



Viewpoint

Comparing deconcentrating poverty policies in the United States and the Netherlands: A critical reply to Stal and Zuberi [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical reply to an article by Stal and Zuberi, in which they compare two policies which deconcentrate poverty in the US and the Netherlands. By drawing lessons from a renewal program in the Netherlands, they suggest several ways to help break the 'cycle of poverty'. We distinguish at least three fundamental flaws in their argument. After discussing these flaws, we discuss renewal in Dutch cities and issues related to displacement and social networks. We conclude with a reflection on the nature of comparative urban research.

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Introduction

In a recent article in this journal, [Stal and Zuberi \(2010\)](#) discuss two policy programs targeting areas of concentrated poverty and argue that a multifaceted approach to socio-spatial integration policies can provide significant social benefits to the poor. They base their claim on a comparison of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program in the United States and the urban renewal program of the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In their article, they make several thought-provoking points with regard to the theory of neighborhood effects (pp. 4–5). Also, they make the important point that MTO programs should also focus on those left behind (p. 9).

Nevertheless, there are several problems with their conclusions. We believe that there are at least three fundamental flaws in the comparison made by Stal and Zuberi. First, it is not really clear what the authors try to compare: three types of comparisons seem to be mixed in a rather confusing manner. Second, the comparison of the two programs is problematic because they are entirely different in nature and embedded in different policy contexts, which makes transfer of the urban renewal program to the American context rather difficult. Third, from a Dutch perspective there is insuffi-

cient evidence to support the claim that urban renewal in the Bijlmermeer is a success. After discussing these three flaws, we will discuss some issues related to displacement and social networks. By way of conclusion, we reflect on the nature of comparative urban research.

What is the object of comparison?

Our first problem is with the comparison of different types of policies. Stal and Zuberi have chosen to compare the relocation program MTO in the US to the renewal of the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam with the objective of evaluating policies and drawing lessons, while making several comments about neighborhood effect studies. Their case selection seems to be based on the condition that both policies seek to deconcentrate poverty.

The renewal of the Bijlmermeer has displaced some of its residents regardless of their income or ethnicity. However, there is no data presented on these dispersed residents. Consequently there is no comparison between those who are dispersed by the MTO program and those who are dispersed by the renewal program of the Bijlmermeer. Furthermore, the authors put a lot of effort into discussing and evaluating the renewal program. However, the Bijlmermeer renewal program tries to accomplish a place-based change in terms of physical appearance and social composition (see [Van Gent, 2010](#)), while the MTO program aims to alter poverty at the individual level. This key difference complicates a comparison of MTO and the Bijlmermeer renewal: both the objectives (i.e. renewal vs. dispersal) and the objects of the policies (i.e. neighborhood vs. individuals) are quite different.

[☆] Stal, G. Y., & Zuberi, D. M. (2010). Ending the cycle of poverty through socio-economic integration: A comparison of moving to opportunity (MTO) in the United States and the Bijlmermeer revival project in the Netherlands. *Cities*, 27 (1), 3–12.

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Frankly, it appears somewhat odd to seek learning lessons from a renewal program for a dispersal program – and *vice versa*. In our opinion, it would have made more sense either to compare the renewal of the Bijlmermeer with renewal in the US HOPE VI program, or to compare outcomes of the poor dispersed residents from the renewal with the participants of the MTO program. The former option implies a comparison of renewal policies and their social outcomes, which may lead to statements about neighborhood effects for those who are allowed to remain *in situ*. The latter, comparing dispersed or displaced residents, would make some sense when the objective is to study socio-economic outcomes and possible neighborhood effects of dispersed poor people in two different contexts. The form and objectives of the policy that brought about dispersal would then be less relevant. A third option could have been a comparison of the protest and resistance against the policies – a point brought up several times. However, the authors grossly overstate the involvement of ‘the community in all aspects of the renewal’ (p. 10). Residential involvement was only introduced after protest and could merely make small and ‘cosmetic’ changes to the renewal plan (Aalbers, Van Beckhoven, Van Kempen, Musterd, & Ostendorf 2004; Dukes, 2007; Van Gent, 2008). The presented data to make such assertions are sorely lacking in Stal and Zuberi’s paper.

In sum, it seems to us as if the authors were ambitiously trying to accomplish three different types of comparison (area-based policies, individual outcomes, resident protests) for two different types of research goals (evaluating policy, contributing to debates on neighborhood effects), which has resulted in a rather confusing argument.

Is the Bijlmermeer comparable to disadvantaged neighborhoods in the US?

Our second concern with the comparison is with Stal and Zuberi’s lack of appreciation for the actual importance of differences in urban and institutional contexts. The authors do not really grasp the differences in depth and scale of poverty in Dutch or Western European cities compared to those in the US. Context is extremely important in understanding poverty and social exclusion (Van Kempen, 2001). Several authors have outlined how social and political urban context in Western Europe structure the social differentiation and policy responses thereon (e.g. Häussermann & Haila, 2005; Kazepov, 2005; Le Galès, 2002; Van Kempen & Murie, 2009; Wacquant, 2008). Important elements are the strong influence and support of the interventionist state, the process of welfare state reform, the meaning of ethnicity and immigration, regional variations in economic restructuring after deindustrialization, and the legacy of public-owned, -regulated or -funded housing. These are important factors in explaining both the meaning and mechanisms of poverty neighborhood formation, as well as in understanding policy responses.

Indeed, the Bijlmermeer is a high-poverty neighborhood by Dutch standards. However, anyone studying neighborhoods in the Netherlands should be aware that even in the poorest neighborhoods in the three largest cities, the share of middle-income households outnumbers the share of poor households (Pinkster, 2006). Similar statements cannot be made for US cities. This dissimilarity is extremely relevant when assessing policies which seek to deconcentrate poverty. It raises the point of whether deconcentration has the same meaning, urgency and implication in the Netherlands as it has in the US. Perhaps a US deconcentration policy would be considered successful when it reached the lower levels of poverty concentration that exist in “high” poverty neighborhoods such as the Bijlmermeer. Unfortunately, Stal and Zuberi do not consider this. Rather, by citing mostly the work of

Kruythoff (2003), they continue to equate the Bijlmermeer with US high-poverty neighborhoods (on p. 7). However, Kruythoff’s characterizations of the neighborhood as an “enclave” refers to the Dutch context and should not be taken at face value when doing an international comparative study. Also, the casual assertion that there is a ‘culture of poverty’ (p. 7) is objectionable for its stereotyping (see Wacquant, 2007). Such a statement should at least receive further investigation, contemplation and citation.

So, how disadvantaged is the Bijlmermeer? In the year 2000, about 90% of the housing in the Bijlmermeer consisted of social rented housing.¹ This is a lot, but one should not forget that 55% of all housing in Amsterdam in that year was social housing and that there were many city neighborhoods that consisted of more than 75% social housing. This implies that social housing in Amsterdam is not a residual sector that only houses the poorest residents. Rather, social housing in Amsterdam accommodates the majority of low- and middle-income households as well as some high-income households. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation in the US, where only about 2% of the population lives in social housing (although the numbers are significantly higher in many cities). In the Netherlands, social housing was, and to some extent still is, built for the masses. In the US public housing is, and has always been, a residual sector, only meant to accommodate a small fraction of the lower classes (see e.g. Harloe, 1985), mostly the non-working poor, although in some US cities, part of the working poor do also live in public housing. This implies that an American neighborhood with a large share of public housing, by definition, has a high degree of poverty, while in the Netherlands, neighborhoods with a large share of social housing usually have merely a slight overconcentration of low-income households. Of course, some neighborhoods with a large concentration of social housing are considered the least attractive by local residents and will have a relatively strong concentration of poverty – i.e. relative to other Dutch neighborhoods.

This also explains why, in 2000, 18% of the Bijlmermeer residents were unemployed, compared to 11% for the City of Amsterdam (O+S, 2000). This is a worrisome figure by Dutch standards, but if unemployment rates in public housing dominated neighborhoods were less than twice as high as the city average, this would probably have been considered a success in the US. Or perhaps this would have been considered impossible in the US because public housing would, by its very nature, accommodate a very high share of unemployed residents. In 1999, 40% of the Bijlmermeer residents were considered low- to moderate-income; in the city at large, this was 30%. The Bijlmermeer also accommodated 13% high-income people, while city-wide, this was 20% (Stedelijke Woningdienst, 1999). The average annual disposable income per inhabitant in the Southeast district (65% of which is comprised of the Bijlmermeer) was only slightly lower than in the city at large (respectively 9100 and 10,500 euro), while the average annual disposable income per household was almost equal (19,400 euro for the Southeast district compared to 20,000 euro for the City of Amsterdam) (CBS, 1998), due to the relatively high rate of female participation in the labor market in the Bijlmermeer. In sum, the City of Amsterdam did not really need to deconcentrate poverty in the Bijlmermeer – it was already a mixed-income neighborhood in 2000.

In addition, even though frequently referred to as a ghetto in the Dutch media, the Bijlmermeer is not comparable to the blighted areas characteristic of many American cities. If we look at key publications on US ghettos (e.g. Hannerz, 1969; Jargowsky, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987), we can see many differences between the Bijlmermeer and its supposed US counterparts:

¹ We have chosen to focus on the data from 1999 and 2000 because these data give a better impression of the Bijlmermeer prior to most of the renewal plans than more recent data.

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