Interview
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/10517

Sociologica. V.14 N.1 (2020)
ISSN 1971-8853

Lessons and Current Challenges for Urban Sociologists. A Conversation with Robert J. Sampson

Niccolò Morelli[*] Robert J. Sampson[†]

Submitted: February 17, 2020 – Accepted: April 15, 2020 – Published: May 20, 2020

Abstract

In this interview, Robert J. Sampson discusses main lessons and current challenges for urban sociologists, starting from his personal experience and perspective. The interview recaps his important works on factors and events that can determine criminal behavior, the important *Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods*, that he led with his innovative theories and empirical results on violence, race and ethnic segregation, inequality, order and disorder in urban environments, and the shifting structure of community network. The interview also reflects on the process and encounters that led him to the formulation of a theory of race, crime and urban inequality with William J. Wilson (1995). Our discussion spanned over areas of research interests of Professor Sampson, including crime, disorder, life course, civic engagement, inequality, "ecometrics," and the social structure of the city, with particular attention to neighborhood effects. Finally, the interview deals with current challenges for urban sociologists, focusing on two main problems: poor quality of data and limit of funding.

Keywords: Sampson; neighborhood effects; urban sociology; social structure of the city.

* EngagemindsHub, Catholic University of Milan (Italy); Department of Management, Polytechnic University of Milan (Italy); niccolo.morelli@unicatt.it; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8916-8640

† Harvard University (USA); https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4259-8146

Copyright © 2020 Niccolò Morelli, Robert J. Sampson
The text in this work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY License.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

1 Introduction

Robert J. Sampson is the Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University, founding director of the Boston Area Research Initiative, and Affiliated Research Professor at the American Bar Foundation. He was a student of Professor Peter Blau and Professor Travis Hirschi, who later became his dissertation advisor. In 1993, together with John H. Laub, Sampson published *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life* (Harvard University Press), where they offered empirical data, theory, and a historical perspective through an outstanding longitudinal study on factors and events that can determine criminal behavior. This study was particularly important, as at that time there was — especially in the US — a strong debate about the usefulness of longitudinal studies on criminal behavior. Age was also considered invariant because offenders commit fewer crimes as they age (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983) and the most predicting factor of crime was argued to be low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). *Crime in the Making* received the Distinguished Book Award from the American Society of Criminology. In 1994, Sampson became the scientific director of the *Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods*, a collaborative project that has produced important empirical results and theories on violence, race and ethnic segregation, inequality, order and disorder in urban environments, and the shifting structure of community networks. At the University of Chicago, Sampson met and worked with William J. Wilson, which led to the formulation of a theory of race and crime and urban inequality. In 2003, Sampson accepted a faculty position at Harvard University, where he became chair of the Department of Sociology in 2005. In 2012 he published *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (University of Chicago Press), a capstone book that received the Distinguished Publication Award from the American Sociological Association in 2014.

Professor Sampson's research and teaching cover a variety of areas including crime, disorder, life course, neighborhood effects, civic engagement, inequality, "ecometrics," and the social structure of the city. with particular attention to neighborhood effects. I had the opportunity to interview Professor Sampson in May 2019 while he was at Sciences Po in Paris, at the Centre d'études européennes et de politique comparée. The interview was informal, and topics ranged from personal and professional pathways to methodological questions to new challenges for urban sociology.

2 On the Shoulders of Giants: Sampson's Masters

Niccolò Morelli (NM): I would like to start with a personal question. Why and how did you decide to study sociology and what prompted you to move to criminal justice for your Ph.D.?

Robert J. Sampson (RS): In my undergraduate studies, I was really interested in philosophy and psychology. Then I took a sociology course that opened my eyes to thinking about the world from a more social and structural perspective compared to psychology. I think it also had to do with personal experiences. Specifically, I grew up in a small industrial city along the Mohawk River in upstate New York. Along that area, there were a series of cities whose livelihood came from textile mills, which fell apart roughly after the 1960s and 1970s. When I was growing up from the mid-1950s on, I witnessed this incredible decline. I'll give you an example: the population of Utica that was over 100,000 in my childhood is now around 60,000. So, it lost 40 percent of its population within a couple of decades. I lived through much of

that and saw a lot of social change. It's a little bit retrospective, but I'm thinking back in my mind to these issues of population decline and social change, what's going on in cities today, and psychological sentiments. I raise these because I think in some ways I've always been interested in cities and different kinds of neighborhoods within cities. For example, as I look back, the small city where I grew up had all the classic manifestations of urban inequality, such as an Italian neighborhood, a middle-class white neighborhood, an upper-class professional neighborhood, a segregated black ghetto, and an immigrant area. In the police force, there was a fair amount of tension with certain communities. There were all these things that were precursors to what I later studied. At the time, Cornell had a strong program in the sociology and philosophy of science. Although I was interested in that in my undergraduate study, I grew up in upstate New York, and I came from a lower income household, so resources were an issue. As a resident of New York State, I could attend the State University of New York for basically free. I heard about the criminal justice program at Albany and I saw it as a very vibrant interdisciplinary opportunity, so I decided to go there. This was at a time where the study of crime was coming into its own as an intellectual enterprise, due primarily to the social changes that were unfolding in cities since the mid-1960s. Hirschi was one of my mentors, and an important intellectual influence there. Another influence I come back to is Peter Blau; he and Hirschi are key influences on me to this day in terms of structuralism and social structural perspectives.

NM: The influence of Hirschi and, especially, Blau clearly emerges in your writings. Specifically, I am thinking of all the papers and books that you, together with Laub, published on the importance of longitudinal studies in order to better understand criminal behaviors in response to the works of Gottfredson and Hirschi. How did these two authors, Hirschi and Blau together, influence your studies and your thinking?

RS: Hirschi provided an intellectual turning point for me. I took a seminar from him on social deviance, and I read his book, *Causes of Delinquency* (1969). It was very interesting — it was bold and made strong claims, and it was written in an unusual way for academics. I found it intellectually exciting. And I also read *Social Sources of Delinquency* (Kornhauser, 1978). It was published in 1978, but the legacy goes back to the 1960s, when Kornhauser was very influential in Hirschi's work. Her structural differentiation argument was very compelling and led me into this whole literature of neighborhoods, ecology, and urban differentiation. I started reading scholars like Hawley (1973) and everything about the Chicago School — for example, McKenzie, Park, Burgess, Shaw, and McKay — who were influential in Kornhauser's works and on social disorganization theory. At about the same time, in 1977, Blau published *Inequality and Heterogeneity*, a major book that he had been working on for a while; he was on the faculty in Albany in the Department of Sociology. Blau was not by any means a criminologist; he was a sociologist. But his argument in that book was incredibly bold because it was a general theory of structural differentiation in society and what he perceived as the differentiation of what he calls "graduated parameters," such as income, how they were distributed in society unequally and how they are correlated with the nominal categories of gender and race. This was early on, before Douglas Massey started writing about racial segregation. Blau was writing about how when the differentiation between racial groups is correlated with income it creates certain types of structural inequalities. The book was a formal theory, deductive, and with many hypotheses that he derived from various starting positions. He was mainly interested in explaining intergroup relations, the social integration of society, and how different groups came into contact. As I was reading Blau's book, I realized that he was talking about everything, from marriage to crime, that is influenced by structural differentiation, so I put

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/10517

together what I learned at Albany and from the Chicago School and started simultaneously observing as a sociologist and a criminologist. I wear two hats — three hats actually — I would say. The urban sociological hat, the criminological hat, and a third that combines crime and life-course thinking. Those were the things that dominated my thinking.

NM: Another sociologist who has influenced you — from what I can see in your work —, is Wilson; you met in Chicago and later at Harvard, right? I'm really interested in what you wrote more than twenty years ago towards a theory of race and crime (see Sampson & Wilson, 1995) and also your update, which I understand is your latest work (see Sampson, Wilson, & Katz, 2018). It seems that this collaboration has been very interesting for you and for your work. What is your thinking about those more than twenty years of work together?

RS: Good question! You're correct that Wilson's work, particularly, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), was another key influence. That came later, but it fit my thinking very well, in the sense of going back to the late 1970s from reading Blau and Hirschi and trying to put together the Chicago School and urban neighborhood theory. While I was working through those issues, race was always there, but I hadn't really quite theorized it until the mid-1980s and later. I wrote a paper on neighborhoods, victimization, and race (see Sampson, 1985), making the argument that race was confounded within multiple disadvantages and that a lot of the interpretations we had been given in the past were misleading. Then in 1987, *The Truly Disadvantaged* comes out and that was to me like *Causes of Delinquency*, one of those books that I started reading and couldn't put down. What I liked about it was that it was a macrosocial perspective, but it was also trying to understand how the macro is mediated, in this case, by changes in neighborhood structures. Wilson was trying to understand massive change, deindustrialization and the outmigration of the black middle-class, in turn changing the nature of class stratification and leading to an increase in the concentration of poverty, particularly in black neighborhoods, which then has specific social influences. You see there the early seeds of the theory of race and inequality, and the idea that the causes of variability with respect to crime are similar in the sense that the proximate causes are the same to all racial groups and not unique to black culture. I took from Wilson the idea that joblessness in the black community, particularly among males, was a key structural cause of family instability, which then linked to my work on supervision and single parent families, particularly informal and peer-control culture (see Laub & Sampson, 1988). One of the pathways I considered, whereby employment and structural characteristics of cities were related to crime, I analyzed both white and black crime rates and then I tested the difference between the race-specific equations and found that there was a real similarity in the basic patterns but tremendous differences in the kinds of exposures. Compared to where you have a characteristic that has different effects but similar levels in each community, here you have similar effects but with very different exposure levels. It's kind of a typology about what's going on. Wilson was published in 1987 and then Massey and Denton in 1993 published *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, which is reacting to Wilson saying that it's not just about deindustrialization and how the migration of blacks progressed but also that you must consider racial segregation as an independent structural force. On the argument between Massey and Wilson, which was the subject of a public debate at the University of Chicago, it turns out they are both right, they just emphasize different features. Lincoln Quillian later had a brilliant article in the *American Sociological Review* (2012) testing out what he called, three kinds of segregation. Basically, he showed that Massey and Wilson are both right in the terms that you did have the outmigration of the black middle-class because of civil rights laws in the U.S. (Wilson, 2003), that opened

new opportunities. The black middle-class, like anyone else, wanted better housing and many moved to the suburbs, but that meant that you had the poor left behind. But blacks are still moving into a segregated environment and that segregation has structural causes. Anyway, Wilson read my paper in the *AJS* in 1987 and wrote to me about it. He liked it and wanted to meet at the American Sociological Association conference. This is how my relationship with Wilson started. Slightly later, the University of Chicago was doing senior recruitment, hiring multiple people. I got a call from James Coleman, another person I admire.

NM: This is really interesting because, of course, we know James Coleman for his theory on social capital, and even if you rarely speak about it, in the collective efficacy theory, speaking about interpersonal trust, neighborhood relationships, you can *feel* social capital even if it is not cited. So how did you speak with Coleman, and how close are you to his theory of social capital?

RS: You're right. In 1988, he published in the *American Journal of Sociology* his article on social capital. I'm not a big social capital fan, in terms of the language, but I found Coleman's work very different from Putnam, who later popularized social capital. In the article in the *AJS*, what he was saying was that neighborhood social organization in the form of social capital and intergenerational closure were important and could affect the future. I mention this influence because the collective efficacy theory was a product of thinking this all through. I viewed his article as integrating the Chicago School idea of social control with the idea of activation of social ties. The thing I got out of Coleman was social action and the way that social ties are activated for intended outcomes or behaviors, and that is how he would talk about it, sort of agentic. If I'm in a neighborhood and I can trust the group to take care of my kid or to leave my car or window open, I essentially have a grounded trust in the neighborhood. That's a real property that benefits not just me, but the collective. That's what I call collective efficacy, which was the intellectual result of Coleman's intervention in my way of thinking, but it was also definitely connected with my long-standing belief in the importance of neighborhoods, social control, and neighborhood social variations.

3 From Park and Burgess to Chicago School in the 21st Century

NM: So, you were saying that you met Coleman, and this was the beginning of your Chicago experience. But at that time, there were also several scholars who were conducting impressive research on urban dynamics, especially in segregation studies. And you also got more in touch with Wilson and in that period you also started working on race, crime, and urban inequality. How vibrant was Chicago at that time, and how did you start your reflections with Wilson?

RS: Yes, I received a call from Coleman when Chicago was doing a senior recruitment, hiring multiple people at that time. On the faculty, were, in addition to Coleman, Wilson, and Massey, a very high-powered group. I was offered a position and went there in the fall of 1991. A key factor for me was that both Wilson and Massey were there; it was no-brainer, intellectually I fit right in. I was talking to Doug and Bill, not daily but they were colleagues, and so I began to think more about racial segregation. John Hagan, the sociologist, was doing a volume, *Crime and Inequality* (1995), and he asked if I would write a paper. I thought it would be an occasion to think more systematically and theoretically about these different literatures. I was talking to Bill, and I said, "What do you think about writing this together?" It became

the chapter entitled "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime and Urban Inequality." (Sampson & Wilson, 1995).

NM: You mentioned the importance of a relevant group of researchers in Chicago when you joined the University. The Chicago School is probably the most studied sociological school on both sides of the Atlantic. What did you learn from the Chicago School? What are the relevant questions that Chicago posed? And what did they not consider?

RS: The importance of context, understanding social change, the important role of neighborhoods, the idea of stability and change for the reproduction of urban equality. These are some of the concepts I derived from the Chicago School. I think that there are many things we can learn from the Chicago School, but we shouldn't be beholden to them; it's not like it's some magical holy book, it's just that it does present a systematic guide, particularly at the time, of how to study cities. The University of Chicago Press just released a new edition of *The City* by Park & Burgess (1925/2019), and I wrote the foreword in which I address these questions: What was the Chicago School about, and what did they get wrong? I think what was important about the Chicago School was more about the kinds of questions it asked and the fundamental principles that were behind it (Sampson, 2019a). The study of cities needs to take seriously, again, urban social processes and the effects of the city on the mind and cognitive processes. A lot of what was in the original Chicago School was in Wirth's (1938), and even Simmel's (1903/2012), works about how urbanization and the city affect mental processes. Fischer, in *Toward a Subcultural Theory of Urbanism* (1975), later wrote that Wirth was wrong — urbanization isn't producing alienation that is psychological withdrawal and where city-dwellers have fewer ties; Fischer proved that, yet urbanism does have a negative effect on trust in the public, what Fischer called the "public sphere" (1981). That kind of linkage of the structural and mental is interesting and yet got somewhat lost. So, I tried to get into that connection more in *Great American City* (2012), around the idea of stigma and social perceptions of disorder. In particular, I have worked with Stephen Raudenbush on the factors that matter most in perceived disorder, and we discovered that while observed disorder predicts perceived disorder, neighborhood racial and economic contexts are more important in driving higher perceived disorder. (See Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004)

NM: I would like to know more about *Great American City* because I think that it might represent a *summa* of your Chicago experience. What does it represent to you? It was a way to show the results of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods that you led, a way to open the debate to the new questions raised by those results. Is that right?

RS: It might be useful to know some of the historical context. I started to write the book about five years before I finished it. I originally felt there was a need to pull together the pieces of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods in a book form. It's a common strategy in large research projects but as I began to write, I was dissatisfied because it wasn't yet saying what I wanted to. I felt there was something beyond the specific papers from the project, so I stopped, stepped back, and started to think more broadly about the idea of neighborhood effects and all the things we've just been talking about — the Chicago School, the role of context, the city — and for better or for worse, it became a book about basically everything I had done and thought about. It unified, or, in other words, it gathered together and expanded a common intellectual idea. Then, once I realized that, it became much bigger as a project, it expanded. I felt I wanted to weave more things together, so there were neighborhood components, there's the structural piece about segregation and the reproduction of inequality,

and there was the part where I started to talk about how neighborhoods are linked in a higher-order social structure, which is an analytical sociology way of thinking about units of linkage crossing levels. For example, how does individual residential mobility between neighborhoods work? How does mobility create the neighborhood ties which in turn create the larger social structure of the city? That was a new way of thinking for me, and I had to pull that all together. I also inserted myself as an observer of Chicago because I was there, and I felt that while I wasn't an ethnographer a key part of my thinking, even in quantitative work, has been about observation.

NM: I would also like to reflect a little bit on the methodological aspects of your book and your work in general. I think it is interesting and important to underline that you made your analysis on Chicago neighborhoods using both qualitative and quantitative tools. For example, you used census data and survey data, but also you adopted videotaping for describing neighborhood interactions. It seems that you follow a mixed-methods approach. But this idea of mixing together quantitative and qualitative tools, is it a theoretical idea, a methodological one, or just a choice of tools? Is it right to say that you used a mixed-methods approach in your book?

RS: Yes. I think that's right. Mixed methods have gotten a lot of attention these days, but it's not clear sometimes what it means. For me, it's more of a theoretical idea that you come at a problem in multiple ways. The cookie-cutter approach is typically "well you do a quantitative survey or something, you talk to some people to get their perceptions." But for me, *Great American City* wasn't an ethnography and it wasn't purely quantitative; it was also going back and forth between knowledge of places like Bronzeville, Hyde Park, Cabrini Green, and the Robert Taylor Homes. These all have historical meaning in Chicago that relate to my concepts. One of the main components of the study was called "systematic social observation," where we videotaped streets. That's where a lot of the disorder stuff comes from. We were asking people about their environment and how they were subjectively perceiving it, hence their cognition. But then we're independently looking at and rating neighborhood contexts in a more systematic way. I was always interested in observation, and it also became clear to me that I needed to put myself more into the study as an observer, which then led to a very detailed analysis of the places. The beginning of the book is based on a walk and immersing myself into the community and narrating, as it were, place and the idea of spatial differentiation. You can see it, smell it, feel it — I wanted the reader to know what it's like to walk through very different neighborhoods of Chicago. Then, I came back to it at the end after many years of study as a sort of postscript or aftermath, revisiting some of the neighborhoods that were going through changes. Cabrini Green, which in the early part of the Twentieth century was known as "death corner," was an Italian slum and then it became a black concentrated poverty area and yet they were both high crime areas over the course of a nearly a century.

NM: Another thing that I find interesting is that you have rarely analyzed European cities. Why? Do you think that there is too much difference, or the reason relies on what you said before about Chicago, that you want to give meaning to places, and you are not confident with European contexts?

RS: Comparative research is hard, especially in multiple countries. I think that is the frontier now. The way I viewed it was that it's hard enough for me to do just one city! So, my hope would be that there would be a lot of studies and new investigations based on neighborhood data on other cities globally, such as mega cities like Mumbai or Shanghai. I think it's just a

matter of time before that will happen and my bet is there will be a continuing debate about contextualization, globalism, and theories of American cities. I just think the current state is in part because a lot of the early work was done in cities like Chicago, but the kind of factors that are important in terms of inequality — segregation, social disorder stigma, collective efficacy — are present in many other cities too. That's my hypothesis. (See Sampson, 2019b)

NM: The importance of research teams emerges clearly in your work on Chicago and also in many other studies. However, big research groups are more and more uncommon. In your Chicago experience, and later on, you led big research groups. What did this opportunity give to you in terms of approaches, understanding, and research hypotheses?

RS: It's true that in my career I've tended to concentrate on relatively few projects over a long period of time and work, particularly in the Chicago project, with teams. I guess what I would say is that I really enjoy mentorship, particularly graduate students. There are three kinds of research teams I've worked with. The Chicago project involved a large research team that went beyond just graduate students. There were a lot of people who collected data and investigated multiple records. I was part of this larger collaborative group; we each took charge of different things. There was another research style team that I've done my entire career, which is with small groups of graduate students. More recently, I've been involved in research teams that involved postdocs who work in a model like a science lab. For example, the research that we discussed on urban mobility involved two postdocs. That's a different kind of teamwork, where the postdocs have their own research project but then they are also involved in a collective ongoing research project. They also tend to interact with graduate students. I also have a workshop called the "urban theory and data lab," which involves works-in-progress and discussions of ideas; it's basically a small group, two or three postdocs and four or five graduate students. So, a relatively cohesive group that is heavily focused on research and progress. I think that research teams are an effective tool and a rewarding one because a lot of these projects involve data collection and analysis at a large scale. That's not something that any one person can do — it really does require a collective enterprise.

4 Current Challenges for Social Research: Poor Quality of Data and Limited Funding

NM: In your recent article on urban mobility and neighborhood isolation (Wang et al., 2018) you used Twitter data. This drives my attention to big data. In the current sociological debate, everyone is speaking about big data, but few are working on it. What do you think about this new tool? Do you think it is reliable data for social research? How do you manage to mix traditional data sources with new datasets? How can it help urban sociology?

RS: There's a lot of talk about it as you say. A lot of strong claims are made on how big data is changing social science. Some say surveys are dead because it's difficult to get people to agree to surveys anymore. My view is that big data are simultaneously an opportunity and a threat. They must be thought through very carefully. The threat part is that these data are, for the most part, generated not for research purposes. It's not original research; they're not collected with research in mind. They are like any administrative data set. They are for the companies, and what that means is that the quality, the meaning, the reliability, and the validity of data is something that needs to be carefully analyzed and interpreted. Yet people often just analyze the

data. In fact, if you work with companies or their data scientists and engineers, the big discussions are around technique, especially machine learning and algorithms and how to manipulate big data. Very little concern emerges about the actual meaning of any individual piece of data and what it means, and I think that's a huge problem because big data doesn't necessarily mean good data. That's why I approach big data the way I approach little data, which is that research design and theory are essential, and we need to apply systematic standards to them. So, with colleagues, we started reflecting on analytical approaches to big data. I derived this approach on big data from the article on little data published in 1999 in *Sociological Methodology* on systematic social observation, called "ecometrics" (Raudenbush & Sampson, 1999). The analogy was psychometrics, and we used the statistical models for reliability and invalidity in measurement creation. In a 2015 article, also in *Sociological Methodology*, we applied that to big data and made the argument that these data need to be analyzed very carefully and systematically (O'Brien, Sampson, & Winship, 2015). On the opportunity side, they do present ways to view or measure certain social phenomenon in ways that we can't capture with traditional forms of data. My use of big data has been completely substantively driven. For example, I use Twitter data, which can have all kinds of limitations, but they do provide a large-scale signal about urban mobility patterns. The idea is that where you live is not necessarily where you spend time. It's not even just about work and home neighborhoods; as you go to your work neighborhood and you go back and forth to other areas it is not necessarily in a confined geographic space. If you think about individuals in their everyday lives over a span of one or two years, there's a structure to their visitation patterns in the social sense.

NM: Yes. This drives me to another question that I would tag as "borders." So, you spoke about home and work neighborhoods, mobility patterns, I would say also perceived neighborhoods, perceived borders that often do not coincide. So how do you define a neighborhood, a city, and their borders so that they have sociological relevance for urban analysis?

RS: It's an important question, and my analytic position in thinking about these various units of analysis is that there really is no one correct unit. It depends on the theoretical question. It also depends on the phenomenon. Sometimes, a very small neighborhood, maybe even a block, sometimes a housing project, can be a neighborhood. However, even then you may have more potential to interact on your own block or street but there are people at the end of your street and the next street over who interact, and it sort of combines into larger structures. So, I think that small areas, neighborhoods, community areas, and large areas are all important, depending on the phenomena. Cities and urban functional areas are too. In Chapter 10 in *Great American City* I look at spatial models because one of the ways to deal with the modifiable areal unit problem is to think about how a neighborhood is not an island. It shares borders with other communities, and we must model that — taking border areas into account and how adjacent neighborhoods are influencing others. That's still assuming a certain boundary and people's perceptions of those boundaries can differ, but that doesn't mean that there aren't structural effects of those communities. People have shared perceptions that are influencing behavior, and there are also structural influences on behavior — they're both happening. I looked at the findings of "The Importance of Trivial Streets" by Rick Grannis in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1998) where he interviewed people about their perceptions of boundaries, which differed. But actual interaction patterns were very much shaped by the ecology and what he called tertiary communities, which were basically areas where there were no major residential streets or parks (or other physical boundaries) dividing them up. Interactions tend to happen within these spaces; people's behavior was constrained and shaped by ecological patterns.

NM: Speaking about your studies on cities, I found your research focus on health issues really interesting and important also for the future of cities. This pattern will be an essential variable especially related to the evolution of mega cities. How did you relate to these issues? Do you consider health issues a main challenge for cities?

RS: I guess I always had an interest in that, partly because if you look at some of the early Chicago research there has always been the notion that some of the epidemiological and health-related findings were related with crime and other features, which is a hint that the broader social organization of the city is explaining a lot. I think the study of public health and the integration with criminology is important. To me it also suggests a more structural approach that implies common causation. I think we see this clustering in cities around the world, what we often call concentration effects. If we think of the argument in *Great American City*, the concentration of inequality is true in multiple contexts. Cities are always changing, but they are overlaid on a pretty stable structure in most cases. I mean, gentrification is all about change, but still, if you look at a long period of time, the durability of inequality is remarkable.

NM: Your attention to health, big data, demography, and crime all show your interest on a multidisciplinary field. If we look to young researchers, it is quite rare because, even if multidisciplinary research groups are rising, every component is an expert in a very specific domain. Looking at young Ph.D. students and postdocs, do you think it is possible to conduct research with a multidisciplinary approach as you did, or is it now more difficult?

RS: Things have changed. There's more emphasis on quantity and evaluation. How that affects the nature of work, I'm not sure. I guess in an ideal world, I'd like to believe that in the long run we should be caring about the questions, the quality, the data, and so forth. What I worry about is that it's harder to collect your own data; it's harder to collect original data because of cutbacks in funding. I think that's a pressing concern. In the U.S., we have active defunding of social science, a hostility from the current administration, and cuts to federal agencies. I think for younger scholars it's especially hard to get funding, a structural limitation which may affect the quality of the science. This is also related to what I was saying before about the availability of administrative data and big data. I think that what we are likely to see is more reliance on the kinds of administrative sources that are outside of one's control, a bad thing that requires a certain due diligence. It also may mean that there's a narrowing of the kinds of data and the narrowing of the kinds of questions we can ask with these changes in the nature of social science. So, I do worry about that, for sure.

NM: We spoke about many things, especially challenges for researchers with new items, new tools. You are a reference point for many urban sociologists, not just researchers interested in urban studies. This also means responsibilities towards young researchers. What is the role that you can play related to new challenges for young researchers?

RS: A lot of what I view myself doing is to try to figure out questions, especially with graduate students. I think we undervalue asking good questions and sometimes that's the hardest thing for graduate students because they tend to learn a kind of cookie-cutter approach and some sort of applied method that is not really chasing good questions. Science is advancing through research discovery as much as it is through questioning our current understanding and posing new questions and generating hypotheses. So, in a sense I consider myself theoretically motivated and that would probably be controversial to some who would consider themselves social theorists. There's this idea of social theorists that produce pure theory, which for me is a foreign concept. I'm always constantly interrogating ideas with how the world works. There

are two kinds of theories: there's theory about theorists or theory itself and there's theory about the empirical world. Sometimes I engage purely theoretical ideas or intellectual history, but I think my primary motivation is theories about the world. In that sense, it's theory about how things work. I don't consider myself, in any way, a statistician, obviously, or a methodologist. Even though I use whatever methods are necessary, I view myself as trying to generate new theory, ideas, and hypotheses.

References

Blau, P.M. (1977). *Inequality and Heterogeneity: A Primitive Theory of Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.

Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, *94*, S95–S120. https://doi.org/10.1086/228943

Fischer, C. (1975). Toward a Subcultural Theory of Urbanism. *American Journal of Sociology*, *80*(6), 1319–1341. https://doi.org/10.1086/225993

Fischer, C. (1981). The Public and Private Worlds of City Life. *American Sociological Review*, *46*(3), 306–316. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095062

Gottfredson, M.R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Grannis, R. (1998). The Importance of Trivial Streets: Residential Streets and Residential Segregation. *American Journal of Sociology*, *103*(6), 1530–1564. https://doi.org/10.1086/231400

Hagan, J., & Peterson, R.D. (Eds.) (1995) *Crime and Inequality*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hawley, A.H. (1973). Ecology and Population. *Science*, *179*(4079), 1196-1201. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.179.4079.1196

Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M.R. (1983). Age and the Explanation of Crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, *89*(3), 552-584. https://doi.org/10.1086/227905

Kornhauser, R.R (1978). *Social Sources of Delinquency. An Appraisal of Analytic Models*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Laub, J.H., & Sampson, R.J. (1988). Unraveling Families and Delinquency: A Reanalysis of the Gluecks' Data. *Criminology*, *26*(3), 355-380. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1988.tb00846.x

Massey, D.S, & Denton, N.A. (1993). *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

O'Brien, D.T., Sampson, R.J., & Winship, C. (2015). Ecometrics in the Age of Big Data: Measuring and Assessing "Broken Windows" Using Large-Scale Administrative Records. *Sociological Methodology*, *45*(1), 101–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/0081175015576601

Park, R.E., & Burgess, E.W. (2019). *The City* (Enlarged ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1925).

Quillian, L. (2012). Segregation and Poverty Concentration: The Role of Three Segregations. *American Sociological Review*, *77*(3), 354–379. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412447793

Raudenbush, S.W., & Sampson, R.J. (1999). Ecometrics: Toward a Science of Assessing Ecological Settings, with Application to the Systematic Social Observation of Neighbourhoods. *Sociological Methodology*, *29*(1), 1–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/0081-1750.00059

Sampson, R.J. (1985). Neighborhood and Crime: The Structural Determinants of Personal Victimization. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *22*(1), 7–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427885022001002

Sampson, R.J. (1987). Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption. *American Journal of Sociology*, *93*(2), 348–382. https://doi.org/10.1086/228748

Sampson, R.J. (2012). *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighbourhood Effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226733883.001.0001

Sampson, R.J (2019a). The City for the Twenty-First Century. In R.E. Park & E.W. Burgess, *The City* (Enlarged ed.) (pp. vii–xiv). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sampson, R.J. (2019b). Neighbourhood Effects and Beyond: Explaining the Paradoxes of Inequality in the Changing American Metropolis. *Urban Studies*, *56*(1), 3–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018795363

Sampson, R.J., & Laub, J.H. (1993). *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128793039003010

Sampson, R.J., & Raudenbush, S.W. (2004). Seeing Disorder: Neighborhood Stigma and the Social Construction of "Broken Windows." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *67*(4), 319–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250406700401

Sampson, R.J, & Wilson, W.J. (1995). Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality. In J. Hagan & R.D. Peterson (Eds.) *Crime and Inequality* (pp. 37–56). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Sampson, R.J., Wilson, W.J., & Katz, H. (2018). Reassessing "Toward A Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality": Enduring and New Challenges in 21st Century America. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, *15*(1), 13–34. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X18000140

Simmel, G. (2012). The Metropolis and Mental Life (K. Wolff, Trans.). In J. Lin & C. Mele (Eds.), *The Urban Sociology Reader* (pp. 37–45). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1903).

Wang, Q., Phillips, N.E., Small, M.L., & Sampson, R.J. (2018). Urban Mobility and Neighbourhood Isolation in America's 50 Largest Cities. *Proceedings of the National Academy*

of Sciences of the United States of America, *115*(30), 7735–7740. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1802537115

Wilson, W.J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, W.J. (2003). Race, Class and Urban Poverty: A Rejoinder. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, *26*(6), 1096–1114. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987032000132522

Wirth, L. (1938). Urbanism as a Way of Life. *American Journal of Sociology*, *44*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1086/217913

Niccolò Morelli: EngagemindsHub, Catholic University of Milan (Italy); Department of Management, Polytechnic University of Milan (Italy)
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8916-8640
niccolo.morelli@unicatt.it
Niccolò Morelli got a Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Research at the Department of Sociology and Business Law of the University of Bologna (Italy), with a thesis on urban conviviality. He is currently scientific collaborator at EngagemindsHub, in the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of Milan (Italy), and at the Department of Management of the Polytechnic University of Milan.

Robert J. Sampson: Harvard University (USA)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4259-8146
https://scholar.harvard.edu/sampson/home
Robert J. Sampson is the Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University (USA), founding director of the Boston Area Research Initiative, and Affiliated Research Professor at the American Bar Foundation. Previously, he was a faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago (USA) and before that the University of Illinois (USA).