Recent discussions of poverty among cultural minorities in the United States have focused primarily on African Americans. The perennial issue of the causal relationships between poverty and the behavioral deviance so often associated with poverty has again become controversial. Yet, Puerto Ricans in New York City are among the poorest groups of people in the United States—poorer than other Latino groups and also poorer than African Americans in the city or nationally. This chapter looks at the social and behavioral correlates of poverty among Puerto Ricans living in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

It has now been fully a generation since Oscar Lewis' sensationalistic account of social deviance among Puerto Ricans in La Vida (1966) became the basis for the theory of a "culture of poverty". Lewis portrayed Puerto Ricans as mired in family strife and social deviance, unable to socialize their children to better themselves. His vivid and lengthy portrayals of a few highly deviant families created powerful public images of Puerto Ricans as deviants and of poverty as the product of culture and community.

Following Lewis' work, a number of more rounded community studies of poor African American neighborhoods argued against simplistic notions of culture as the cause of poverty by showing the wide range of life-styles in poor neighborhoods and by demonstrating the relationship of poverty and deviance to structural factors.
such as labor market conditions and societal discrimination (Aschbrenner 1975; Hannerz 1969; Ladner 1971; Liebow 1967; Rainwater 1970; C. Stack 1974).

After a period in which ethnographic studies of poor communities, along with the study of poverty generally, went into decline, the study of poverty at the community level has returned. This time the controversial theory has been that of the emergence of an “underclass” (Wilson 1987; Ricketts and Sawhill 1988). The package of concepts tied to that term includes both strong echoes of the “culture of poverty” and an explicit focus on the effects of economic restructuring.

Most of the empirical focus this time has been on African American neighborhoods. Yet, Puerto Ricans remain even poorer than African Americans, especially in areas of concentrated poverty within New York City. The reexamination of poverty at the community level demands close attention to Puerto Rican neighborhoods of New York City. This chapter examines the relationships of culture, community, poverty, deviance, and economic restructuring within one such neighborhood in order to advance understanding of how economic conditions and community social organization affect one another.

Despite the fact that economic restructuring has occurred nationally, its effects have not been uniform. Both African Americans and Latino-Americans have suffered disproportionately from economic restructuring, but there are significant differences among minority communities in how they have been affected and how they have responded.

The Puerto Ricans of Sunset Park include both upwardly mobile, working-class homeowners and families that have been dependent on welfare for more than one generation. Though Puerto Ricans constitute an ethnic plurality in the neighborhood, they are not a majority. They share the area with other poor and working-class Latinos, Asians, and non-Latino whites. The range of life-styles in the neighborhood is also quite wide. By looking at how working-class and poor, mainstream and deviant live together in this neighborhood, this study of community social organization describes both some distinctive features of poverty among Puerto Ricans and the etiology of deviance in a community bearing the brunt of dislocations caused by economic restructuring.

Sunset Park’s relationship to national and regional economic restructuring; its changing ethnic, class, and institutional structure; and the ways in which deviance is both generated and controlled are discussed below. The discussion is based on ethnographic data collected under the direction of the author and on published sources.
including census data and a recent book by Louis Winnick (1990). The descriptions of Sunset Park are frequently contextualized by means of comparisons to other poor groups and neighborhoods in New York City and elsewhere.

Regional Economic Restructuring

Much of the recent discussion of poverty has focused on the effects of economic restructuring that accompanied the nation’s deindustrialization during the 1970s. Regional and local processes of economic restructuring, however, have not been uniform. Economic restructuring in New York City has taken a distinctive path, leading to its current configuration of residual marginal manufacturing and highly developed regional and international service sectors. New York City has been experiencing deindustrialization for several decades. The shift toward a service economy has been more extreme than elsewhere. The timing and manner of Puerto Ricans’ entry into this changing labor market have led to their current economic niche, characterized by low-wage jobs, high rates of welfare dependency, and widespread poverty (Tobier 1964).

Although manufacturing has been leaving New York City for at least fifty years, the continuation of a low-wage manufacturing sector was a primary reason for the in-migration of large numbers of Puerto Ricans in the period following World War II. Unlike the large Midwestern cities, New York City’s economy was never based on a few large-scale industries such as steel and auto manufacturing. Although New York was a major manufacturing center and also a strong union town, manufacturing there was always scattered among many small firms, garment factories being prototypical. Wages were lower than in auto and steel plants, despite unionization. When the bulk of New York City’s Puerto Rican population arrived during the 1950s, the garment industry was their main employer. Yet, both political power in the garment industry unions and high wages were denied them (H. Hill 1974).

As much of the garment industry and other manufacturing continued to leave the city, Puerto Ricans who had come to the mainland in search of employment were thrown out of work. By the late 1960s, they were already on the welfare rolls in large numbers. Since the 1960s, both these trends—the concentration of Puerto Rican employment in low-wage manufacturing jobs and the displacement of Puerto Ricans out of those jobs and out of the labor force entirely—have continued. Despite the massive deindustrialization of New York City, a significant manufacturing sector remains, and it depends on immigrant labor. Puerto Ricans remain concentrated there, but, as we shall see in looking more closely at Sunset Park, they are being displaced by more recent immigrants, who are more easily subjected to labor discipline because they lack the U.S. citizenship and mainland socialization of the established Puerto Rican population.

New York City also differs from other urban areas in the intensity of its shift toward a service economy. That shift has accompanied deindustrialization nationwide, but in few places to the same extent as in New York City. During the 1980s, the growth of the corporate service sector, serving both domestic and international clients, gave the New York economy a vitality that made it an exception to the conventional Sunbelt/Rustbelt opposition of growth and decline during that period (Drennan 1991). Service sector jobs, both high-wage and low-wage, however, require more education than blue-collar work, and thus have eluded many Puerto Ricans because of their low levels of education. Still, low-wage service employment has become the second-largest category of jobs for Puerto Ricans after manufacturing (Falcon and Gurak 1991).

The deindustrialization of the 1970s, therefore, was merely the continuation of a long-established trend among New York City’s Puerto Ricans. During the 1970s, the concentration of Latinos in manufacturing actually increased, despite the continuing decline of manufacturing employment (Bailey and Waldinger 1991). Together, the concentration of employed Puerto Ricans in low-wage manufacturing and service jobs and the displacement of many others from labor force participation have been the primary generating forces of widespread poverty in their neighborhoods.

Sunset Park and Puerto Ricans

Sunset Park in the early 1990s is an area of approximately two square miles and 100,000 residents,9 of whom about half are Latino and about 40 percent are Puerto Rican. The western border of the neighborhood is the waterfront of New York Harbor, along which lies a large concentration of industrial, warehousing, and transportation facilities. This industrial spine continues with the water around the northern edge of Brooklyn and up the East River separating Brooklyn from Manhattan. Though much deteriorated from its prime during and after World War II, this area remains the largest concentration of blue-collar employment in New York City. The residential neighborhoods just behind this waterfront area were originally constructed to house the workers employed in these businesses. Originally populated by white ethnics, this area is now largely black and
Latino, primarily Latino, with Puerto Ricans comprising the dominant Latino category.

This arc is part of what has been referred to as the “Puerto Rican doughnut”, actually more a croissant, that curves around three sides of predominantly black Central Brooklyn, New York City’s largest area of African American and Afro-Caribbean settlement. The heavily Hispanic neighborhoods of Sunset Park, Red Hook, Williamsburg, and Bushwick enclose Central Brooklyn’s Fort Greene, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Flatbush, and Brownsville. Sunset Park itself is a mixed area of Latinos and whites that is bordered by the more affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods of Bay Ridge, Borough Park, and Park Slope. This type of settlement pattern, with Latinos living more intermixed with whites than are blacks and with Latino neighborhoods separating predominantly white and predominantly black neighborhoods, is not unique to New York but is in fact common across the country (Massey 1979).

The development of a large Puerto Rican community in Sunset Park has taken place over a sixty-year period. Throughout this period, economic restructuring and associated political decisions have continuously affected the ecological, political, and demographic profile of the neighborhood, eventually producing today’s mixture of both very poor and upwardly mobile Puerto Rican families living alongside other poor and working-class non-Puerto Rican Latinos, Asians, and whites.

Although there is considerable intermix of both ethnic and income categories throughout the neighborhood, there is a social gradient that conforms in a general way to the ecological gradient defined by the declining elevation from Eighth Avenue on the neighborhood’s inland border to Second Avenue near the waterfront.

This settlement pattern is illustrated in Table 1.1. The sub-areas indicated in the table are five bands of census tracts. Sub-Area 1 comprises the tracts nearest the waterfront, Sub-Area 2 the tracts just behind them going up the hill, and so on through Sub-Area 5, along the Eighth Avenue edge of the neighborhood. The population figures of the tracts in each sub-area have been averaged. The figures show that as one approaches the waterfront, the population generally becomes progressively poorer, more Latino, and more Puerto Rican.

The blighted area around Third Avenue, above which rises the elevated Gowanus Expressway, is the focus of the most concentrated poverty. The creation of this blighted area dates back fifty years to the construction of the expressway, opened in 1941, long before the arrival of large numbers of Puerto Ricans in the area. Robert Caro, in his biography of Robert Moses, describes how Moses ignored pleas from community leaders to route the expressway along Second Avenue, instead diverting it to the factories and warehouses of the vast Bush Terminal, rather than along Third Avenue, then the heart of a neighborhood of predominantly Scandinavian immigrants that was “poor, but clean poor”. After the expressway was constructed, Third Avenue degenerated into an unsavory neighborhood of dregs, prostitutes, and roving “fighting gangs, Irish and Puerto Rican teenagers, speeding down from the notorious Red Hook section” (Caro 1974, pp. 520–525). By 1950, Latinos still accounted for only 2 percent of the neighborhood’s residents (Winnick 1990, p. 92).

A small number of Puerto Ricans have lived in Sunset Park since the 1920s. Local lore traces their arrival to their disembarkation from ships of the Marine Tiger Company that docked along the waterfront. They came primarily from two towns in Puerto Rico, Hatillo and Aguadilla, whose names are still incorporated into the names of several social clubs in the neighborhood. These early immigrants provided a template for the large Puerto Rican in-migrations of the 1950s and 1960s. To this day, many of the neighborhood’s residents can still trace their roots to these areas. This settlement pattern is less cosmopolitan than in other of the city’s Puerto Rican neighborhoods such as El Barrio (East Harlem) or the South Bronx. As a result, Sunset Park has more of a small-town atmosphere than these other neighborhoods.

One community activist refers to the neighborhood as “este pueblito” when he discusses the extent to which local people live most of their lives within the boundaries of the neighborhood. The fact that there are still a lot of jobs in the neighborhood—albeit low-wage, insecure, and not plentiful enough—means that local residents are less compelled than residents of many other neighbor-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Poverty</th>
<th>All Latinos</th>
<th>% Puerto Rican among Latinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Area 1</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Area 2</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Area 3</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Area 4</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Area 5</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
hoods to travel to Manhattan for work. Cheap housing and a once plentiful supply of unskilled jobs along the waterfront were the attractions leading to large-scale Puerto Rican in-migration after 1950.

During the following two decades, there was a major population turnover throughout Brooklyn, as jobs disappeared and many white residents fled the northern and central parts of Brooklyn for southern Brooklyn and the suburbs, to be replaced by blacks and Hispanics. The population of the borough shrank by half a million between 1950 and 1980. By the late 1960s, seven of the eight piers of the Bush Terminal had closed (Winnick 1990, p. 89). The resulting exodus of the white ethnicities once employed there created many housing vacancies. As the housing stock had always been quite modest and now was aging, many units became available at very low prices.

Responding to these vacancies were poor and upwardly mobile Puerto Rican families, both from the island and from more crowded areas of the city from which they were uprooted by urban renewal. Many young, working families bought their first homes here. Others, non-working and welfare-dependent, settled in the very cheap and poorly maintained buildings closer to the waterfront.

In 1961, the city dealt a further blow to the already blighted area around Third Avenue by passing a zoning resolution prohibiting residential improvements between Third and Second Avenues in vain attempt to stimulate industrial revitalization along the Bush Terminal. This resolution signaled the doom of most of these blocks, although the final results were not felt for another twenty years. In the early 1980s, a wave of arson swept through this area displacing thousands of very poor, mostly Puerto Rican families in the course of a year.

During the 1960s, the local housing market was a gamble for many Puerto Rican families. Some won. As their homes increased in value, they sold them for a profit and joined the leading edge of more successful Puerto Ricans leaving the city for the suburbs. Others lost, victimized by unscrupulous real estate agents who induced them to buy at inflated prices with mortgages they could not afford.

During the 1970s, Sunset Park became progressively more Latino. During this same time, it also lost in overall population, a decline of about 9 percent. Median income declined as poorer Latinos replaced more affluent non-Latino whites. The Latino population became more diverse. Puerto Ricans accounted for nearly 90 percent of the area's Latinos in 1970 but only 80 percent in 1980 (Winnick 1990, p. 116).

During the 1980s, many of the new arrivals in the neighborhood were Asian and non-Puerto Rican Latinos. Among these non-Puerto Rican Latinos, Dominicans were the most numerous, followed by Central and South Americans (Winnick 1990, p. 146). Both the Dominicans and the Asians tended to be more prosperous than the poor Puerto Ricans concentrated near the waterfront. Dominicans, for example, operated almost as many small businesses in the neighborhood as Puerto Ricans, despite their much smaller numbers (Waldinger 1990), while Asians owned their own homes at rates similar to non-Latino whites and much higher than for Puerto Ricans.

An additional small stream of middle-class immigrants during this period were non-Latino whites who came in search of housing bargains, although gentrification as such has not been extensive in this neighborhood. Reliable information on Central and South Americans is scarce, but ethnographic data suggest that many of them are employed at higher rates than Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood poverty areas but work for illegally low wages, living in very crowded conditions and sending much of their earnings back to their countries of origin (Sullivan 1989a).

Ethnographic data present a picture of a marginalized work force, in which many people do work but often sporadically and under illegal conditions. Many of the more stable families are supported by men working steadily at manual jobs. The neighborhood's largest employer, the Lutheran Medical Center, employs over 2000 people under honest and humane conditions, though many of the jobs are low-wage. Other employment patterns, however, are far less stable. Women work seasonally in some of the small manufacturing firms or for very low wages in service jobs. Young men find occasional work on the loading docks, either for minimum wage or for daily, off-the-books pay on an as-needed basis. Young men also complain that many of the operative jobs in the factories are closed to Puerto Ricans because employers intentionally hire undocumented aliens and then illegally hold back part of the wages their books say they are paying them, knowing that their immigration status will keep them from complaining to the authorities. Many men also work either in unskilled service jobs or in off-the-books construction. These patterns of irregular work often alternate or combine with welfare enrollment.

The social and economic position of Puerto Ricans in Sunset Park thus presents a very mixed picture. One portion of them are upwardly mobile, often homeowners. Another and probably larger portion of them are very poor—welfare-dependent and living in officially female-headed households. Many of these very poor families are residentially concentrated between Fifth Avenue and the waterfront. In 1987, 25.1 percent of the neighborhoods' households had incomes below the poverty line, and 14.5 percent received public assistance (Stegman 1988, p. 158).
One useful indicator of this mixed socioeconomic picture is provided by comparing home ownership rates for different ethnic groups within the neighborhood, as in Table 1.2 below. The home ownership rate of 14.1 percent for Latinos is well below those for whites and Asians. Nonetheless, it is also substantially higher than in the South Bronx, New York City's largest area of concentrated Latino poverty, where ownership rates are between 2 and 5 percent (Stegman 1988, p. 166). Thus, Sunset Park has many poor Puerto Ricans and some areas of concentrated Puerto Rican poverty but also other Puerto Rican families who are young, upwardly mobile, and homeowners.

The pattern of population succession just described differs markedly from that described by Wilson (1987) for black, inner-city Chicago, in which a black middle class allegedly fled neighborhoods formerly characterized by class integration. In Sunset Park, there was a replacement of working-class by poor residents during the 1960s and 1970s, leading to a smaller, poorer population in the neighborhood as a whole. However, the working-class people who fled were primarily non-Latino whites, and those who replaced them were both working-class and poor Puerto Ricans along with working-class Asians and working-class and poor non-Puerto Rican Latinos. The 1980s then saw a further exodus of poor Puerto Ricans, who fled to Williamsburg and other poorer neighborhoods as they were displaced by the burning of the housing stock to the west of the Guanum Expressway.

The following sections of this chapter describe the social organization of the neighborhood's ethnic and economic diversity within various institutional domains. A central concern of the underclass debate has been the effects of economic restructuring on neighborhood institutions. Wilson's theories have portrayed the erosion of local institutions and family breakdown as key mediating links between economic displacement and the crystallization of patterned deviant behavior. The evidence for the existence of these community processes in Sunset Park is quite mixed. Despite the emergence of considerable poverty among Puerto Ricans in Sunset Park, including local areas of concentrated poverty, the neighborhood has shown considerable institutional resilience in several sectors along with evident stress in others. In addition, despite the presence of high rates of officially female-headed households, patterns of family formation and household structure differ markedly from these patterns among either blacks or whites.

### Political Organization

In the political arena, Sunset Park's Puerto Ricans have not been able to use their local plurality to gain control of the major local elective offices, those for city council, state legislature, and Congress. (As this is being written, federally mandated redistricting for the New York City Council has just gone into effect, one possible but far from certain result being the first Latino representative from Sunset Park.) Those offices, as well as that of head of the powerful local planning board, have been held entirely by whites, mostly of Irish or Italian descent. Since the late 1960s, however, a coalition of white, church-based liberals and grass-roots Puerto Rican community organizations has sometimes managed to give effective voice to the concerns of Puerto Ricans and other Latino and poor people in the neighborhood. This coalition has had some success in developing a network of antipoverty initiatives more extensive and effective than those in many other poor neighborhoods of the city.

This coalition was initially sponsored by a major neighborhood institution, the Lutheran Medical Center (LMC), part of the neighborhood's institutional heritage from its Scandinavian past and an important local employer and provider of medical services. The catalyzing situation was a decision by the city to transfer the Fort Greene Meat Market to Sunset Park's industrial area. Local activists opposed this decision because of the noxious nature of the business. In 1969, LMC worked together with a local confederation of grass-roots Latino organizations called UPROSE (for United Puerto Rican and Spanish Organizations of Sunset Park-Bay Ridge) to organize a protest against this decision.

Though they failed in that attempt, the organizing activity had several significant results. First, they drew concessions from the city to help with future efforts to redevelop the neighborhood. Second,
they founded a local redevelopment organization, the Sunset Park Redevelopment Committee (SPRC), which, working out of the LMC, operated successfully for several years building and rehabilitating low-income housing. SPRC also served as an effective advocacy organization, bringing a wide variety of antipoverty funds into the neighborhood. The organization was headed by a young, college-educated Puerto Rican male.

One of SPRC’s major victories was in helping to obtain special designation in 1979 of Sunset Park as a Neighborhood Strategy Area, a city classification entitled the neighborhood to preferential access to a number of benefits including Section 8 subsidies for low-income housing. This designation came only after an internal political battle between SPRC and middle-class white community leaders who represented the poverty designation and the subsidizing of poor, Latino residents (Winnick 1990, pp. 101–113). SPRC and UPROSE found important allies in the surrounding middle-class neighborhoods, particularly Bay Ridge, because residents of those neighborhoods thought it in their interests to stabilize Sunset Park as a buffer between them and even poorer, and blacker, neighborhoods (Lugo 1979, personal communication).

LMC also made a crucial decision to relocate within the neighborhood, rather than moving to the more affluent Bay Ridge. In 1977, they opened a new facility in the heart of the blighted area west of the Gowanus Expressway. This decision had several positive consequences for poor people. Over 2000 jobs remained in the neighborhood, many of them low-skill jobs employing poorly educated Latinos. The major supplier of medical services to the poor also remained in place. In addition, LMC’s relocation served as a catalyst for the development of a small area of new, low-income housing adjacent to the hospital. This area was the only part of the corridor between Second Avenue and the expressway to escape the massive arson-related depopulation in the early 1980s.

SPRC’s leading role in community redevelopment continued until 1986, when a series of financial scandals crippled its ability to continue its work. Although it is now dormant, the legacy of its housing development remains. UPROSE also remains a significant voice commanding attention from the local planning board and other centers of power.

Any discussion of antipoverty programs and social services in Sunset Park must include mention of two notable church-sponsored youth programs. One of these, the Center for Family Life, is administered by Roman Catholic nuns and enjoys a national reputation for its youth and family services. The other, the Discipleship, is run by a Lutheran minister who provides housing for homeless youths and provides a round-the-clock crisis and referral center for troubled youth. Though not run by Puerto Ricans, these organizations provide extensive and valuable services to many poor and troubled families within the neighborhood.

The significance of these antipoverty programs and services should not be overemphasized, however. Though more extensive than in other poor neighborhoods of the city and, in one case, nationally known, they still fall far short of the need. For example, the Center for Family Life was the subject of a Time magazine Christmas cover story during the 1980s, yet youths living only a few blocks away and very much in need of their services were unaware of their existence.

The political clout of Puerto Ricans in Sunset Park is also weak compared to their numbers. Voter registration and electoral participation are low, and major political offices are controlled by non-Latino political clubs outside the neighborhood. Puerto Ricans generally lack political power proportionate to their numbers throughout the city (Falcon 1988).

**Religious Organizations**

The antipoverty efforts of the LMC and church-based service agencies exemplify the important role played by local churches in attempting to deal with the problems of poor Latinos. These organizations have provided direct services and brokered a substantial flow of antipoverty funds into the area. However, many Puerto Ricans and other Latinos have relatively low levels of involvement with the mainstream churches. Some Latinos do participate in both Spanish-language and regular English-language services in these churches. In general, however, the religious affiliation of most Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood, and elsewhere for that matter, could be described as either inactive Roman Catholic or intensive Pentecostal.

The small Pentecostal congregations constitute very tight communities within the neighborhood. They meet several times a week with whole families coming together for several hours. Either as congregations or as cooperating individuals, these groups own or rent small bundles of real estate and provide dense networks of mutual support for their members. Many of their members are the young, hardworking, upwardly mobile families of the neighborhood. The Pentecostal churches are not connected to mainstream politics in the same way as the more traditional churches but rather form small, independent self-help communities.
Commerce

The commercial areas along the neighborhoods' avenues are busy and crowded, with many small stores operated by local residents. Fifth Avenue is the main artery for Latino shopkeepers and customers. A study of ethnic business in the neighborhood compared small businesses in terms of the financial and social capital of proprietors and whether or not their customers were co-ethnics. Asian and non-Latino white proprietors tended to be older, more educated, and more highly capitalized than Latino proprietors. Asian and Latino businesses also differed in that Asian owners sold primarily to non-Asians while Latino businesses sold to Latinos. On the whole, the Latino businesses were smaller and more marginal than non-Latino businesses. A disproportionate share of Latino businesses were operated by Dominicans compared to their share of neighborhood population, again a reflection of poverty concentration among Puerto Ricans (Waldinger 1990).

Despite the small, often marginal nature of their businesses, Puerto Rican commerce does constitute a substantial ethnic enclave economy within the neighborhood. This situation contrasts with that in predominantly black neighborhoods in the city and elsewhere, where the lack of local businesses operated by local residents has often been noted (Glazer and Moynihan 1963).

Apart from the businesses along the bustling retail strips, small bodegas are scattered throughout the Latino blocks of the neighborhood. Ethnic work with local families has documented the complex role of the bodega in poor areas. Poor families buy most of their groceries there, despite the fact that prices are much higher than in the more distant supermarkets, because they receive credit. This credit is essential to those whose money runs out between welfare checks or sporadic paychecks, but it comes at a high price. Bodega proprietors keep the tabs and are often thought to add charges quite arbitrarily, especially for customers already behind in payments. Families down on their luck may be forced to move or walk a great distance to find a new source of credit if they fall too far behind. The bodega owner thus serves as both merchant and banker and becomes a key figure in the micro-neighborhood. The bodega itself becomes a major nexus of interaction and gossip. Yet, the hours are long and economic viability is uncertain.

The community features and processes just described—home ownership, the emergence of political advocacy, physical redevelopment, the presence of youth and family services, commercial vitality—all differentiate Sunset Park both from stereotypical black, "underclass" areas as well as from neighborhoods of more concentrated Puerto Rican poverty within New York City, notably the South Bronx and Brooklyn's Williamsburg. In addition to the bustling Latino marketplace along Fifth Avenue, many predominantly Puerto Rican streets in Sunset Park are lined with very modest but neatly maintained homes housing two or three families that attest to this neighborhood's status as a step up from poverty.

Despite this, there are also many very poor people in the neighborhood, both concentrated toward the waterfront and scattered elsewhere throughout. The behavioral deviance stressed in writings about the culture of poverty and underclass formation is readily evident. Specifically, there are high rates of school-leaving and female-headed households, and crime and drugs are serious problems in the neighborhood. The rest of this chapter examines these aspects of life in Sunset Park.

The emphasis in the following discussion is not just on the existence of behavioral deviance but on the ways in which these problems are specific to this neighborhood: how local conditions both generate and control deviance and how these local patterns of deviance do or do not resemble patterns in other neighborhoods, particularly the poor, African American neighborhoods in Chicago, New York City, and elsewhere that have provided existing stereotypes of underclass formation. In education, for example, Puerto Ricans have lower rates of school attainment than blacks. Their rates of early, out-of-wedlock childbearing, however, appear to be lower. Beyond these quantitative differences, moreover, there are significant differences in the ways in which behavior is patterned by community norms, resources, and social organization.

Education

Since Sunset Park's Latinos are younger and have larger families than non-Latinos, the neighborhood's public schools are 85 percent Latino, far out of proportion to the Latino share of overall population, which is under 50 percent (Winnick 1990, p. 94). Educational levels of adults are low. In the neighborhood as a whole, only about 40 percent of adults have a high school education. In the predominantly Latino census tracts, less than a third of the adults have completed high school. Nor is this low level of educational participation restricted to adults. Over 40 percent of young people aged 16 to 19 in the neighborhood as a whole and 60 percent in predominantly Latino census tracts are not enrolled in school (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1983). The local public schools are overcrowded and in very poor physical condition, to such an extent that they are seen by local
real estate agents as serious barriers to attracting more middle-class residents. Parochial schools, a major resource for working-class families throughout the city who seek better than public education at less than private fees, have experienced sharply declining enrollments for years.

Although Latinos lag behind both blacks and whites in educational achievement across the country, in part because of language barriers, the social ecology of Sunset Park suggests additional factors that restrict educational attainment. The high level of concentration of employed residents in factory jobs and other types of manual work means that credentials and skills acquired through formal education have less relevance to career paths than for workers in other sectors of the economy. For example, in some black neighborhoods, as many of 40 percent of residents are employed in government jobs for which civil service requirements make formal education a necessary prerequisite.

Comparative ethnographic work among young people in Sunset Park and two other neighborhoods—one poor and African American, one working-class and white—showed the important influence of both culture and local labor markets on the school-to-work transition. Puerto Rican youths left school even earlier than their black or white peers in the other neighborhoods, even though school completion rates in those neighborhoods were also low. Yet, the Puerto Rican youths were in the labor market to a greater extent than their black peers during the teen-age years. Even though they were not able to earn as much as they desired and received lower wages than their white peers, when they did work, local factories, small private landlords, and auto repair shops did provide them with a certain amount of sporadic employment (Sullivan 1989a).

Responses to teen pregnancy in these three neighborhoods also showed this tendency of local Puerto Rican youths to leave school and assume adult roles at earlier ages than their peers elsewhere. The young Puerto Rican couples in Sunset Park were generally expected by their families to leave school and try to provide for the child immediately. In the black and white neighborhoods, in contrast, abortion rates were much higher. Young black mothers and fathers were more likely to continue their education (Sullivan 1989b).

The school-to-work transition pattern for Puerto Ricans in Sunset Park is one of early school-leaving and labor force entry. Yet, this early labor force entry is into a very low-wage and insecure sector of the economy. Even though they start work early, their subsequent labor market careers include many spells of joblessness and severe restrictions on the kinds of jobs for which they are able to compete.

Thus, although Sunset Park's proximity to the deteriorated but still substantial industrial spine of the city seems to be associated with somewhat earlier labor market entry and higher levels of labor force participation and employment than is found in predominantly black neighborhoods, low levels of education confine many Puerto Rican workers to low-wage jobs. This is a particularly serious disadvantage in an extremely service-oriented economy such as that of New York City. As noted earlier, the Latino share of manufacturing jobs actually increased during the 1970s (Bailey and Waldinger 1991). Overcrowded and undermaintained schools exacerbate these educational problems rooted in local labor market patterns.

Crime

Sunset Park has had substantial crime problems over the last twenty years. The blighted area around Third Avenue has been a high-crime area since the construction of the Gowanus Expressway fifty years ago, long before the major influx of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos into the area. As the neighborhood became poorer and more Latino, however, the crime worsened and spread. Three specific crime patterns during the 1980s were fighting youth gangs, auto theft, and drug traffic.

Youth gangs came to prominence in the neighborhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Youth gang activity in New York City had previously peaked during the 1950s "West Side Story" era and then had faded away with the heroin epidemic in the 1960s. When youth gangs returned in the mid-1970s, they appeared primarily in Latino neighborhoods and Chinatown, almost as if the city's newest immigrants were claiming their chance at this urban tradition. Puerto Rican gangs appeared in the South Bronx in the mid-1970s, although neither the South Bronx nor Chinatown gangs were youth gangs because they included older members and were involved in organized crime.

By the early 1980s, Sunset Park had developed classic fighting youth gangs that drew a great deal of press attention for the large number of murders they committed on one another. These gangs—the Assassins, the Turban Saints, the Maseteros, and the Dirty Ones being the most prominent—had well-defined colors and turf and pursued violence as a kind of recreation rather than as a means toward an end such as financial gain. They were so prominent that all local youth had to be aware of territorial boundaries. One of the youth programs mentioned earlier, the Discipleship, came into being
when a young Lutheran minister's church service was invaded by a
gang and he decided to devote his life to the young people of the
community.

By the mid-1980s, however, the youth gangs had run their course.
Their members had either grown up and straightened out or they
had moved into more profit-oriented forms of crime, particularly
drug sales and auto theft.

Sunset Park has a very high volume of activities related to auto
theft. Residents of Manhattan who find their cars stolen are some-
times told by the police to go look for them underneath the Gowanus
Expressway. The local auto theft tradition has a long history: some
of its current Puerto Rican practitioners can trace lines of recruit-
ment going back to the Italians and Irish who preceded them in the
neighborhood. The many abandoned buildings and whole deserted blocks
west of Third Avenue provide ideal spaces for stripping cars. Many
small shops for mechanical repair and body work are scattered
throughout this part of the neighborhood, and the Atlantic Avenue
corridor, which is a major locus of auto shops, is not far away.

The tradition of auto work is strong among local residents. Many
of the shops are legitimate, but many others are "chop shops" and
still others combine both legitimate and illegitimate activities.
The proximity to the waterfront allows many stolen cars to be chopped
up and their parts shipped to South American countries. Both teen-
agers and adults do the actual stealing, ranging throughout Brooklyn
and over into Manhattan, Queens, and beyond, while adults take
supervisory positions in a substantial underground industry.

Many of New York's neighborhoods, including some that are not
among the poorest, have very serious problems with drug traffic,
Sunset Park among them. Again, the most visible traffic during the
1980s was around Third Avenue. During the early 1980s, heroin
traffic was especially prominent here. Adult male addicts lived in
groups in abandoned buildings and supported their habits by priz-
ing copper from the abandoned piers, stealing automobiles, and
other forms of theft, with some occasionally shipping out to sea
for a few months to clean their systems out while they worked cleaning
the inside of tankers.

In the mid-1980s, the police department began a major campaign
to curb flagrant heroin dealing on Manhattan's Lower East Side,
another Latino neighborhood that served as a major metropolitan
heroin marketplace. The police campaign known as "Operation
Pressure Point" displaced some of that traffic to the area west of
Third Avenue. During that period, the scenes on some of the side
streets were truly terrifying: dozens of addicts in the middle of the
street being herded about by dealers carrying baseball bats and guns.

The crack cocaine trade was actually somewhat slower to emerge in
the Third Avenue area than in some other parts of the city, perhaps
because of the tight control of the heroin trade, but crack traffic was
established with a vengeance by the late 1980s.

During the early 1980s, the efforts of community residents to ob-
tain police protection were frustrated. The neighborhood is served
by two precincts, the 68th and the 72nd. Cooperation with the 72nd
was problematic but was eased somewhat by the presence of a
Puerto Rican community affairs officer. In contrast, community lead-
ers described the attitudes of officers in the 68th as "protecting Bay
Ridge from Sunset Park".

By the mid-1980s, however, the juxtaposition of major drug traffic
on one side of the neighborhood with the viable commercial districts
and relatively peaceful blocks of homeowners just a few blocks to the
east created a perfect opportunity for special police interventions. To
date, several such interventions have taken place. First, the police
department decided to inaugurate its Community Patrol Officer Pro-
gram (CPOP) in the 72nd Precinct. This program was New York
City's bid to join the national trend toward moving officers out of
cars and reactive policing to foot patrols and systematic cultivation of
good working relationships with community residents. The program
was highly popular with merchants and many residents and has
since been replicated throughout the city.

Subsequently, the 72nd was also the first precinct in this part of
Brooklyn to be the site of the saturation drug-busting task forces
known as the Tactical Narcotics Teams. In the early 1990s, the 72nd
has again been chosen as the demonstration site, this time for the
Model Precinct program, which attempts to integrate community
policing methods into all aspects of the precinct's operations. These
programs have markedly improved the relationship between the po-
lice and many local residents, especially merchants and homeowners,
but there remains a large segment of the population that is alienated
from the police and officials of all sorts.

Despite these substantial problems with crime and drugs, how-
erver, it should also be noted that Sunset Park does not have a reputa-
tion as one of the highest crime areas in the city, nor does it appear
as such in police statistics. For example, its rates of reported crimes
are much lower than those either in the predominantly African
American precincts of Central Brooklyn or in the predominantly
Latino and Puerto Rican precincts of the South Bronx. Much of the
interpersonal violence in Sunset Park has been associated with con-
flicts between parties who know one another, such as warring youth
gangs or rivals in the drug trade. The sense of danger from an un-
known predator, while higher than in middle-class neighborhoods,
is not as palpable in Sunset Park as it is in many other poor neighborhoods of the city.

**Families and Households**

Household composition and family formation patterns have been at the center of much of the discussion of the effects of economic restructuring on poor neighborhoods. Declining rates of marriage and rising rates of family formation through out-of-wedlock births to teen-age mothers have been cited as evidence of family breakdown and increasing intergenerational transmission of poverty, especially among blacks (Wilson 1987; Ricketts and Sawhill 1988).

Nationally, Puerto Rican households are far more likely to be female-headed than those of whites or of other Latino groups (Tienda and Glass 1984; Ventura 1984). In Brooklyn in 1986, the out-of-wedlock birth rate for Puerto Ricans was 61.9 percent, slightly lower than the 65.4 percent for blacks but much higher than either the 12.6 percent for whites or the 41.2 percent for other Latinos (City of New York 1986). Puerto Ricans thus seem at first glance to resemble blacks very closely in their family patterns, with both groups deviating very strongly from other major groups in the United States.

This superficial resemblance, however, obscures some very pronounced differences between Puerto Ricans and blacks. Despite high rates of officially female-headed households, family formation patterns among Puerto Ricans in Sunset Park diverge significantly from those in poor black neighborhoods in New York City and elsewhere. New York City health statistics reveal sharp differences between the fertility and family formation patterns of Latinos and those of blacks and whites. Tables 1.3 and 1.4 are based on birth and abortion statistics from selected Health Areas in Brooklyn. The figures for Latinos below are from Sunset Park and Williamsburg, those for whites are from Sunset Park, Borough Park, and Greenpoint, and those for blacks are from Central Brooklyn. Although Puerto Ricans are not separated from other Latinos in these figures, Puerto Ricans constitute a very substantial majority of Latinos in these areas.

Table 1.3 shows the different outcomes of teen-age pregnancies by ethnic group, controlling for Medicaid status as a poverty indicator. It shows that poor pregnant teen-agers are far more likely than non-poor to carry their pregnancies to term. Within each income group, however, Latinos are far more likely than either blacks or whites, whose abortion rates are basically similar, to carry to term. This is clearly a cultural difference.

### Table 1.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White (N = 162)</th>
<th>Black (N = 663)</th>
<th>Latino (N = 756)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abortions</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Births</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square $p = 0.0000$.

### Not Medicaid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White (N = 430)</th>
<th>Black (N = 663)</th>
<th>Latino (N = 488)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abortions</td>
<td>77.9%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Births</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square $p = 0.0000$.


A similar analysis of legitimacy rates for births again shows clear class and ethnic differences. Non-poor teen mothers of all cultural groups are much more likely than poor teen mothers to be married by the time their babies are born. Latinos fall in between whites and blacks in marriage rates within both income groups.

What these analyses show is that, although rates of female-headed households are high for both Latinos and blacks, the processes of family formation leading to these household composition outcomes are quite different. Pregnant blacks who avoid becoming unwed teen mothers are more likely to do so by means of abortion, while Latinos are more likely to do so by getting married.

Ethnographic work in these same areas reveals further distinctive processes of family formation among Puerto Ricans in Sunset Park that are not discernible in census or health statistics. Although eth-
TABLE 1.4  
Legitimacy by Race/Ethnicity, Controlling for Medicaid Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Medicaid</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White (N = 117)</td>
<td>Black (N = 437)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Legitimate</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>97.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square p = 0.0000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Medicaid</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White (N = 95)</td>
<td>Black (N = 102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Legitimate</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square p = 0.0000.


Ethnographic data do confirm high rates of female-headedness, they also suggest that male participation in households is greater than that reflected in statistics. In a study for the Census Bureau, we compared the results of an ethnographic block census with the household count of the block performed by census employees around the same time. We found that the census had undercounted adult males living in households by 20 percent (Sullivan 1990), which is very close to the Census Bureau’s own estimates of its undercount of black and Latino men (Hainer et al. 1988).

Ethnographic work also suggests that marriage and co-residence are more common among Puerto Ricans than among blacks (Sullivan 1989b) and that the practice of common-law marriage (documented for Puerto Ricans by Falcon and Gurak, this volume) is far more common among Puerto Ricans than among blacks or non-Latino whites. Many Puerto Rican couples in Sunset Park live together and refer to themselves as "husband" and "wife" even though they are not legally married. Falcon and Gurak report common-law marriage rates of nearly 30 percent for mainland Puerto Ricans, and ethnographic work in Sunset Park suggests the same pattern. Another distinctive cultural practice among young Puerto Rican parents is that the young mother often moves in with the young father's family, a pattern rarely seen in ethnographic work with lower-income blacks or non-Latino whites (Sullivan 1989b).

The functional importance of non-legal unions among poor people can be quite significant. As Jenkins and Edin (1990) have recently shown, welfare recipients are almost universally unable to survive on welfare benefits. In this situation, concealing marriage can allow two people to combine meager incomes without the woman's welfare check being cut back. This situation offers a tempting explanation for the prevalence of common-law marriage, except that it does not explain differences between poor Latinos and poor blacks in the prevalence of this practice. In addition, it does not explain the fact that common-law marriage has been relatively common in Puerto Rico for decades, since before widespread welfare enrollment. Indeed, some family histories gathered in Sunset Park show a pattern of common-law marriage reaching back generations. On the other hand, ethnographic data also confirm that many couples in Sunset Park do combine incomes illegally and in full knowledge that they are avoiding welfare regulations.

What may have happened is that a cultural pattern rooted in an island past has become functionally adapted to a new set of structural constraints defined by the welfare system. Together the official statistics and the comparative ethnographic work suggest two patterns. First, enduring conjugal relationships and cohabitation with or without legal marriage are more common among Puerto Ricans than among blacks. Second, it is also true that these unions are fragile and that structural unemployment does separate males from households among Puerto Ricans more often than among whites.

If these patterns are being correctly measured and interpreted, it would appear that the effects of economic restructuring on family life do bear some similarity between Puerto Ricans and poor blacks but also diverge in significant ways along cultural lines. Although blacks and Puerto Ricans in these neighborhoods have similarly high rates of officially female-headed households, Puerto Ricans probably have higher cohabitation rates than indicated by official statistics. Further, the family formation processes that lead to these household patterns appear to be quite different.
Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the ecology, demographic profile, and social organization of Puerto Ricans in an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood on Brooklyn's waterfront. The neighborhood and its inhabitants have been compared at various points to other poor neighborhoods and poor groups in New York City and elsewhere in an effort to ascertain the effects of economic restructuring and how they vary by neighborhood and cultural group.

If there is a Latino "underclass" in the United States (Moore 1989), it is most likely to be found in areas such as the blocks of Sunset Park near the waterfront. Yet, the complexity of the life of residents of Sunset Park belies many aspects of the stereotypes of poverty associated with the notion of an "underclass", or, for that matter, of a "culture of poverty". Such sweeping and stereotypical labels inevitably cloud the diversity of life-styles in any neighborhood and obscure positive forms of organization and adaptation.

A number of differences have been noted between the Puerto Ricans of Sunset Park and the residents of stereotypical "underclass" neighborhoods in which concentrated poverty is associated with deteriorated neighborhood institutions, family disintegration, crime, and social isolation generally. Yet, the deleterious effects of economic restructuring are still amply visible in Sunset Park. Despite the presence of working-class homeowners, some vital institutional sectors, and family and household patterns that differ significantly from those of other cultural groups, Sunset Park is home to many very poor Puerto Ricans who have been displaced over time from the manufacturing sector that originally drew them to the mainland and to this neighborhood. Crime, family stress, and low rates of participation in schooling, electoral politics, and other mainstream institutional sectors are widespread. Sunset Park offers simultaneous evidence that some Puerto Ricans are upwardly mobile community builders and that many others are now suffering enormously, as individuals and as members of a community, from economic restructuring.

Community studies such as this chapter and the others in this book are vital for improved understanding of poverty. If the "underclass" debate has had one beneficial effect, it has been to refocus attention on the fact that poverty affects people not just as individuals but also as members of communities. Yet, very little of the considerable scholarly activity generated by the debate has been based on studies of community process. Local-level statistics alone will never be able to answer questions about social process at the neighborhood level. Qualitative data and analysis are needed in order to understand such things as how deviant and mainstream values and behaviors coexist and how people adapt collectively to material deprivation. Both the strengths of local groups and the specificity of their problems tend to get lost in bare statistical tabulations of rates of non-mainstream behavior.

NOTES

Many people have contributed over the years to my knowledge of Sunset Park. I owe special thanks to Antonia Caban, Sister Geraldine, the Reverend Doug Heilman, Wilfredo Lugo, Adalberto Mauras, and Antonio Valderama.

1. Subsequently, the term "whites" will be understood to mean "non-Latino" whites, unless otherwise stated.
2. Bailey and Waldinger's figures do not separate Puerto Ricans from other Latinos.
3. Some demographic tabulations to follow are based, for technical reasons, on a population of 85,000.