to differing interpretations. Superficially, they might seem to support a culture of poverty analysis, which, among other supposed attributes of the poor, emphasizes low commitment to work and little predilection for planning ahead.<sup>31</sup> Low labor force participation could be taken as indicating low commitment to work (although it could just as well reflect a variety of legitimate reasons for not attempting to work, such as age, disability, or the presence of young children), while low educational attainment could be read as failure to plan for the future.

Unfortunately for the culture of poverty argument, even those Roxbury tracts that met or exceeded Boston and SMSA levels of labor force participation and education came nowhere near their levels of income (with one exception). Furthermore, even among those tracts with the highest labor force participation and the lowest unemployment, poverty was often exceptionally high compared to Boston and even more so to SMSA rates. These data support very strongly the concept of the working poor, namely, the idea that a segment of the population exists which, despite working on a regular and more or less full-



time basis and therefore espousing the work ethic, nevertheless remains stuck in poverty. The data therefore do not support a culture of poverty explanation.

These same data, however, do support a structural analysis, focusing on the social, economic, and political organization of the environment in which Roxbury exists and its residents must function. If those tracts that had labor force participation and education levels equal to or greater than those of the SMSA and Boston but had substantially lower incomes, then something other than failure to act on dominant cultural values must be involved. What has happened is that key social institutions have evolved in ways that, whether intentionally or not, limit the participation, and thus the progress, of racial and economic minorities.

Structural analysis suggests, for example, that the educational system (and for that matter the political system that governs education) supports or even enhances socioeconomic stratification by enabling a much lower than average proportion of the adult population among blacks and in Roxbury to achieve the level of educational attainment needed to compete successfully in the local economy. For example, even though the Boston SMSA contains a large number of colleges and universities, the rate of college graduation among the area's blacks is far lower than that for the population as a whole. Blacks, therefore, are not benefiting from the presence of abundant local resources in higher education. Furthermore, lower levels of education were associated with lower levels of labor force participation and higher levels of poverty in many Roxbury tracts. In short, the educational system, along with other social institutions, contributes to the reproduction of the class system.<sup>32</sup>

Additional strong support for a structural explanation comes from the often profound disparities observed by race not only for education but also for income, poverty, labor force participation, and unemployment. Despite a major economic boom in Boston, the area's blacks have yet to obtain more than a disproportionately small share of its benefits.

Of course, no one social institution by itself is responsible for poverty, inequality, or any other social outcome, because none functions alone. Each institution contributes to a given social outcome in part through its effect on the ways in which classes of individuals are able to interact with other institutions. Thus, for example, individuals encounter certain effects of their experience with the educational system only when they attempt to enter the labor market, obtain health services, or participate in political processes. We thus return here to the idea of socially structured alternatives. It is the joint functioning — the continual interactions at different levels — of social institutions that produces the differing sets of alternatives available to individuals at each point in the social structure. If the range of those alternatives is such that a group (the poor or a racial minority, for example) is disproportionately unable to participate in social institutions and benefit from their resources, then the remedy lies in changing the social structure.

Initially, this was seen in terms of providing equal opportunities for education, jobs, income, and housing. The passage of legislation to support equal opportunity was, in fact, an attempt to create structural change in the social system. It has since become clear that equality in opportunity does not necessarily result in equality of outcomes.<sup>33</sup> For equal opportunity to work, there must also be equal preparation, for without it there cannot be equality in the ability to take advantage of opportunities. The structural factors that have been discussed jointly determine the extent to which equal preparation, equal opportunity, and equal outcomes occur.

In the face of compelling evidence that socioeconomic disparity not only continues to exist but also appears to be growing, it is necessary to consider yet again the nature of available solutions. Structural explanations of poverty take both the individual living in



poverty and the slum in their broader social contexts, seeing them as part of, and therefore affected by, the social system in which they are situated. From this perspective it is assumed that the problem of poverty is systemic in origin. The focus then is not only on the individual part of the socioeconomic structure — the various social institutions — but also on system interconnections. Because poverty is so deeply entrenched and derives from so many parts of the system, it is beyond the capacity of any one part (including government) to develop and implement a fully effective solution. It therefore makes sense to bring together representatives from those parts of the local socioeconomic system that appear to have the greatest bearing on the future of poverty.

This means identifying the stakeholders in the situation, those who either have a lot to gain or a lot to lose, depending on whether or not the situation changes.<sup>34</sup> In this case, the stakeholders include local government, the private sector, the educational system (including colleges and universities), unions, and, most especially, the disadvantaged themselves.

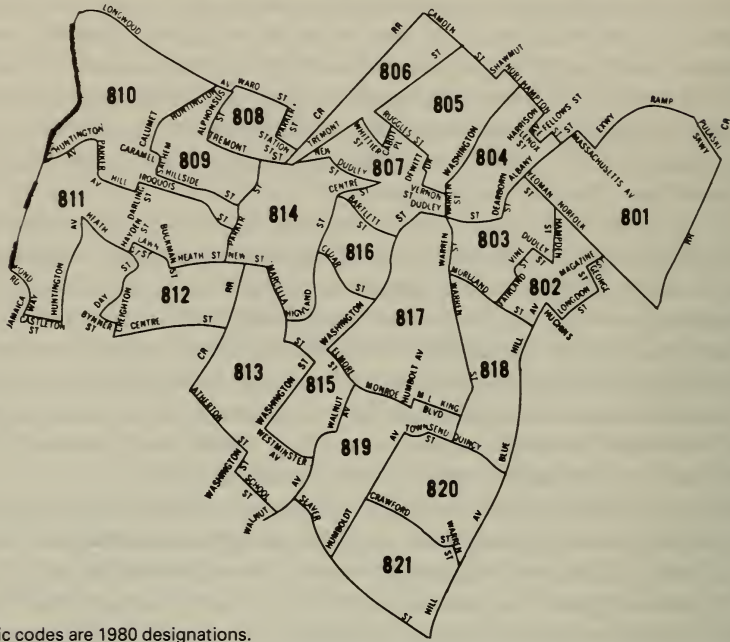
The primary goal of such a group should be to achieve greater balance in minority participation at all levels of the local socioeconomic structure. Development of a coherent system of incentives aimed at integrating public and private efforts would support this goal. These incentives should be adequate to encourage the necessary structural changes in each of the sectors whose representatives make up the task group.

It is difficult to set out the precise tasks of such a group because it is up to any group of this kind to develop its own agenda, based on a mutually agreed on definition of the problem to be addressed. It is easier to forecast the types of obstacles it almost certainly will encounter. Entrenched power is a potential stumbling block. An example of entrenched power is unions, which affect both the provision of education in the public schools and access to jobs in trades such as construction. While unions originally are formed to redress serious power imbalances, it sometimes happens that they later contribute to power imbalances vis-à-vis other groups. Including representatives of teachers' and trade unions (and of all other relevant local interests) allows them to contribute to the development of solutions while still protecting the concerns of their members.

Some cooperative, cross-sectoral efforts of the sort proposed here are already under way in Boston. The Boston government has established a Jobs Residency Policy, which is intended to increase the percentage of Boston residents (including a specified proportion of minorities) who are employed in city-funded construction projects. In addition, the city's recent hiring policies have led to an increase in minority employment in government jobs. Another new approach is called Parcel-to-Parcel Linkage, in which, as a condition for building in downtown Boston, developers must provide funds for a neighborhood project elsewhere in the city.<sup>35</sup>

These are examples of potentially effective efforts to arrive at a solution to local racial and economic disadvantage. Whether they work will depend in large measure on the extent to which their design and implementation reflect the needs of each of the interest groups involved. Solutions that are based on the cooperation of representatives of all the stakeholders are far more likely to receive the active support of the wider community. In the end, poverty — and economic disadvantage more generally — is a community issue and the solution must be a community solution.❧

**Appendix A**  
**Roxbury, Massachusetts, Census Tracts, 1960**



*Note:* Numeric codes are 1980 designations.

*Source:* U.S Bureau of the Census. (June, 1983). *1980 Census of Population and Housing Census Tracts*. Boston, Mass. Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. PHC80-2-98. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

**City of Boston Planning Districts**



*Source:* Boston Redevelopment Authority.

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## Notes

1. *The American Heritage Dictionary*.
2. See Alan Lupo, "The Two Cities of Boston," *Boston Globe*, 17 August 1985, 19; John Camper, "Tribune Series Angers North Lawndale Leaders," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 November 1985, Section 2, 3; Hodding Carter III, "Second-to-None Coverage of the Other America," *Wall Street Journal*, 5 December 1985, 31.
3. See Colleen Cordes, "Chicago Sociologist Challenges 'Culture of Poverty' as Explanation for Plight of Inner-City Poor," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 33 (11 March 1987): 7; Bill Neikirk, "Brookings Report Cites Racial Bias," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 April 1985, Section 1, 1; William Julius Wilson, "Cycles of Deprivation and the Underclass Debate," *Social Service Review* (December 1985): 541–59.
4. See Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Stephen J. Pfohl, *Images of Deviance and Social Control: A Sociological History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 135–36, 145–55, 158.
5. See Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, 128–53.
6. See R. C. Longworth, "Lawndale's Lots Eerily Empty, Haunted by Economy That Died," *Chicago Tribune*, 17 November 1985, Section 1, 1.
7. While blacks and Hispanics now predominate in inner cities, whites constitute the majority of those living in poverty in the United States. See Leonard Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1983), 19.
8. See Marshall B. Clinard, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).
9. See Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America*, 117–39; Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," in *On Understanding Poverty*, ed. D. P. Moynihan (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 187–200.
10. See Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America*, 14, 111, 131, 133.
11. See Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 102–3, 224.
12. Segmented labor market theory proposes that the labor market is divided into primary and secondary sectors. The primary sector contains the desirable jobs, characterized by higher skills, good wages, and stable working conditions (low turnover, high security), and is well organized in terms of job allocation, the provision of training, and the determination of wages and paths for advancement. The primary sector is divided into two tiers. Professional and managerial jobs are in the upper tier, while blue-collar and some white-collar jobs are in the lower tier. Secondary sector jobs have minimal entry requirements, are poorly paid, are unstable, and offer little opportunity for advancement. Not only does labor market structure significantly affect individual economic outcomes, but family background and educational attainment also have much to do with where one enters and subsequently ends up in the labor market. Segmented labor market theory, then, considers the ways in which different social institutions interact and thereby affect the individual's life chances. See Suzanne Berger and Michael J. Piore, *Dualism and Discontinuity in Industrial Societies* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1971), and Paolo Villa, *The Structuring of Labor Markets: A Comparative Analysis of the Steel and Construction Industries in Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
13. See Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America*, 22.
14. In 1981, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics determined that a family of four would require an income of \$15,323, which is 65% higher than the poverty line, to ensure minimum coverage of all its basic needs. Families whose income fell in the interval between \$9,287 and \$15,323, while not officially poor, would nevertheless experience substantial deprivation. See Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America*, 26.



15. For the definition of population of Spanish origin, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1983), B-3.
16. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98, B-3, B-4, B-10.
17. See Margaret C. O'Brien and Deborah A. Oriola, *Boston at Mid-Decade: Results of the 1985 Household Survey, II: Income and Poverty*, Document No. 290, Boston Redevelopment Authority, Boston, May 1987, 55-62.
18. See Robert Rosenthal, Bernard Bruce, Faith Dunne, and Florence Ladd, *Different Strokes: Pathways to Maturity in the Boston Ghetto* (report to the Ford Foundation) (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1976).
19. See Frank Sweetser, *The Social Ecology of Metropolitan Boston: 1950* (Boston: Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, Division of Mental Hygiene, 1961).
20. See Gregory Perkins, *Roxbury Neighborhood Profile, 1987*, Document No. 265, Boston Redevelopment Authority, Boston, February 1987.
21. See Rosenthal et al., *Different Strokes*, 16.
22. See Joe R. Feagin, *Ghetto Social Structure: A Survey of Black Bostonians* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1974), 13.
23. See Jonathon Kaufman, "Upscale Rental Plan Stirs Roxbury Fight," *Boston Globe*, 11 October 1985, 1.
24. See Phillip L. Clay, James E. Blackwell, et al., *The Emerging Black Community in Boston: A Report* (Boston: University of Massachusetts, Institute for the Study of Black Culture, 1985).
25. See Michael K. Frisby, "Flynn Said to Be Stung by Report on Blacks," *Boston Globe*, 6 December 1985, 19, 23; Michael K. Frisby, "City: Blacks Have Gained in Jobs, Housing, Income," *Boston Globe*, 7 December 1985, 21, 22.
26. See O'Brien and Oriola, *Boston at Mid-Decade*, 26.
27. See Charles Kenney, "The Politics of Turmoil," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 19 April 1987, 18.
28. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98, B-4. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people of Spanish origin may be of any race.
29. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing: Census Tracts*, Boston, Mass., Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, PHC80-2-98, Table P-15.
30. See Alexander Ganz and Gregory Perkins, "The Massachusetts Economy: The Good News and the Bad News," Document No. 305, Boston Redevelopment Authority, Boston, 21 October 1987, Section 1, "The Growth Record."
31. See Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America*, 120.
32. See Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America*, 149; Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, 102.
33. See James E. Blackwell and Phillip Hart, *Cities, Suburbs, and Blacks: A Study of Concerns, Distrust and Alienation* (Bayside, NY: General Hall, 1982), 2.
34. See Ian I. Mitroff, *Stakeholders of the Organizational Mind* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983), 1-12, 18-27. Mitroff uses the concept with regard to a specific (i.e., focal) organization and those organizations and interest groups within its environment that are crucial to its functioning. The stakeholder approach, however, should be equally useful in identifying the key players in ongoing social conditions such as poverty and in bringing them together to work out mutually acceptable solutions.
35. See Kenney, "The Politics of Turmoil," 18; "New Horizons for Roxbury," Document No. 199, Boston Redevelopment Authority, Boston, 1986.