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The purpose of this study is to determine the viability of churches located in high poverty neighborhoods in an urban area. This study is meant contribute to Wilson’s discussion of the instability of institutions in socially isolated neighborhoods. Race is a variable of interest because of the legacy of the Black Church as a key institution for the African American community. The geographic focus is on the Cincinnati metropolitan area, comparing data from Cincinnati City directories across a five-year time period. U.S. Census data were used to locate churches in tracts and to determine tract level poverty estimates, race and other demographic variables. Data were analyzed to determine if poverty levels or other demographic factors had an effect on whether churches were considered “viable” over this time period. The results of logistic regression analysis suggest that church viability is diminished at high levels of poverty regardless of neighborhood race composition.
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Chapter I: Introduction

During the winter energy crisis of 2001, a Cincinnati newspaper headline reads, “Rising heat bills squeeze churches” (Cincinnati Post 1-20-01). It is easy to forget that the clergy, in addition to concerns primarily ethereal, are weighed down by earthly debts due to local energy companies. With skyrocketing gas prices, a local minister predicted “churches with ministries to the poor may get spread thin in the spring when low-income people are more likely to get their utilities cut off for lack of payment” (Cincinnati Post 1-20-01). In some areas of the city, the reciprocal relationship between church and community stretches available resources to an extreme. While clergy look for bigger baskets to pass on Sundays, so must congregants find pants with deeper pockets. For the church, as for any economic institution, output is a function of input (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark 1995). Thus, “the dialectic between other-worldly versus this-worldly” is held in dynamic tension (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, p. 12).

The unique challenges churches face in an urban environment cannot be described without understanding the interaction between race and poverty. In a 1994 article discussing urban poverty, Jargowsky’s research concludes that “Both the number and percentage of the black poor in ghettos has increased substantially since 1980” (Jargowsky: 295). The Midwest region saw an increase in blacks residing in concentrated poverty from 19.5 to 32.5 percent from 1980 to 1990. These areas of urban concentrated poverty have been termed “socially isolated”, and are considered unique in that they are isolated from local institutions (Wilson 1996). Can this also be said of the churches harbored in socially isolated inner city neighborhoods?

Historically, we consider the “Black Church” to be a strong and integrative institution (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Bellah argues, “historically, the church has been an essential place of refuge and empowerment for black people in America” (Bellah 1991, p. 212). The Black
Church has been unique in that, while blacks were denied access to certain institutions in the larger society, the church developed around the performance of important secular as well as spiritual roles. Over time and as the result of socio-historical factors, the church grew into an encompassing institution defined as the center of the black community and of social, political, and spiritual life (Bellah 1991). But, does this depiction hold true in predominately black urban areas experiencing extreme poverty? Are high poverty neighborhoods decaying around historically strong Black Churches, or are religious institutions faltering as communities become economically and socially disorganized?

**Statement of the Problem**

Wilson’s depiction of a socially isolated neighborhood is important in that it describes an area that is qualitatively distinct from the larger community (1996). An individual’s life chances are determined by living in a state of poverty, but these circumstances are compounded by the structural reality of experiencing individual poverty within the context of a poverty stricken environment (Wilson 1996). According to Wilson, socially isolated communities may lack enough social and economic capital to sustain vital institutions (1996). As poverty increases a neighborhood will lose the sufficient economic base required to sustain businesses and institutions (Bingham and Zhang 1997). Jargowsky identifies the absence of institutions in census tracts where 40 percent of the population lives in poverty (1994). At such extreme levels of poverty, neighborhoods undergo increased disorganization, which weakens social cohesion across the community. For this reason, we can think of local institutions as a barometer for community organization (Wilson 1996).

Importantly, without a socially cohesive and economically stable population, it may be difficult for a community to sustain an institution such as a church. Just as a church requires
certain resources of its community, it is in a position to be an integrative force. It can strengthen the neighborhood by distributing social and economic capital across the social space and being the linkage to other community institutions inside and outside the community (Wilson 1996). As such, a church strengthens, as it is strengthened by, its community.

In the predominately black community, if there is concentrated poverty, what happens to the strong Black Church? Do churches disappear from the communities as their economic base weakens? If churches are not viable in underclass black neighborhoods, we might expect unmet needs in the economic, social, and spiritual realm.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between concentrated neighborhood poverty and church viability, particularly with regard to the Black Church. Is the church an indicator or a determinant of a community’s health in neighborhoods that have been called socially isolated? While many of these relationships may be reciprocal in nature, and their resolve beyond the scope of this study, I think it important to explore how churches are distributed in high poverty neighborhoods over time. The Black Church is of particular interest because of its known durability and centrality in the lives of African Americans. As such, race may predict the presence of the church in a community, while poverty may predict its absence. That is, high levels of poverty reduces the resource base on which the church may depend for survival.

This study focuses on churches in the Cincinnati metropolitan area, comparing data from Cincinnati City directories at different points in time to determine which churches are sustained through the period. U.S. Census demographic data were used to locate churches in tracts to determine tract level poverty estimates, race, age, and community stability demographics. I
analyzed these data to determine factors that affect the viability of individual churches and address whether even the Black Church is “at risk” in economically depressed areas of the city.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The Black Church: its history, role and function in the community

Survey research reveals that blacks attend religious services at higher rates than whites and feel more strongly about their beliefs. Using several national data sets it was found that 80.1 percent of blacks compared to 51.5 percent of whites claim that religious beliefs were important in their lives. Blacks have higher religious participation rates regardless of SES (socio-economic status), geographic region, or religious affiliation. Historians explain these differences by noting differences in socio-historical factors that have shaped the African American experience (Taylor 1996).

Survey data illustrates that the role of the church is not confined to religious life but is an integral player in community life. Using the National Survey of Black Americans, a representative sample of adult blacks, Taylor et al. (1987) found that, of those who believe that the church has helped the condition of blacks, 13.6 percent believed that the church has helped spiritually compared to 62.5 percent that claim that the church helped personally or socially. Respondents said the church takes an active role in lending money, helping the sick, and providing food and clothing. It was also said that the church is fundamental in “holding blacks together”, and it was identified as the only place blacks could “gather and interact as a community” (Taylor et al., 1987, p. 135). The perception, then, is that the church plays a central role in the black community and is not limited to the satisfaction of spiritual needs.

Literature that reviews the history of the Black Church suggests that even as economic and social opportunities have opened up for blacks, religion is the primary institution in African-American communities (Glenn and Gotard 1977; St. George and McNamara 1984; Taylor 1988: cited in Johnson et al. 1991). Religious institutions play important roles in “...promoting racial
awareness and identity (Ellison 1991), political socialization and mobilization (Wilcox & Gomez 1990), [and] social service provision...” (Caldwell, Green & Billingsley 1992; cited in Ellison and Sherkat 1995: 1416). Religious participation defines what it means to be black. It is part of African-American identity to engage in religious and church behaviors (Beeghely 1981). Smith claims the church “…has functioned as ‘the tie that binds’ the fabric of institutions, organizations, and diverse forms of socially created structures that sustain and vitalize life in the African-American community” (1993: 124). It is clear “the importance and influence of the church on the social, economic, and political development of black communities has been well documented” (Drake and Clayton 1945; Frazier 1974; Korris 1981; Woodson 1939; Young 1932; cited by Taylor et al. 1987: 123). Scholars have argued that historically there has been no institutional alternative to churches for blacks (Wilson 1979). “…Because of a long history of racial oppression and the absence of strong secular organizations, African Americans have historically looked to their churches as their chief source of culture, music, values, community cohesion, and political activism” (Cavendish 1999: 373).

We can begin to understand the institutional centrality of the Black Church by noting the roles that have developed for the church as products of society wide structural conditions (Cavendish 1999). Chaves and Higgins (1992) examine the expanded role set of the church beyond the spiritual. “A long history of persecution and extremely limited opportunities for organizing secular social, political, and economic organizations has produced black churches which performed functions and tasks beyond those traditionally religious” (1992: 425). Chaves and Higgins (1992) compare directly the non-religious activity of black and white congregations, in attempts to discern differences in role performance in their communities. They predicted that black congregations will be more involved in both secular activities that address underprivileged
populations in surrounding communities and general civil rights activities. A random sample of congregations yielded findings that suggest that black congregations are not more involved in general secular activities, but in the specific social service and civil rights activities suggested above. When control variables were used, it was found that the race effect was not explained away by differing sizes of congregations, financial resources, region, or urbanity (1992). In sum, black congregations were more involved in their local communities and in civil rights activities than were white congregations.

In response to a unique social historical context, the Black Church has defined itself as an institution able to meet needs that transcend the spiritual. In the Black Church, spiritual concerns have become community concerns and vice versa (Taylor et al. 1996). The line between “the social” and “the ethereal” has become blurred, as this broad definition of the church has become central to the definition of the community. Historians have considered the Black Church a central institution, as it has become the foundation for other successful institutions in the black community (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Furthermore, historical factors point to the varied roles the church has played over time, including social and political aims.

The church has taken on political roles throughout its history and continues to do so. Most are familiar with the connection between the church and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, where the church served as a base for mobilizing for political and social change. In a recent study of local politics in New York, Owen (1997) shows how church based non-party organizations are still instrumental in acquiring political representation for inner city blacks. When political institutions have failed to adequately represent blacks, the church has taken over this role. Owen cites unresponsive political parties as the impetus for the formation of church-based political groups where blacks developed alternative strategies to gain political strength.
In addition to strictly systems-based explanations of the Black Church, the creation of a “Church Culture” is seen as a byproduct of institutional centrality. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) describe “Black Sacred Cosmos” as the unique religious worldview that defines black Christianity and unifies the black church community. Social forces that led to institutional centrality also led to a shared group experience that translates into a unique interpretation of reality. Reflecting oppression and lack of mainstream representation, the “Black Sacred Cosmos” has been thousands of years in development. It shapes perceptions of the world and therefore unifies persons across class boundaries and in spite of differentiation. “Black Sacred Cosmos” is a central part of black heritage that profoundly affects political, economic, spheres of life (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). In this way, spiritual concerns are community concerns. Church culture is seen as the foundation for secular endeavors.

Emotional expression is often considered deviant for non-dominant groups (Hercus 1999). Certainly the type of music, dance, call and response worship, etc. associated with black religious experience can trace its source back to Africa (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). These forms of expression, however, may have become more salient as blacks were denied emotional expression by mainstream institutional outlets. An ethnographic study of “emotional” worship services in lower-class African-American communities illustrates how feelings are of primary importance in these situations (Nelson 1996). Clapping, singing, standing, and swaying are typical response behaviors called for at an emotional worship service, while shouting is an extreme form of sensational behavior (1996). Nelson (1996) argues, that the wider society has not provided outlets for emotional expression, so the church may again be compensating for this structural shunning.
Pattillo-McCoy’s (1998) study demonstrates how “church culture” serves as the foundation through which problems are solved. Church culture and worship strategies provide the framework through which community issues are addressed. In a community study, Pattillo-McCoy illustrates how “curbing youth delinquency, closing a neighborhood drug house, and attracting voters are addressed through black church ritual...”(1998: 781). Church based organizations do not only take place within the church, but they combine the expressiveness of the church service with the instrumentality of their secular purpose (Nelson 1996). Using call and response and emotional worship practice, borrowed from the church service, church culture serves as a strategy for reaching secular goals. As such, the Black Church is described as a “more encompassing institution” than white religious institutions (1998: 781). This is true both because of the instrumental roles they play and because the expressive roles they play are shaped by church culture (Pattillo-McCoy 1998) and the “Black Sacred Cosmos” (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Sociological forces have created a Black Church that has been one of the few institutions available to blacks in reaction to discrimination and segregation. “The significance of the church may be attributed largely to its position as one of the few institutions within the black community that is primarily built financed and controlled by blacks” (Drake and Clayton 1945; Frazier 1974; Nelsen and Nelsen 1975; in Taylor et al. 1987: 123). In this way, blacks have the opportunity to participate in roles denied to them in wider society.

In sum, it is clear that the Black Church is a unique institution that engages in functions that are religious as well as secular above and beyond the functions of white congregations. But this expanded role set is not the only characteristic that sets the Black Church apart from other religious institutions. As discussed before, the Black Church has a unique approach in that
spiritual and the civic obligations are closely entwined. The Black Church serves different functions not just in outcome but also in process.

Will the Black Church remain a key institution in the future?

While there is much research focusing on the significance of the Black Church historically, there is debate around predicting its continuing centrality. Scholars have argued that in urban areas, especially outside of the South, availability of a wider range of secular activities and benefits, often provided by the southern rural churches, have made the church less central in the urban environment (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). At the same time, scholars point out that race is still a significant predictor of religious participation. Woodward (1988) examines black participation in voluntary institutions in urban environments and finds that church groups are the most popular voluntary associations for blacks. According to Woodward, education is the best predictor for participation. This may suggest that, given the opportunity to participate in more secular groups, educated blacks have turned to the church as their association of choice. This finding could also reflect the continuing significance of race, even if African-Americans are offered more opportunities outside of the church. Thus, even if we can conclude that the church is still the voluntary institution of choice, we cannot use this fact alone to predict the institutional centrality of the Black Church in urban areas.

If society is secularizing, in general, and if race declines in significance, the Black Church could begin to resemble the church confined to the religious polity. Some scholars predict a diminishing role set for the Black Church, as it loses its unique functions to more secular institutions. Chaves and Higgins (1992) and Woodward's (1988) research speaks against this differentiation process of the churches role set in the present. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990)
suggest that we should expect continued partial differentiation, but that a strong and stable Black Church will remain.

Wilson’s (1996) *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* may indicate a weakening church, as the inner city poor become more socially isolated from the black middle class and the numbers of the ghetto unchurched continue to rise (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Wilson argued that as middle class blacks leave inner city neighborhoods, the black community reorganizes along economic lines, leaving poorer blacks physically isolated from successful black institutions (Wilson 1996). This new bifurcation has created two Black Churches (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Gilkes (1998) cites the continuing challenge of the black middle class church to reach out to deprived members. The Black Church has historically fostered settings “where connections can be made across class boundaries” and has used strong kinship ties within churches to unite the black community (Gilkes 1998: 109). Olson suggests that when this happens, the church is a more successful institution (in Rose 2000).

This notion of a weakening of the church has not gone unchallenged. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) reminds us that the difference between black churches and white churches are actually strengths for the black community. Looking beyond institutional explanations, it is these differences that will unite a strong Black Church in the face of challenges of class bifurcation and role differentiation. Pattillo-McCoy cites the unique conception of a Black Christian ethos as a strong and unifying force in the black community, able to link communities across socio-economic lines. This Black Christian ethos works against class stratification of the church and is termed by Pattillo-McCoy as “Church Culture” (1998). Lincoln and Mamiya have developed a similar description with their “Black Sacred Cosmos” (1990).
When looking at why black religious participation is unique, support has been found for the two hypotheses that blacks have been isolated from mainstream institutions and the Black Church has served as an institutional coping mechanism. Therefore, the church has played a larger role in the lives of blacks than white churches generally play for whites. This structural argument may provide a foundation for study, but it also may mislead future research. If the Black Church were a vital institution only because of its instrumental functions, we would see the decline of its significance with the decline of the importance of race, as Wilson (1987) suggests. Pattillo-McCoy’s (1998) research suggests a different outcome. Structural forces may have created the omnipresence of the church in the black community, but brought with it the development of church culture shaped by “Black Sacred Cosmos”. It has created something unique and highly functional in its own right. There is a contention that the importance of the church will decline as broader social opportunities improve for blacks (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, Woodward 1988). The Black Church has developed in response to needs and problems; it also has also created new ways of process and organization. With the blending of the spiritual and the secular, the church, as an expressive-instrumental association, has created a worldview that may persist despite a hypothetical racial equality. For current research purposes, the Black Church’s survival, even when resources are extremely limited, would suggest that church provides a unique arrangement for the community.

Institutional Isolation in an Urban Environment

The effect of concentrated poverty on urban institutions

Recognizing that institutions integrate individual to the community and the community to a larger society (Bellah 1991), we must consider the consequences of a community lacking
institutional resources. Just as SES determines the life chances of the individual, a neighborhood can play a role in determining life chances independent of SES. In a number of communities, individuals experience individual poverty within the context of impoverished neighborhoods. As institutional resources require economic sustenance, communities with insufficient resources will experience a weakened institutional base. We would hypothesize a negative linear relationship between neighborhood poverty and community institutions. If this is true, the question to ask is, to what extent do neighborhoods with high levels of poverty sustain institutions?

As neighborhoods lose their economic base, Wilson contends they lose the ability to sustain thriving and successful institutions and to maintain linkages between institutions inside and outside of the community. Wilson (1987, 1996) has characterized the most extreme of these neighborhoods as being socially isolated. Wilson defines these neighborhoods by “the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society” (Wilson 1987: 60). When a neighborhood cannot provide linkages between individual and larger society, we would expect contextual effects to compound struggles of individuals living in high poverty. Businesses, schools, churches, social clubs and other key institutions are lacking from socially isolated areas. As neighborhood poverty increases we would expect institutional viability to decrease in accordance with the economic resources of its population.

William Julius Wilson’s social isolation argument describes the structural changes that prompted an increase of concentrated poverty in urban areas for African-Americans in the 1970s and 1980s. Wilson contends that urban minorities have been greatly affected by nation-wide changes associated with de-industrialization. Structural economic changes of the past two decades, such as the shift from a goods producing to service producing industries, the polarization of the labor market into low and high wage sectors, innovations and technology, and
relocation of manufacturing industries outside of the inner cities, has left urban minorities vulnerable to unemployment (Wilson 1987). As manufacturing positions decreased in number and relocated away from the central cities, joblessness rose in black neighborhoods.

Problems created by joblessness were compounded by changes in neighborhood class composition. Through the decades there began an increasing exodus of the black middle and working class from the central city neighborhoods to other areas of the city and to the suburbs. During the 40s, 50s, and 60s lower, working and middle class blacks occupied the same or contiguous social space, and there was relatively high interaction between groups of varying economic means. This provided stability in black communities. The depopulation by non-poor blacks led to a reduction in the amount of community structural and cultural resources available in times of need. In the past, these resources had acted as a buffer when the economy recessed and joblessness rose. With the loss of these same resources through out-migration, key institutions, schools, small businesses were weakened. This, in turn, contributed to further social disorder, leaving these communities vulnerable to the ravages of drugs and violence. Formal and informal social controls weakened as “...basic neighborhood institutions were more difficult to maintain” (Wilson 1996: 44). Overall poverty in these areas increased, as social disorganization became the norm. “The vitality of a community’s institutional structure depends on …the economic support and involvement of working people” (Rankin & Quane 2000: 141). Wilson’s idea of social isolation refers to neighborhood deterioration as a result of depletion of economic and social capital.

*Economic aspects of social isolation*
Logically speaking, socially isolated neighborhoods face an increased need for services but a decreased availability of resources to sustain such services. We would predict economic activity to diminish in neighborhoods that do not have the resources to support it. Key institutions and local business provide the infrastructure for the neighborhood. The need for key institutions will increase with an increase in poverty, as business and other associations have fled the community (Rose 2000).

While Wilson sought to define the black underclass, Jargowsky set out to determine how concentrated urban neighborhood poverty should be measured (1994). He determined that neighborhoods in which 40 percent of census tract residents lived in poverty, can be operationally defined as a “ghetto” neighborhood. The likelihood that someone lives in a ghetto is strongly correlated with race and poverty status. In examining 1990 Census data, he found that more than half of ghetto residents were non-Hispanic blacks. He noted that between 1980 and 1990, middle-income blacks and lower income blacks were becoming increasingly bifurcated, resulting in an increasingly segregated black underclass (1994). These findings reinforce Wilson’s hypothesis that the black middle class has been leaving the worst inner city areas, resulting in socially isolated urban black neighborhoods. Although recent work by Jargowsky points out that this trend seems to no longer be on the increase, the fact remains that concentrated poverty was on the rise between 1980 and 1990 (2003).

As an extension of Jargowsky’s work, Bingham and Zhang (1997) investigate the relationship between poverty and economic activities at the neighborhood level. They focus on distressed neighborhoods in an attempt to understand how their economies function under the stress of serving an extremely low-income population. Following Jargowsky, they examined
areas is on areas of concentrated poverty in which 40 percent of residents in the census tract live below the poverty level. These areas are considered high poverty tracts.

Examining central city neighborhoods in seven Ohio cities, their task was to discern between high-income economic activity and ghetto economic activity. Bingham and Zhang (1997) examine 24 types of economic activities and discuss their prevalence relative to neighborhood poverty levels. They found there was a tendency for grocery stores, gasoline stations, eating/drinking places, drug stores, laundry and cleaning services and automotive repair stores to linearly decline as poverty rates increase. For other businesses, there was a flat distribution across neighborhoods of differing income, with the exception of extreme ghettos where presence was much lower. Further, when compared to more affluent neighborhoods, ghetto neighborhoods have higher levels of economic activity with regard to depository banking, furniture repair, and social services and vocational rehabilitation. It should also be noted that with decreased economic activity comes limited neighborhood employment opportunities. “For residents of ghetto areas, this decline means not only fewer and more costly service but also fewer neighborhood employment opportunities” (Bingham and Zhang 1997: 791).

Overall, Bingham and Zhang (1997) found that about 20 percent of economic activities begin to decline as the neighborhood poverty rate reaches 10 percent. By 30 percent poverty, economic activities substantially subside. At 20 percent poverty, neighborhoods show signs of distress; for example, supermarkets and commercial banks are scarce (replaced by mom-and-pop corner stores and check cashing outlets). Bingham and Zhang determine that a neighborhood economy begins to become “ghettoized” at 20 percent poverty. While they expected 40 percent poverty to identify ghettos as in Jargowsky’s work, their research indicates that significant decline may occur at even lower poverty rates.
While this research may lend further credence to institutional disappearance at high levels of poverty, it should be pointed out that services leave these neighborhoods because of lack of economic resources and because of increased social disorganization associated with high poverty. But there are economic activities that are positively related to poverty rate, such as social services and vocational rehabilitation (Bingham and Zhang, 1997). At the same time, social services are different than traditional economic activity. Sustenance of social service mainly comes from outside of the community through private and public funding. Within this framework, if the church is viewed as an agent of social service, it is part of the economy that may be sustained despite poverty levels. If it is viewed as an institution much like a gas station or check cashing service, then the church becomes vulnerable if its surrounding community cannot financially support it.

Social aspects of social isolation

Looking at neighborhood economies is important for two reasons. Neighborhoods with thriving economies generate dollars that can be used towards services. Organizations such as churches and other community groups not only provide services, but also, as a latent function, provide social space that promotes community cohesiveness. Individuals are nested within families, who have neighbors, and interact within institutions in the local and the greater community. Wilson’s social isolation theory (1996) suggests that the community is separated from the society at large. Individuals experience poverty within the context of poor communities. This has ramifications for individuals' integration into the larger community. Lack of social organization in their community is a barrier for integration. As such, an individual who is poor residing in a poor neighborhood is doubly disadvantaged.
Wilson (1996) defines social organization as the extent to which neighborhoods are able to maintain effective social control and realize common goals. He cites three dimensions of social organization: 1) the prevalence, strength and interdependence of social networks; 2) the extent of collective supervision and personal responsibility residents’ exercise; 3) and the rate of residents’ participation in voluntary and formal organizations. Social organization and community cohesiveness falter with the weakening of social networks and diminished participation in formal organizations. Informal social controls weaken as people use adaptive strategies to cope with the dangers of their environment. In this regard, it may be better to be less, rather than more, integrated into the community in these areas. At the same time, these circumstances result in individuals isolated from other individuals occupying the same social space, and isolated from role models, job networks and local institutions. The spiraling effects of neighborhood decline come as social disorganization increases and rate of community participation decreases (Wilson 1996).

Kasinitz and Rosenberg’s (1996) ethnographic study of a Brooklyn neighborhood also predicts the loss of economic institutions at high poverty levels. In their study of Red Hook, New York (at 46 percent poverty), they find that the number of social spaces (as places to develop networks and strengthen communities) decreases as neighborhood economic activity experiences decline. “In many ways the social spaces in which networks can be formed have been sharply constricted…A number of churches have left…and those that remain have curtailed their activities” (1996: 189). They note other social spaces, such as bars and barbershops, have also left. In general they found that social spaces become highly segregated by age, with many spaces being off limits and dangerous to some. Many adults spend less time in public spaces to assure their safety. The loss of gathering places impacts social cohesion and community pride.
This constriction of public life led to homogenous social networks with more private social ties. In this way, patterns of interaction change in response to disorder, independent of economic resources. Social patterns develop in response to a loss of institutions, but these patterns are not conducive to maintaining institutions. In areas of high poverty, social disorder disrupts the kind of institutional resources found in more affluent neighborhoods (Kasinitz and Rosenberg 1996).

In sum, it has long been argued that communities have an influence over persons’ patterns of social relations, as community determines the social environment within which an individual interacts (Rankin and Quane 2000). Adaptive strategies are developed to cope with neighborhood disorder that may be deleterious to local institutions. Distrust and fear of victimization lead to avoidance behaviors, such as staying inside after dark. While these strategies may be functional for individual families, who may not want their family to be influenced by “dangerous” community members, they weaken community ties (Furstenberg cited in Tienda, 1991). Avoidance behaviors weaken the density of social obligation and expectations that form social cohesion. The result is less social support, weak social networks, and reduced distribution of available social capital, not to mention weakened informal social controls. The family becomes isolated from other families in the community as well as from families outside the community (Furstenberg in Tienda, 1991). As Wilson contends, institutional networks are weak in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty.

The Urban Church

*Neighborhood decline’s effect on the Urban Black Church*

It can be argued that the presence and vitality of the Black Church may indicate the health of the neighborhood in the urban community. Kasinitz and Rosenberg (1996) suggest that
churches leave neighborhoods in decline. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) stress that the cultural foundation provided by the “Black Sacred Cosmos” acts as a unifying influence in the face of divisive forces. If the Black Church is in decline, then it is a clear signal of neighborhood decline. Other scholars have suggested that as racial barriers begin to fall, the relevance of the Black Church will wane (Wilson 1996), perhaps making the church less of a barometer of neighborhood viability.

Historically, the urban Black Church grew as northern and western cities offered increased job opportunities for southern blacks. Blacks migrated to these cities during the great migration between 1910-1930, leaving behind strong familial bonds and rural poverty. In a new urban environment, they found solace in the institutions they were most familiar with. The urban church saw an incredible growth during this period and it remained a strong and central institution, even as classes became stratified and more secular opportunities were opened. The urban Black Church did not have the same monopoly on political and social services that the rural Black Church had. Still urban Black Churches provided gateways to secular institutions by offering the church as a gathering place for community groups and social events. Church culture was often the framework that dealt with community problems particular to the black community. Many of these churches prospered and still remain in these communities. Also, these are often the churches that middle class blacks who left the church, return to (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

So how stable are these churches that remain in inner cities? The Black Church is an economic institution that receives and distributes capital (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark 1995). Some studies (May and Nichols in Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) have found church debt to be as high as 71 percent, but a more recent estimate suggests that 55 percent of urban Black Churches are harboring an average of $62,743 (compared to rural churches with an average debt of
This may not mean that churches are struggling. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) remind us that many of the large historically Black Churches remain in low-income neighborhoods and receive tithing from commuting suburbanites. But with increased out-migration of the middle class, the degree to which churches can keep their middle class congregants is unclear. These patterns hinge on the church’s ability to span class divisions.

Wilson’s social isolation theory is predicated on growing disparity between middle and lower class blacks, and the out-migration of middle class blacks from traditional black communities. Traditionally, the church has been the central institution for the black community, in part because of its ability to span class divisions (Wilson 1987). In times of trouble, as during 1980s inner-city cutbacks, churches took over many of the social programs and tended to needs of the community. But, as lower class blacks are continuously met with political, economic, and social alienation, there may be little the church can do to counterbalance this trend. There is a growing number of the unchurched underclass, especially among the youth. The church may not seem of primary importance for youths, when in theory it could make all the difference, by providing role models, networks and job opportunities. If the middle class fails to reach the urban poor, or does not try to do so, two Black Churches may emerge along class lines, one weak and one strong (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Bobby M. Wilson suggests that the strength of the urban Black Church lies in members’ definition of the church as an integral part of a community’s well-being (1979). Therefore, its continued strength would depend on how out-migrants define community and their social space. Olson finds that urban churches, which draw from both inside and outside the community, have the strongest social programs and they respond to the needs of the larger community and not just
it’s congregants (in Rose 2000). The urban churches link with institutions and members that reside beyond its contiguous space is a key to their vitality.

Rose’s study (2000) demonstrates the church’s ability to link to other institutions and to survive in poor areas. In previous work, it was found that community organizations and poverty have a curvilinear relationship (Podolfsky and Dubow 1980, Rose 1995, Skogan 1990 in Rose 2000). As needs increase with poverty, the ability to sustain neighborhood organizations with available resources is diminished. Rose hypothesizes this relationship for religious institutions as well. The measure of social disorganization includes poverty, racial heterogeneity, and residential mobility. To assess parochial control, Rose’s dependent variable is number of religious organizations within locally defined community areas. Data were collected from a Chicago telephone directory and matched to 77 social areas.

Rose found that an increase in poverty is associated with prevalence of religious institutions when up to 20 percent of the residents live below the poverty line. After 20 percent, the number of churches declines. The relationship between poverty and religious organizations was found to be curvilinear; “…the poorest communities have insufficient resources to sustain a proliferation of …[organizations], even as they have the most need for them” (Rose 2000: 354). It was also found that residential mobility and ethnic heterogeneity are negatively related to prevalence of religious institutions, although Rose admits to difficulty disentangling the effects of race and poverty. She also found a link between the prevalence religious organizations and the prevalence of more secular organizations, reinforcing Wilson’s hypothesis that the church can act as a link to larger society. “…Religious groups are instrumental in the development of other community resources” (Rose 2000: 355).
While Olson’s research suggests that churches with the strongest social programs are drawing members from both inside and outside of the community and Gust and Lee finds the longevity of a churches residence in a community determines whether a church has extensive neighborhood oriented programs (in Rose 2000), Smith’s research suggest the link between community and low income neighborhoods is already broken (2001). Survey research conducted in the Indianapolis area found an overall lack of interaction between churches and low-income families across denominational lines. “The physical presence of churches has not, of itself been sufficient to facilitate integration between churches and their low income neighbors” (Smith 2001: 306). Different denominational definitions of community and strategies of outreach are determinants of the success or failure of local outreach. Overall, Smith considers direct outreach to low-income residents in Indianapolis communities to be unsuccessful. Even denominations known to have encompassing definitions of community were not overly successful at outreach. Smith argues that the isolation of the poor from broader social networks explains, in part, why outreach attempts are unsuccessful. Among low income residents, Smith found a lack of exposure to churches and to people involved with churches, suggesting that the non-church affiliated can quickly multiply where the “unchurched” are concentrated. “…The consequence of respondents’ lack of involvement in church life…has been the absence of normative, social service, and policy advocacy support that churches have afforded so many generations of African Americans” (Smith 2001: 308)

McRoberts (2003) might disagree with the proposition that the church is an indicator of the health of the surrounding community. He argues that by characterizing the church as a “local” institution (as described by Bingham and Zhang), we may fail to account for ecological variables acting on the greater urban landscape that have the ability to shape the future of the
church. McRoberts, in his analysis of a Boston neighborhood, highlights how niche churches occupy space in urban neighborhoods for reasons based more on cost efficient real estate than by the location of the communities they serve. Older organizational models (such as catholic parishes) suggest that churches serve the districts in which they occupy. McRoberts asserts that this tie between church and surrounding neighborhood has become more tenuous. His research suggests poor neighborhoods attract churches that have no inclination towards outreach or social service. He may therefore take issue with the blanket supposition that urban churches are “neighborhood churches” (2003).

Summary and Research Questions

The weakening of a community infrastructure occurs when community resources are depleted to the point that they cannot sustain key institutions. It is unclear how social forces act in the process of neighborhood decline. The reciprocal nature of the relationship makes the process difficult to describe with temporal accuracy. Wilson does not emphasize the salience of economic over social variables but discusses them symbiotically. As shown in Diagrams 1 and 2, race may predict the presence of the church in a community, while poverty may predict its absence. Do institutions require both economic and social capital to remain vital? Wilson infers a yes. But questions around tipping points arise. At what point do key institutions leave neighborhoods? Is there a definitive poverty level that indicates social disorder? Can a neighborhood maintain cohesiveness without the economic capital to sustain key institutions? Or are cohesive communities ever able to sustain institutions in the face of overwhelming poverty? Because the Black Church is such a prominent institution for the African American community, the question of interest is whether even this strong institution falters in the face of
Diagram 1. The expected relationship between Racial Composition and Church Viability

Diagram 2. The expected relationship between Poverty and Church Viability
overwhelming poverty. For the sake of social policy, these are the questions that are calling out to be addressed.

Based on previous research and the centrality traditionally afforded the Black Church, three research questions were developed to direct the current study.

R1 Is neighborhood poverty correlated with church viability?
R2 Is race correlated with church viability?
R3 As suggested by Jargowsky’s model of concentrated poverty (and Wilson’s Social Isolation), is there at tipping point where poverty becomes a more salient predictor of church viability?
Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to assess the viability of the churches as an institution in high poverty neighborhoods, with a particular interest in the Black Church’s viability. Of interest is the question whether the Black Church, a historically strong institution, is able to sustain in neighborhoods with weak economies. This question may be of key importance to policy makers considering neighborhood revitalization strategies and the need to funnel resources for maximum impact.

As noted in the previous section, there has been limited empirical work done on churches in impoverished urban neighborhoods. Of all the literature previously reviewed, my study is most in line with Rose’s research and methodology (2000). Rose addresses the topic of social disorganization and parochial control using “number of institutions” per community as the dependent variable. The present study is different in that it uses “church viability” as the dependent variable with race and poverty as key predictors.

Rose notes that measures of social disorganization are highly correlated with race, but omits the race variable (percent black) from the final analysis because of problems with multicollinearity. Because history demonstrates the stability of the Black Church even beyond what is expected from local organizations and even non-black religious organizations, it may be that African-Americans support their church in the face of overwhelming poverty. While it may be difficult to disentangle race and poverty effects in the inner city, race remains a key focus in the present research and will be pursued as an independent variable in this study.

The goal of this analysis is to predict the success and failure of churches based on neighborhood characteristics derived from census tract data. Because the dependent variable is
dichotomous, logistic regression was used as the method of analysis to determine the most salient predictors of church viability. As discussed, it was my hypothesis that race and poverty would influence the presence of churches over time.

Data Collection Procedures and Study Variables

**Dependent Variable: Church Viability** In the proposed study, the dependent variable is church viability. Data were collected from Cincinnati City directories in 1988 and 1993. A list of 565 churches was generated and compared to the 1993 directory to assess stability of the 1988 churches over a 5-year period. Of the 565 churches on the 1988 list, 82.5% were present in 1993 (see Table 1). The original research question suggests that the most important aspect of stability is viability moving forward (staying over a period of years). For this reason, the dependent variable, “Viability”, was created to summarize church presence or absence in data sets from 1988 and 1993 (see Table 1).

To categorize a church as viable, the church was located by address using Tiger Census Street Locator for census data. Street addresses were considered the primary identifier to determine the presence of the church. Addresses for 1988 churches were matched to 116 different census tracts. Churches were coded dichotomously to indicate their presence or absence in the 1993 data set. Of the 565 churches included in the analysis, 99 churches (17.5 %) were coded as “no longer in existence” (466 churches showed viability for that period). Regardless of coding, all churches were matched to census tracts and linked to race, poverty, age and residential mobility data from the 1990 U.S. Census Bureau.
Table 1. Frequencies for Categorical Variables Poverty, Race and Dichotomous Church Viability (1988-93)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low 0-19.99%</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>32.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 20-39.99%</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>31.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High &gt;=40%</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>35.88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low 0-9.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 10-49.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High &gt;=50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Church Viability (1988-93)

Of 563 Churches in 1988 Present in 1993 464 82.42%

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Below Poverty</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>34.59</td>
<td>22.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>50.13</td>
<td>35.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>47.98</td>
<td>8.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (under 18)</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>26.88</td>
<td>9.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (60 plus)</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>18.06</td>
<td>6.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While conducting this study it was assumed that data derived from Cincinnati City directories and the 1990 U.S Census of Population and Housing are accurate. It was recognized that error could be introduced in the coding process. Strict methods were employed to code the “presence” or “absence” of churches over the period. Although the research involved two points of comparison (1988 and 1993), multiple data sets across years were compared to assess continuity. Any discrepancies involving church name or address were strictly documented. Only after documentation was complete were decisions made regarding the coding of the church. If the street address was the same, but the name had changed, it was carefully considered whether this was a new church or just a name change. If only part of the name changed then it was considered the same church. For example, if a church was named “Riverside Church of God” in 1988 and listed as ”Riverview Church of God” in 1993, this discrepancy was documented as a “name change” regardless of how it would ultimately be coded. A name change such as this would not constitute a coding of “no longer in existence”. If a church retained any of the original naming convention or identified the same denomination, it was considered to be a name change rather than a new church. There were no discrepancies (and therefore no additional documentation required) in 94.1 percent of the 565 coded elements.

**Independent Variables, Racial Composition.** Because of the high rates of religious participation among African Americans and the focus on the historical significance of the Black Church, this study uses race as an independent variable. While Rose used a variable operationalizing racial heterogeneity, this study will use percent black per census tract as a predictor variable. The mean percent black per census tract was 50.0 (median 55.4)(see Table 1 and Table 2). Based on previous work, racial composition (or percent black) was collapsed into
three categories (greater than 50% black, 49%-10% black, and less than 10% black) as suggested by Rawlings et al (2004).

**Percent Poverty.** The second independent variable in the analysis is percent poverty. Jargowsky identifies the tipping point for neighborhood decline at the 40 percent poverty level. Both Bingham and Zhang (1997) and Rose (2000) suggest we look at poverty levels lower than 40 percent, because they found neighborhood deterioration or social disorganization effects at 20 percent. To align with this research, poverty has been collapsed into “less than 20 percent poverty”, “20-40 percent poverty” and “greater than 40 percent poverty” levels. While 32 percent of the churches in the sample were located in census tracts where the poverty was “less than 20 percent”, 36 percent of the sample was located in tracts where poverty was greater than 40 percent. The mean poverty level for census tracts was 34.5 (median 29.1).

**Control Variables, Residential Mobility.** This study includes two control variables: residential mobility, and age. As suggested in Rose (2000), residential mobility (defined as “the percent of population five years and older not living in the same house from 1985 to 1990”) was included along with poverty and race as a predictor variable. This is a useful measure in that it should be an indicator of neighborhood integration. Rose acknowledges that this is a flawed measure, as it does not account for out migration. It is, however, the only measure of its kind available through the Census for the year (U.S Census Bureau 1990). Rose (2000) did find this to be a significant predictor in her analysis. In the present study, the mean for residential mobility was 48 percent mobile between 1985 and 1990 (Table 2).
**Age.** Research on church participation shows patterns across age demographics (Taylor 1996). Although not specifically identified in by Rose (2000) or Bingham and Zhang (1997), age distribution is known to affect church participation rates, which could influence church viability. Two age variables were created from the Census (U.S Census Bureau 1990); percent of the population under 18 (mean=27 percent) and percent of the population over 60 (18 percent) (Table 2). It should be noted that there were two cases from the original analysis that were not identified on the age and mobility variables. These two cases were dropped from subsequent analysis where age and mobility are considered part of the full model.

Correlations were run for the continuous variables to check for multicollinearity among variables. This is shown in Table 3. It was found that the strongest positive correlations were between poverty and race (.56), and poverty and age under 18 (.58). Poverty and age over 60 showed a strong negative correlation (-.45). Percent black was correlated with age under 18 (.38). Age under 18 and age over 60 showed an inverse correlation (-.47). Residential mobility had the strongest correlation with age over 60 (.41). While none of the variables showed a strong correlation with the church viability variable, poverty was shown to be negatively correlated and significant as predicted (-.14). There was no significant correlation found between percent black and church viability. Overall, the correlations were not so high as to suggest a problem of multicollinearity in the data. Consequently, all variables could be incorporated in the data analysis.
Table 3. Pearson Correlations for Viability with Poverty, Race, Age, Residential Mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Poverty</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>Age % under 18</th>
<th>Age % 60 plus</th>
<th>% Residential Mobility</th>
<th>Church Viability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Poverty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age % under 18</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age % 60 plus</td>
<td>-0.45</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Mobility</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viability</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bolded correlations show significance at .05 level
**Data Analysis**

Logistic regression was used to assess the probabilities of each of our predictors on the dichotomous outcome variable. The dichotomous dependent variable, “Viability”, was created to describe the absence or presence of the church (coded 0 and 1) from 1988 to 1993. Logistic regression allows for independent predictors that are both categorical and continuous. All independent predictors were collected as continuous variables derived from the census, but race and poverty variables were collapsed into categorical variables. Again, this was done to highlight possible tipping points where the interaction between these variables affects the sustainability of churches. Previous research by Jargowsky suggests that poverty should collapsed into discrete categories, because neighborhoods with greater than 40 percent poverty are characteristically different from neighborhoods with less poverty. The literature does not suggest the same categorical framework for our other predictors, so age and mobility were left as continuous variables.

In the next section, the results of analysis are presented. This is followed by the discussion of those results and assessment of their implications with regard to the viability of the Black Church.
Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this research is to investigate the viability of the urban church, and particularly the urban Black Church. Logistic regression models were used to characterize the relationship between race and poverty and church viability. All of the models include residential mobility and age as constants. Model 1 focuses on racial composition and viability. The reference category for Model 1 is “10 percent black” and is assumed in the intercept. Model 2 looks at poverty and viability. In this model “less than 20 percent poverty” is the reference category. Model 3 includes both racial composition and poverty variables main effects. Lastly, Model 4 examines the interaction effects between race and poverty on the dependent variable, along with racial composition and poverty effects. Table 4 reports coefficients and standard errors for Models 1 through 4. In addition, odds ratios were calculated along with coefficients to help with interpretation and reported in Table 5. Because this was a census rather than a sample, the reporting focus will be on effect sizes rather than statistical significance.

Model 1 includes race variable groupings with “less than 10 percent black” as the reference category. The analysis shows that coefficients for black neighborhoods and mixed neighborhoods are in different directions, but neither has a pronounced effect compared to white neighborhoods, with regards to church viability. In white neighborhoods the odds of viability are 1.33 times greater than in mixed neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods are not that different from white neighborhoods, where the odds of viability increase by a factor of 1.1. Odds ratios for control variables; age and mobility are not very different from 1.0 suggesting limited effects on the dependent variable.
Table 4. Coefficients and Standard Errors from Logistic Regressions of Church Viability on Percent Black, Percent Poor, and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Coeff.</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Coeff.</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Coeff.</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Coeff.</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Race and poverty variables</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Mixed&quot; neighborhood (10-49% Black)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.46</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Black&quot; neighborhood (&gt;49% Black)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20-40% poor neighborhood&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 40% poor neighborhood&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.83</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.22</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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<td>-0.80</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-1.23</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed x &gt; 40% poor</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black x 20-40% poor</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
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<td>Control variables</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 18</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
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<td>Age &gt; 60</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo R&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> "White" (0-10% black) omitted.

<sup>b</sup> <20% poor omitted.

* p < .10; ** p < .05; *** p < .01, two-tailed tests.
Table 5. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression of Church Viability on Percent Black, Percent Poor, and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Ratio</td>
<td>Confidence Intervals</td>
<td>Odds Ratio</td>
<td>Confidence Intervals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and poverty variables</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Mixed&quot; neighborhood (10-49% Black)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Black&quot; neighborhood (&gt;49% Black)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-40% poor neighborhood&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 40% poor neighborhood&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed x 20-40% poor</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed x &gt; 40% poor</td>
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<td>Black x 20-40% poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black x &gt; 40% poor</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
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<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 18</td>
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<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &gt; 60</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> "White" (0-10% black) omitted.

<sup>b</sup> <20% poor omitted.
Results for Model 2, where poverty is the only independent variable, suggest more pronounced effects and in different directions. Where poverty is low, the odds of viability are 2.30 times greater than where poverty is greater than 40 percent (see Table 5.). The odds ratio for “20-39.99 percent poverty” is only slightly over 1.0, but in a different direction compared to high poverty, it is also not significantly different from low poverty. In comparing Models 1 and 2, the main effect for poverty is more apparent than the effect for race. The negative relationship between poverty and viability is also consistent with direction of the relationship that is found in their correlations.

Model 3 includes both race and poverty effects on church viability. In this model, there is an even more pronounced effect of poverty on viability when we control for race. The odds of church viability are 3.39 times greater in the reference group (<10% black, <20% below poverty) than where poverty is greater than 40 percent (see Table 5.). For race, the odds of viability are 2.15 times higher for black neighborhoods (> than 50%) compared to the reference group (<10% black, <20% below poverty). When race is controlled, there is a negative relationship between poverty and viability. When poverty is controlled a positive relationship is found between race and viability. This illustrates the contradictory effects between race and poverty that were proposed in the original argument (see pg. 25).

Finally, Model 4 presents an interaction model to help discern viability at different levels of race and poverty. As such, Model 4 isolates the effects of predictors on the dependent variables. Because it is difficult to understand the effects of the reference category in an interaction model, probabilities of viability at each level of race and poverty were derived to compare effects. These are presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows that across all race-poverty groups, viability ranges from 97 percent to 82 percent viability, with an average of 91 percent.
The variation of probabilities are greater within race groups than between, supporting the findings in main effects models that poverty is the stronger predictor of viability. Furthermore, there is a reduction in church viability at 40 percent poverty for all race groups. For black neighborhoods, viability remains constant where poverty is less than 40 percent (at 97% viability), but there is a sharp decrease at the “40 percent poverty” marker. For mixed race neighborhoods, there is a steady decline in church viability falling about 10 percent from non-poor to poor neighborhoods. Finally, for white neighborhoods, there is a slight increase in viability (3%) from non-poor neighborhoods to those of moderate poverty. Then there is an 11 percent fall in viability in the shift from neighborhoods with a moderate level of poverty to those with more than 40 percent in poverty.

In sum, black neighborhoods have the highest level of church viability when poverty is low (see Figure 1). Moving from non-poor to moderate poverty levels, we see the stability of churches in black neighborhoods, with 97 percent viability. Surprisingly, we see an increase of 3 percent in church viability for white neighborhoods moving from low to moderate levels of poverty; at moderate levels of poverty in white neighborhoods church viability is almost equal to that of comparable black neighborhoods. For mixed neighborhoods, there is a decline of 5 percent church viability, moving from non-poor to those of moderate poverty neighborhoods. Moving from moderate to high poverty neighborhoods, black and white neighborhoods follow the same trend; both fall about 10 percent. The trend for mixed neighborhoods is less dramatic, dropping about another 5 percent to the lowest probability of 82 percent.

While there are some differences in patterns of viability across race categories, the decline in church viability exists for all groups at levels of high poverty. I predicted that
Figure 1.

Probability of Church Viability by Poverty Category for Race Groupings

- White
- Mixed
- Black
churches in black neighborhoods might offer more resilience in the face of poverty, but it appears that church viability decreases in black neighborhoods at a rate similar to other neighborhoods. Overall, average viability may be slightly higher for black compared to white neighborhoods, but there is not any greater stability of the church in the face of high poverty for black neighborhoods. In fact, church viability levels are not much different than in white neighborhoods at moderate and high levels of poverty. Where poverty is at its lowest, black neighborhoods have higher church viability levels than white and mixed neighborhoods. There is, however, a tipping point at 40 percent poverty level for both white and black neighborhoods where viability declines dramatically. For mixed neighborhoods, the decline is more linear, but the “end point” is similar. At high levels of poverty, church viability declines dramatically from the viability seen in neighborhoods with low levels of poverty.
Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

As poverty overtakes neighborhoods, institutions tend to breakdown. But, the Black Church is known to be a historically strong institution and central to black community life. Are the effects of extreme poverty so severe that even the Black Church struggles to remain viable?

Based on the literature three research questions were presented:

R1 Is neighborhood poverty correlated with church viability?
R2 Are race demographics correlated with church viability?
R3 As suggested by Jargowsky’s model of concentrated poverty (and Wilson’s Social Isolation), is there at tipping point where poverty becomes a more salient predictor of church viability?

Based on my analysis, I have concluded that there is affirmative support for each of these questions.

Using interaction models, it was found that race and poverty were associated with church viability. Importantly, however, this relationship is variable across different race groups and poverty levels. In examining the correlations, there was a significant but a weak correlation between poverty (measured as a continuous variable) and church viability (−.14). The race variable, however, was not correlated with viability at all, although it was in the predicted direction. These correlation patterns for poverty and race are mirrored in Models 1 and 2 and 3 of logistic regression models, where poverty can be seen as a more salient predictor of viability. The isolated effects of race and poverty are more evident in the interaction model, where race mitigates the direction of relationship between poverty and viability in some cases, while not changing the overall pattern. As such, it is not surprising that race is not in a direct association with poverty.
Poverty

Using logistic regression models, and particularly Model 4, comparing areas that are non-poor to those of high poverty, there is an average decrease of about 10 percent in church viability regardless of race group. For mixed race neighborhoods, there is a gradual decline of equal proportion across poverty categories mixed neighborhoods. By contrast, there is a dramatic decline in viability at 40 percent poverty for both white and black neighborhoods. This finding lends support to Jargowsky’s framework for looking at the effects of “ghetto” poverty or social isolation in tracts with greater than 40 percent poverty. It demonstrates the possible existence of a “tipping point”, where economies may not be able to sustain institutions such as the church. While Bingham and Zhang (1997) and Rose (1990) found the effects of particular economic and social disorganization variables taking hold at percentages less than 40 percent, their findings where not broadly supported. In my research, as poverty increases in these neighborhoods, we see viability increasing or remaining stable at over 95 percent. It is when neighborhoods experience high levels of poverty, that sustainability declines. This same framework does not apply for mixed neighborhoods, where the decline is less dramatic and linear beginning at the initial stages of poverty.

Race

Past literature has identified the Black Church as a central institution for the black community, which may be impervious to the effects of poverty and diminished resources. The data suggests the theory of the strong Black Church has some weight where communities are non-poor and at moderate levels of poverty. Here we see the highest level of church viability at 97 percent (4 percent higher than white and mixed neighborhoods). Church viability in black
communities sustains at moderate poverty (9 percent higher than mixed neighborhoods). I should note, as well, that even with the decline at 40 percent poverty, churches in black neighborhoods have the highest average viability at 93 percent.

While this paper has not focused on churches in white neighborhoods, this may be where we have seen the most surprising effect with regard to results of analysis. Comparing non-poor to moderate poverty neighborhoods, there is an increase in church viability of 3 percent. Where we might have expected a linear decline, we instead see the relationship between poverty and viability reverse itself in white neighborhoods. Also for white neighborhoods, church viability in moderate poverty and high poverty areas are equal to church viability levels in black neighborhoods at the same level of poverty. This may suggest that we have overlooked the strength of churches in white neighborhoods where viability increases in the face of diminished resources.

Mixed race neighborhoods have the weakest levels of viability at an average of 88 percent across poverty categories. This is surprising, in that it was expected that a linear positive relationship between percent black per tract and viability would at least maintain the level of viability. Instead, there is a linear negative relationship for poverty and viability in mixed race neighborhoods. This finding suggests that racial heterogeneity may be an important explanatory factor in church viability. There may be less community cohesion in more racially heterogeneous neighborhoods than might be found in white or black neighborhoods. As such, there may be less support for churches in those neighborhoods. This raises the question of whether community cohesion is a better predictor of church viability than race alone. Pursuing this question would be valuable for future studies, especially considering that the patterns of
church viability are almost identical for black and white neighborhoods at moderate and high poverty levels.

In this study, I made the implicit assumption that the church is a community institution, where church membership and community composition are congruent. McRoberts would not make that same assumption. McRoberts’ (2003) work contends that highly mobile “storefront” churches tend to occupy areas of the city where rents are the cheapest creating religious districts in high poverty areas. In its most basic form, McRoberts might expect a negative linear relationship between poverty and church viability, where church location is solely influenced by poverty rather than neighborhood composition. Since we do see different patterns by racial group, with viability actually increasing with the proportion in poverty in some cases, we might contend that the race does affect viability patterns, even if high poverty effects viability across all race categories. Of course, this study was not designed to test McRobert’s theory and only introduced here because there may be alternate interpretations of these findings.

Overall, these findings are aligned with Jargowsky’s theory of neighborhood decline, where institutions can no longer sustain themselves at high levels of poverty. But, the Black Church is a unique institution historically and currently, in that it remains strong in the face of poverty (20-40%). Yet even the Black Church has a breaking point (over 40%). This certainly gives support to the contention that neighborhoods at extreme levels of poverty lack the key institutions, such as the church, that link them to larger society.
Limitations of the Study

As may be expected there are certain factors that limit the generalizability of the present study. Specifically, the findings in this study cannot be generalized outside of the Cincinnati metro area. While Cincinnati may be similar to other Midwestern cities more work would needs to be done to see if this pattern holds up. Omar McRoberts (2003) research does a good job of demonstrating that, even while under the strain of similar social forces, local particulars have a high degree of influence. As such generalizability of my findings is limited.

It should also be noted that the use of data from a city directory might be influenced by the independent variables in the study. We must assume that data are systematically collected, but we have no assurances against haphazard data collection. Also, even though our dependent variable is the summary of change over time, our independent variables are static in nature. It would have been more accurate to describe our independent variables as change variables so that we can correlate change in X with change in Y. As such, we are assuming a high measure of “stability” across time for our measures.

Finally, as Omar McRoberts (2003), suggests, one of the weaknesses of this model is that it treats the neighborhood church as an institution that serves people in its contiguous community, even though we know that people cross community lines to participate in churches and that church resources stretch beyond tract boundaries. The idea for this study was adapted from Bingham and Zhang's (1997) research, looking at neighborhood business patterns. However, the pattern for church membership and the distribution of resources could be very different. We know that successful congregations may have congregants that live and work outside of the census tract that houses the church. This is clear in current trends of the suburbanization of middle class blacks. Furthermore, churches are not like public schools that
are dependent on a population defined by limited geography. Also, some denominations may receive national support that may draw on resources outside of the defined model (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark 1995). Consequently, any conclusions are framed with the recognition that the model, of churches serving a contiguous community, may not be fully accurate.

**Tipping Point and Institutional Viability**

In the most recent reports tracking concentrated poverty through the 1990s, a reversal of the previous decade’s trends have been announced along with words of caution concerning the future (Jargowsky 2003). Inner city poverty still exists and when individuals are poor living in neighborhoods that are poor in resources, it can have a deleterious effect on life chances for the individual and for the social system. This study is in agreement with past work suggesting the Black Church is a strong institution. At the same time, this research has found that even historically strong institutions falter in neighborhoods with extreme poverty.

Guided by Jargowsky's theory of a tipping point, I examined tracts were poverty exceeded 40 percent. In neighborhoods with low and high percent black we see a decline of about 10 percent probability for church viability when poverty is greater than 40 percent. This finding supports the idea of a “tipping point” where communities are isolated to the degree to which they no longer have enough social or economic capital to sustain such institutions. The decline in church viability comes even earlier in mixed neighborhoods; as poverty increases church viability decreases. This may suggest that racial heterogeneity is an intervening variable in the relationship between poverty and church viability.

This study also lends support to Jargowsky's and Wilson’s theory of a social area that is quantifiably different, based on a level of poverty so extreme that it is isolated from broader society. In essence, churches are no longer able to be a viable presence when economic
resources are low. What we don't know is whether this is causation or correlation. Our data were not rich enough to answer this question. That is, churches may be lacking social, economic, and other forms of capital, but we do not know which form of capital is the most salient. It would be helpful, in future research, to determine the specific resources that predict church viability, rather than which census tract characteristics are related to it.

One might suggest that church viability is a neighborhood phenomenon, rather than an individual church phenomenon. Future research might consider using neighborhood as the unit of analysis rather than individual churches. McRoberts (2003) ecological approach looked at the neighborhood as its own social system. Churches find niches based on an amalgam of churches and community attributes. As an extension of this research, it would be interesting to discover the pattern of church characteristics in a neighborhood that predict overall church viability by census tract. The degree to which a neighborhood can support its churches has as much to do with neighborhood attributes as with the range of church characteristics that already exist within. Also, each church or denomination has its own unique participation patterns, affiliations and ties to the larger social system. Some attributes being more advantageous for survival than others. These characteristics are not distributed equally across the urban environment and it would take an in depth ecological study to understand church viability patterns across the urban landscape.

Also left unclear is how these churches function in areas that are considered high poverty. We might suspect these structures house only the bare bones of an institution, when compared to churches in higher income areas. Alternatively, when churches are successful in high poverty areas, is it because the people that have left the community return to offer support, leaving isolated communities a little less so? And what are the patterns of church attendance and levels
of support these churches receive from out-migrants? Answers to these questions are important in light of Wilson’s hypothesis.

Finally, the data also did not bring us closer to answering the question about the nature of the relationship between individual, institution, and broader society in areas of concentrated poverty. There is much to be learned, in general, about how institutions are affected by concentrated poverty and whether they have the ability to affect concentrated poverty. Answering these questions may give a better understanding of the process of neighborhood decline and or rejuvenation.

**Conclusions**

Religious institutions do more than provide spiritual and moral guidance to their surrounding communities. Churches as institutions serve an integrative function in that they connect both the individual and the community to a larger social life. Churches can act as a conduit in the reception and transference of spiritual, social, and even economic capital. Churches act in response to different strengths and strains in and around social systems, thus negotiating varied roles across communities. However, the functions of key institutions will be determined by particular socio-historical contexts, or patterns of interaction (Bellah 1991). The success and failure of key institutions can, in part, determine the integration or isolation of community. In this way, churches are vital to the integration of individual to community and community to social system.

As discussed earlier, the Black Church is a historically significant institution in the face of institutional isolation both in urban geographies and beyond. The data from Cincinnati City directories showed that race was a factor in predicting church viability but poverty was an even
stronger predictor. From the data, we learned that where poverty is at its highest in urban neighborhoods, churches are less viable. Poverty supersedes race in this instance, reinforcing the need to look for economic solutions. In essence, while the Black Church has been a powerful institution, it can only do so much in the face of limited resources.

The data do not allow us to make predictions based on cause and effect. We do not know the degree to which churches are supporting or being supported by their communities. But, we do know that there is a point where neither side of the argument is relevant. I found that Jargowsky’s tipping point, of “40 percent poverty”, characterizes communities that may not be able to connect to mainstream society. These are isolated communities where the strongest institution is no longer a viable resource able to link to larger society. The individuals life chances are certainly even more limited if they cannot use the churches’ integrative functions for support. While it is not clear whether it is lack of social or economic capital that causes a church to fail, we can reason that if the church is not present in a community, it cannot be a conduit for either.
References


