

Urban Appalachia

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On Saturday, July 30th and Monday, August 1st, I canvassed the Dutchtown neighborhood for my dad's election, which was held on Tuesday, August 2nd. My spatial boundaries were Delor to the South, Chippewa to the North, Gustine to the West, and Broadway to the East. It's a neighborhood that I grew up in and know relatively well. I still have several friends and acquaintances in the neighborhood and even ran into a few! It was a "strange" feeling being back in my old neighborhood – simultaneously both familiar and foreign. I tried to knock on as many doors and speak to as many people as possible. I would talk about my father's candidacy, urge a Butz vote, then try to push the conversation further into what is ailing St. Louis and what might be done to improve the area. These are my notes that I wrote down when I got home from canvassing. This is likely due to the fact that I focused efforts North of Meramec, but I spoke with substantially more African Americans (38) than whites (15), Latinos (3), and Asians (3).

- What strikes me initially is the feeling of "emptiness" and dereliction. It is not "buzzing" with commercial and social activity like in decades past, and many structures are completely abandoned and falling into disrepair. Dutchtown has much more of a "sleepy" feel than I remember. Most of the doors that I knocked on seemed like they haven't been knocked in quite some time. I would estimate that every 3rd house is essentially abandoned, or maybe has one elderly retired person living there. This is likely due to decades of sprawl, leaving behind crumbling structures and aging population.
- People have no idea there is an election on Tuesday! I would say 8 out of 10 people of voting age population that I encountered had no idea there was an election. What seemed most confusing to people is that Missouri had recently held a presidential primary election in March. "How could there be another primary already?" claimed one older African American lady. This appears to be a low visibility election in general and not on many people's radar at all.
- From what I can tell, the billboards have not increased name recognition for my dad, at least not significantly. Outside of a few people that I encountered that know him personally, almost nobody had heard the name Steve Butz or knew that he was a candidate for elected office. We will need to work on better outreach and name recognition next time.
- It feels like Appalachia to me in many ways. Urban Appalachia. It is much more dense, more urban for sure, but many of the same markings of social isolation, economic malaise, listlessness, and sense of aimlessness and hopelessness. Many appear to have downtrodden disposition. Most of the men that I spoke with – many younger African American men in particular – spoke directly to a lack of immediate economic opportunity and general sense of feeling "lost" and without purpose. My takeaway from most conversations is that the alienation runs deep and there is minimal sense of "connectedness" or exposure to mainstream norms and opportunities. I spoke with several African American men who were "surprised" that I would engage them at all. "You are just going to walk up on a porch full of fellas? That is cool right there." My sense is that they largely feel "trapped" in a high poverty neighborhood without obvious ladders to economic and social mobility – minimal exposure to professional career paths and minimal access to start-up capital and business/home loans. This mirrors decades of research in both inner-city and Appalachian settings - Poor people living predominantly among other poor people is broadly destabilizing for communities. No one really appears to have any answers. Neither do I really (although I have a few ideas). I think there is some valuable human capital that we are leaving on the sidelines, and we need to focus attention on building up distressed neighborhoods and affording more opportunities. More regional cooperation perhaps?
- The intersection of Compton and Chippewa resembles a dilapidated war zone. Going North on Compton, the entire block is completely abandoned. Abandoned house after abandoned house. Incredibly jarring to see the level of abandonment in various places throughout Dutchtown.

- One interesting theme echoed among several African American residents, both male and female – commuting to the suburbs for low-wage employment is both miserable and almost not worth it economically. Several people I talked to worked in service sector jobs in various suburban areas (car wash, restaurants, nurses aid, hotels, etc.), where they commute oftentimes 2+ hours a day via intermittent bus service. By the time they finally get home at night, they have little time to spend with their children and their paychecks are so small it is difficult to pay bills and save anything. Outlying suburban areas house a disproportionate share of the job opportunities, but it is not clear how these Dutchtown residents can achieve mobility under this arrangement. This same theme is discussed at length in William Julius Wilson's "The Truly Disadvantaged" and "When Work Disappears". This "spatial mismatch" between where people live and where job opportunities exist came up often. Nearly everyone I speak with, especially younger but many older, has at least a part-time service sector job, but is unclear how to achieve mobility and prosperity. In an age of globalization and automation this is the American conundrum in many ways. Not sure if we need more targeting skills training or better (more equitable) distributing of the rewards of globalization, but some action is needed.
- One theme from people I would speak with aged 20-35 is the need for more targeted parenting interventions. A few AA parents I spoke with expressed frustration because while they are modeling proper manners/behaviors for their children, the other parents around them are not always doing the same, making it more difficult to reinforce "positive" habits and behaviors. When I push the conversation, they largely express sympathy in a sense that they know these other parents also did not have role models demonstrating "proper" behaviors. There might be room here for non-profits or some public-private partnerships to have more parenting classes and targeted interventions. My sense is that most parents I talked to wanted to do the "right" thing (work hard, take care of their family, be good parents, etc.), but lacked tools and exposure needed to fulfill these civic obligations to their potential.
- One heartbreaking theme and it's not the first time I've heard this: Racial minorities, especially African Americans, know that white people generally hold negative, unflattering views toward them, and view them as "less" than whites. They know that they are reflexively looked at with suspicion and derision – as criminal, lazy, deviant, irresponsible, undeserving, etc. "They don't even give us a chance."; "In their minds it's already made up and we are at fault." It always bums me out when I hear this because (1) I know it's true and (2) It's going to take many years more of evolution and growth to expunge our (implicit and explicit) racist core of white supremacy.
- Another interesting theme and one I was not expecting because of my own privileged background. Several of the African American residents I spoke with had migrated south from North side neighborhoods, where concentrated poverty, crime, etc. was actually a much bigger problem. Several perceived Dutchtown as a relative upgrade in overall quality of life over "worse" neighborhoods and parts of the city. Probably most of my closest (white) family and friends would regard much of Dutchtown as largely inhabitable. Everything is relative!
- One unexpected theme among several of the younger African American men: resentment toward immigrants. Without me even prompting, a handful of younger AA males (18-25) in separate conversations expressed a concern that immigrants were receiving "special" favors and benefits. When I pushed it, they could not really name any particular special benefits that immigrant groups were receiving, but the "feeling" was there that immigrants are receiving special attention and supports, while they – African American men were being ignored. This threw me off in a few conversations and I wasn't prepared to talk about this subject, but I thought I should note it. It's interesting to think about the inter-group dynamics at play... We usually think of white racial resentment toward minorities and immigrants (i.e. racial minorities and immigrants perceived as deviant and undeserving of benefits and public support). It was interesting to see the inter-group tension expressed between African Americans and immigrants.

- Many of younger African American men reported being harassed and targeted by police in some fashion. It seems like everyone has a story to tell and are eager to tell it. A few people told me that they never wear baseball hats in their car anymore because that will get you pulled over automatically. There is a broad “punitiveness” toward racial minorities being reported, especially young African American men, that has always been there and remains today. There is a widespread perception of unequal treatment and distrust among several that I spoke with. On the flip side, they acknowledge the need for public safety and “good” policing when I ask directly. They know it is a relatively high-crime area and want to be protected from crime, similar to white residents, but “feel” that police are not primarily there for public safety or to support them.
- White residents, primarily older residents, are seemingly more concerned with criminal activity. Nobody I talk to really has a “horror story” about crime happening to them personally, and nobody I spoke with had experienced violent crime personally, but they know there is greater likelihood of criminal activity happening in their neighborhood than other areas. There is an immediate racial frame for most and most are quick to frame young minority males in unflattering ways - as deviant and criminal and generally unwanted encroachment. A white male in his mid-50s tells me an overtly racist joke, “Why did they make the windows in the Arch so high? So the n***ers wouldn’t smash them out.” My sense is that this is a major divide in Dutchtown (and the city more broadly) – younger minorities feel alienated and are concerned with the lack of economic development and opportunities (“How are we supposed to care for our families when there are no jobs?”), while older white residents feel scared (or uneasy) about the changing demographic landscape, and are primarily concerned with public safety and law and order. When I push the conversation beyond a racial frame, most white residents are able to connect criminal activity to the broader decline of the area. They sense that the area has declined broadly over many decades, there are no immediate answers, and heightened crime is immediate and palpable, so they perceive that as the most pressing problem - although I sense that most also desire economic development and believe that economic development can provide some broader stability for Dutchtown.

These were my two major takeaways:

- There are GREAT people living in Dutchtown and I really enjoyed talking with them!
- The problems of concentrated poverty and social/economic isolation are daunting. Probably even worse than I initially thought and I initially thought it was pretty dire! This is poverty literally stacked on top of more poverty and all of the destabilizing effects we would expect to stem from that. This might be the toughest hurdle for the St. Louis area in many ways. We have neglected wide swaths of the central-city as suburbanization and de-industrialization shifted wealth and industry into outlying areas, leaving behind the most vulnerable and least resourced populations. White people still overwhelmingly see these inner-city problems through an individualist lens – that these are “bad”, “undeserving”, “deviant” people creating their own poverty and they deserve their misery, not attention and resources. However, we know that environment matters! I think it’s difficult for many white people to acknowledge this because we disproportionately live in the “good” affluent areas surrounded by resources, connections, security, and opportunities. We largely take these contextual advantages for granted. It can be difficult to truly understand how totally destabilizing and dislocating high-poverty neighborhoods can be for individuals residing within them. Ultimately, we need more of this acknowledgement and awareness from white St. Louisans, and I would argue more coordinated, regionally focused solutions that invest broadly and target economic resources and job training initiatives in high-poverty neighborhoods. Dutchtown needs some real attention and investment - some real ladders of growth and opportunity - not simply morality lectures!