

To: Digital Humanities Working Group
From: Jonathan Eastwood
RE: Digital Humanities Incentive Grant

I am writing in order to apply for a Digital Humanities Incentive Grant for a course to be offered in Winter 2015. The course in question, tentative called “Neighborhood Effects and Poverty,” would combine seminar-based discussion of cutting edge research on “neighborhood effects” (described in more detail below) with student instruction in GIS software and work-shopping of student projects. The plan is for the course (of which I hope to offer two sections if there is sufficient student interest) to meet twice a week. The first weekly meeting (hereafter called “Tuesday sessions”) will always be seminar-style discussion of key texts. The second weekly meeting (“Thursday sessions”) will be held in a computer lab or other appropriate site on campus and their content will evolve over the course of the term. The first few Thursday sessions will involve basic training in GIS analysis. The remainder of these sessions will involve team workshopping of students’ GIS projects. As will be seen below, these projects will be part of a collective effort to extend neighborhood effects research into cities beyond Chicago, the city which has been most extensively studied in this research tradition.

Research on Neighborhood Effects and Poverty: The Rationale for the Course

Research on “neighborhood effects” has a long history in sociology and cognate fields, going back at least to the ethnographic work of “Chicago School” sociologists of the 1920s. However, over the last decade it has experienced a great revival as new analytical techniques have been brought to bear on questions concerning how neighborhood context impacts the life chances of individuals and groups. The most important work has been carried out by Harvard’s Rob Sampson and his students and other collaborators, and is probably best reflected in Sampson’s 2012 book, *The Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago).

Sampson brings together an incredible amount of data (based on fieldwork; systematic video observation of thousands of street blocks; neighborhood-level lost letter experiments; census data; community surveys; FBI crime reports; interviews with community leaders; and historical data about collective action events; among other sources) in order to understand something which seems quite simple at first glance: neighborhoods have characteristics that are remarkably “sticky,” meaning that they tend to endure even as the composition of their population changes. Thus Chicago’s “death corner” remains a lethal place even as the sociological profile of its resident population has changed several times over the last several centuries. Some neighborhoods consistently “outperform” their aggregated SES in terms of crime rates, mobility chances, perceptions of order/disorder, child health, and many other outcomes of interest, again, even as the population that occupies them changes. Others consistently “underperform” expectations. Sampson investigates this by comparing various rates and characteristics *across* neighborhoods (i.e., looking at the determinants of inter-neighborhood variation). In other words, rather than

comparing individuals to individuals and coding a neighborhood as an exogenously given characteristic of an individual, he compares neighborhoods to neighborhoods, using statistical techniques to discern which neighborhood level characteristics predict other such characteristics. From this we learn that, net of average SES and other “usual suspect” variables, increasing immigrants’ share of a neighborhood population predicts *lower* crime. We learn that neighborhood “collective efficacy” predicts all sorts of benevolent outcomes. We learn that neighborhood level perceptions of disorder are driven more by racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods than by “objectively discernible” disorder, contra the famous “Broken Windows” theory, and so forth. In a nutshell, this research reveals that neighborhoods are best viewed as complex, social-ecological systems. Neighborhood effects research has really impacted the way that social scientists think about urban poverty, and it’s just getting started.

I taught Sampson’s core book last winter (2013) in my “Culture and Poverty” course. Students loved the book. Two students have told me that they would love to do graduate work with Sampson (one of them seems pretty intent on it!), and the work keeps showing up in students’ papers for other courses (including a couple Shepherd capstone projects). This is not surprising, and there is a need for more curricular coverage of neighborhood effects research at Washington and Lee. Indeed, I would argue that there are two fundamental areas in which social science research is making rapid progress on poverty-related issues right now. The first is the whole “soft skills” conversation that has taken place across parts of economics and psychology. This perspective is already well covered across the Shepherd Program Curriculum, with extensive coverage in courses offered by Tim Diette, Art Goldsmith, Karla Murdock, Sara Whipple, and others. The second is the neighborhood effects research that I am describing, which is much less prominent in our curriculum at present. So for these reasons and others, I am eager to deepen students’ exposure to this kind of work.

The puzzle for me has been how to best do so. I want to do more than just have students read the work of Sampson, Papachristos, Sharkey, Harding, and others. Seminar discussion of monographs and journal articles by these authors is great, and will be an integral part of the course, but students need to be taught not just what we know as a result of this work but how to create such knowledge themselves. But the fundamental problem I’ve wrestled with is how to incorporate the actual analysis of geographic space in the classroom. This has been vexing, because I’ve long thought that students would find fascinating a collective project in which they each selected different cities and examined empirically whether neighborhood level processes observed by Sampson in Chicago are observable elsewhere (Sampson himself has shown that we can observe some similar phenomena in Charles Booth’s materials on poverty in 19th century London, <http://booth.lse.ac.uk>, which we might spend some time on in the course, and he has also done some small-scale comparative research on Chicago and Stockholm with regard to crime, but there is much more to be done here). Obviously such a project would have limitations because we don’t have the benefit

of Sampson's extensive Chicago data collection. But one could do a lot with just census data if one could figure out how to meaningfully sort it by neighborhood.

I had a "light bulb moment" during the presentation Kelly Johnston and Chris Gist from UVA's The Scholars' Lab made on campus earlier this year. I had never worked with GIS before, but I learned from their presentation that at the very least the following is possible:

- (a) I can have students select their own city maps and *themselves draw boundaries around neighborhoods*, which is really important, because the neighborhood boundaries that are culturally significant are not necessarily those established by bureaucratic agencies like the Census Bureau. This is of critical significance since neighborhoods, rather than individuals, are the units of analysis in neighborhood effects research. Thus we need to be able to draw our own boundaries, defining those units for our own analytical purposes. My plan is to have students, once they've selected their city, do some cultural history reading to try to make informed decisions about how to construct neighborhood boundaries.
- (b) I can have students import census data as another "layer" in ArcGIS, and then sort it by neighborhood.
- (c) I can then have students export those data, sorted by the neighborhoods they have defined, to STATA for basic analysis.

I expect to have a mix of students with a range of methodological backgrounds (probably some who have never taken a statistics course and others who have taken advanced econometrics), but the idea would not be to do super fancy data analysis. However, all we would need in order to examine some of Sampson's key findings would be basic correlational analysis. I think this is very reasonable in 12 weeks.

In summary, the idea is to give students in-depth exposure to cutting edge research on neighborhood effects and poverty, to integrate this with some basic training in GIS, to have them each pick a city to compare to Chicago and select some of the neighborhood-level relationships of interest from *Great American City* (and other course readings), to have them read some cultural and historical works on their cities of interest¹, to have them make informed decisions about how to draw lines around neighborhoods, input census data, sort census data by neighborhood, and export these data to STATA where I will coach them as they do some basic data

¹ This will admittedly be tricky depending on which cities they select. I doubt there is any functional equivalent to Ackroyd's "biography" of London for cities like Toledo, OH; San Jose, CA; or Hartford, CT (where I'm from, lest you think I'm picking on the denizens of Toledo and San Jose!). But with a little ingenuity I think we'll figure this out, and the students will enjoy the historical detective work, I think.

analysis.² This will culminate in papers for which the course readings serve as the core literature review. In these papers students will present their main questions, the motivation of these questions and their relevance to the literature, their hypotheses, a description of the analytical choices they made in sorting neighborhoods, a description the procedures they followed in doing their analyses, and their conclusions. Obviously these will not be publishable papers but rather exploratory projects. Nonetheless, I think this course would go well beyond what most programs offer along these lines.

Tentative Learning Objectives

Students will

- (1) Become well-versed in the core literature on neighborhood effects and poverty;
- (2) Apply theoretical ideas from this literature to new empirical materials (cities and neighborhoods not extensively discussed in that literature);
- (3) Acquire introductory familiarity with GIS software and with its use for sociological analysis;
- (4) Use GIS software to explore social processes in the cities and neighborhoods they have selected; and
- (5) Integrate their analyses of new empirical materials with the aforementioned core literature on neighborhood effects.

Tentative Readings (for Tuesday Sessions, subject to change)

Elijah Anderson. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. WW Norton.

David Harding. 2010. *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture Among Inner City Boys*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

David S. Kirk and Andrew V. Papachristos. 2011. "Cultural Mechanisms and the Persistence of Neighborhood Violence," *American Journal of Sociology*, 166(4): 1190-1233.

Andrew V. Papachristos, Chris Smith, Mary Scherer, and Melissa Fugerio. 2011. "More Coffee, Less Crime? The Influence of Gentrification on Neighborhood Crime Rates in Chicago, 1991 to 2005," *City & Community*, 10(3) 215-240.

Rob Sampson. 2012. *The Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

² I have thought about the possibility of implementing a "two track" model to accommodate students' divergent methodological training. If I go this route, there will probably be a STATA and a non-STATA option.

Patrick Sharkey. 2013. *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Towards Racial Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tommie Shelby. 2007. "Justice, Deviance, and the Black Ghetto," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 35(2): 126-160.

Xavier de Sousa Briggs, Susan J. Popkin, and John Goering. 2010. *Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The Rationale for the Grant

I was trained as a qualitative, comparative-historical sociologist (very much on the "humanities" side of this discipline that straddles the line between the humanities and social sciences). As such, I have no experience with GIS or related analytical tools. Indeed, the DHWG-sponsored talk by Johnston and Gist was my first direct exposure to GIS. In other words, I have a lot to learn. Moreover, I will likely need some coaching from Carol Karsch and Jeffrey Barry, with whom I've already been in touch, and I'll probably have to take some tutorials and maybe get up to UVA for a couple more sessions with the folks at the Scholars' Lab if that is possible (contingent both on the availability of such sessions and my schedule, but I am hopeful). Needless to say, this is a significant undertaking for me. I do not expect to quickly become an expert in GIS, but I am confident that I could get up to speed for the purposes of this course by Winter 2015. Moreover, I am quite enthusiastic about building on this knowledge to try to incorporate this form of Digital Humanities teaching in other courses. For example, I plan to teach one third of SOC 202 (Contemporary Social Problems) on racial and ethnic segregation next time I teach it (probably winter, 2016), and I will try to think about whether it would be advisable to include this sort of approach there and then. Another course where I'm planning to bring in DH materials (though not GIS) is a spring class I plan to pitch for 2015, tentatively called "Polarization: Networks and Identities," which will teach students how to do basic network analysis in the service of understanding how social contexts become polarized. In short, I am committed to expanding my involvement with DH initiatives and contributing to DH programs at W&L.