

# Exploring spatial justice challenges in rural Mississippi

**Silvina Lopez Barrera**  
Mississippi State University

**ABSTRACT:** The poverty and food insecurity rates in Mississippi are the highest in the nation, 20.8% of people in Mississippi are living in poverty and 18.7% of Mississippi households were food insecure for the years 2014-2016. This study identifies and explores spatial justice challenges in small towns in rural Mississippi, by examining the social-spatial implications of unequal access to resources and affordable housing through the lenses of spatial justice theory. It reviews existing literature exploring issues of food insecurity, housing inequality, and inequitable development in vulnerable rural communities and it highlights the need for a spatial justice approach in this state. This article critically examines literature on food deserts and geographical discrimination practice of redlining as an important barrier for minority populations in Mississippi to access to affordable housing and adequate housing quality. The goal of this literature review is to inform policymakers to consider innovative and inclusive ways for community development and development of infrastructure in vulnerable communities in the context of limited resources in rural Mississippi.

**KEYWORDS:** spatial justice, small towns, food insecurity, housing inequality

## INTRODUCTION

The State of Mississippi located in the Southern United States, is characterized by its rural landscape with small towns and few large cities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Mississippi has a population of 2,984,100 people: 59.3% white, 37.7% Black or African-American, 3.1% Hispanic or Latino, 1.1% Asian, and 0.6% Native American. Being one of the poorest states in the country, Mississippi ranks very low in health, education, and median household income, among others. The median household income is \$40,528 and 20.8% of its population lives in poverty; this poverty rate is 7.1 % higher than the national average (13.7%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2017)

This article reviews existing literature to reveal spatial injustices in vulnerable communities in Mississippi, highlighting the everyday struggles of systematically oppressed groups to access to community resources and adequate housing, and healthy well-being. Through the lens of spatial justice theory, it critically examines literature on food deserts, geographical discrimination practice of redlining, and exclusionary zoning as important barriers for minority populations in Mississippi to access to food and to affordable and adequate housing.

In rural areas in the Southern United States, high poverty rates and the presence of minority population are predictors of the possibility of the existence or formation of food deserts (Dutko , Ver Ploeg and Farrigan 2012). This is particularly relevant in the state of Mississippi where the rate of food insecurity is the highest of the U.S (Coleman-Jensen , Rabbitt , et al.). Thus, rural areas in Mississippi are particularly vulnerable to the lack of access to food and other resources.

In general, low-income households experience financial barriers to access to adequate and affordable housing, spending more than 50 percent of their income in poor quality housing solutions (Lee, Parrott and Ahn 2012). The access to fair housing is even more challenging for low-income minorities in Mississippi, who often face higher denial rates, predatory style loans, and geographical discriminatory practices of redlining.

In addition, zoning ordinances in the form of exclusionary zoning supported by local privileged groups can exacerbate unequal and an unjust development; intensifying environmental injustices and resulting in the displacement of vulnerable minority groups.

The goal of this multidisciplinary literature review is to inform future research and policy, and encourage policymakers to consider innovative and inclusive ways for community development in vulnerable communities in rural Mississippi. Moreover, recommendations center on the following questions: Is it possible to facilitate the right to space in Mississippi? How can communities be empowered to transform the spaces they live in and to access to resources and infrastructure? What are the possible ways to promote and strengthen inclusive community development?

## **1.0 SPATIAL JUSTICE**

### **1.1. Urbanization of inequality**

To explore spatial justice and injustice in Mississippi, it is critical to understand contemporary urban and rural development processes and their social, economic, and environmental impacts and implications. In this section, I discuss the significance of spatial justice as a way to challenge the current production of unequal geographies and a way to claim the right to the city.

The term spatial justice implies a response to conflict and asymmetric geographies; it is also a response to the struggle of access to resources, and injustice. The notion of the spatial dimension of injustice was introduced by Henry Lefebvre (1996). This author argues that urbanization and development create inequality and these unjust realities can be challenged when those who are negatively affected fight for their right to the city.

David Harvey (2008, 23) emphasizes the idea of the right to the city as a fundamental human right, which according to this author, it has been disregarded for a long time. Harvey argues that the right to the city is a common right, not an individual, which can be pursued by grassroots movements at community level to exercise community power and to challenge the process of urbanization itself and the inequalities produced by the urbanization process.

Spatial justice underlines the fundamental relationship between social structure and the organization of the space. The organization of the space embodies a relationship of power between those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged from space. In the words of Lefebvre, "The space of a (social) order is hidden in the order of space" (Lefebvre 1991, 289). In "The Production of Space," Lefebvre (1991) brought to urban discourse the role of the state and politics in determining people's relation to the built environment. Thus, space is understood not just as a built environment, but also as a force of production and an object of consumption. The space consequently produced is an instrument of thinking and action; and it is both a mechanism and a consequence of control, domination, and power relations. Space expresses the material and political priorities of societies; each society produces its own space (Lefebvre 1991).

### **1.2. The right to space**

Lefebvre's right to the city highlights the right of local residents to access to urban resources, to occupy urban space and to transform it. The right to the city is not associated to the term "citizenship" that implies membership in specific nationality or ethnicity. In contrast, it empowers inhabitants of space, it is earned by experiencing everyday life in the urban space (Purcell 2002, 102). This highlights the inclusive characteristic of the right of the city, as a right that also belongs to marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

According to Soja (Seeking Spatial Justice 2010, 7), demanding the right to the city becomes a synonymous of seeking spatial justice. In addition, the spatial approach to social justice implies the spatial redistribution of resources and ensures the access to resources and urban infrastructure by the entire society (Harvey, Social justice and the city 1973, 14-15).

Soja's theory of spatial justice is a response to social and spatial inequalities created by unjust urbanizations and geographical uneven development. The conceptualization of spatial justice argues that all geographies that humans produce are embedded with spatial inequalities, giving relative advantage or disadvantage to different spatial locations. When these relative advantages and disadvantages are based on specific social statuses such as race, gender, and class, they produce and reproduce oppressive and exploitative practices and consequences. In other words, spatial injustice occurs when segments of the population are systematically oppressed reducing their well-being, their participation in social life, and their access to societal resources (Soja 2010, 71-79).

## **2.0 SPATIAL JUSTICE CHALLENGES IN MISSISSIPPI**

### **2.1. Food insecurity**

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. In 2016, 13 % of U.S. households were food insecure throughout the year (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, et al. 2017). There is a direct relation between poverty and food insecurity. The Economic Research Service' report found that food insecurity rates were higher than the national average in households with incomes close to the Federal poverty line. The rate of prevalence of food insecurity in Mississippi is the highest of the nation, 18.7% of Mississippi households were food insecure for the years

2014-2016. Mississippi's prevalence of food insecurity is 5.7 % higher than the national average (13 %) (Coleman-Jensen , Rabbitt , et al. 2017).

Food deserts are defined as lack of access to healthy food sources. Based on 2000 Census and 2006 data on locations of supermarkets, supercenters, and large grocery store, USDA identified approximately 6,500 food desert census tracts in the U.S. (Dutko , Ver Ploeg and Farrigan 2012).

According to Dutko et. al, the food desert status in rural and urban areas is correlated with high poverty rates and the presence of minority population. In addition, the region within the U.S is also a predictor of food desert status, rural census tracts located in the South, the West, and the Midwest are more likely to be identified as food deserts than rural census tracts in the Northeast (Dutko , Ver Ploeg and Farrigan 2012, 23-26).

A study by Walker et. al., identifies different theories about the formation of food deserts and their implications in the built environment. One cause of formation of food deserts is associated with the closure of stores because of the development and growth of large chain supermarkets in the outskirts of inner-cities, this is also associated to use of vehicular transportation to access to food sources (Walker , Keane and Burke 2010, 876).

The status of vacant housing and lack of access to transportation are also associated with food deserts. Particularly in rural areas, the presence of vacant housing and high poverty rates are strong indicators of the likelihood of food deserts (Dutko , Ver Ploeg and Farrigan 2012, 23-26). In addition, food insecurity is intrinsically linked to lack of access to transportation, especially for low-income households in rural food deserts. (Canto, Brown and Deller 2014, 2).

## **2.2. Housing inequality**

Declining small rural towns, boarded-up downtown buildings, shacks and vacant residential and commercial buildings, are images of complex and unjust geographies in rural Mississippi.

According to the State of the Nation's Housing report 2017, the gap between high and low-income households has increase because of unequal rates of household growth. The increase of household income inequality has affected the growth of economically segregated neighborhoods. In 2015, 54 % of population below the poverty line in the U.S. was living in high-poverty neighborhoods. High-poverty neighborhoods have increased by 59 % in the period 2000-2015 for the entire U.S.(Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University 2017, 16-17).

Furthermore, because of affordability challenges, low-income households are associated with inadequate and poor housing quality. In 2009 the Joint Center for Housing Studies reported that around 50 percent of low-income households in the U.S. that were living in low quality housing conditions, were paying more than 50 percent of their income in housing (Lee, Parrott and Ahn 2012, 94). Thus, low-income households have financial barriers to access to adequate housing quality.

The socio-economic and demographic causes of vacant housing are diverse, but the patterns of vacant housing can represent a barrier to access to affordable and adequate housing. According to the 2014 "Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice" Report, in the last decade, the growth of the number of housing units was higher than the population growth in Mississippi. This affected the growth of vacant housing units where rental housing units accounted for a substantial portion of the overall vacant housing units (State of Mississippi Development Authority 2014 , 4).

Adequate housing quality is even more challenging for low income minority populations in the Southern United States. Low-income minority populations experience additional challenges to access to adequate housing due to different factors such as income, education, and living in rural areas. Additionally, low-income minority homeowners struggle to maintain their homes and this usually establishes conditions of poor and inadequate housing quality (Lee, Parrott and Ahn 2012, 93-96).

Although Mississippi residents are protected from discrimination by the Federal Housing Act, there are studies that show the presence of discriminatory practices in the housing market (State of Mississippi Development Authority 2014 , 4). In this regard, minority populations experience constraints to access home loans. In general, these constraints are based on higher denial rates, predatory style loans, and geographical discrimination practices.

A study in the state of Mississippi revealed relevant information about high denial rates for minorities that were not explained by economic issues (Ezeala-Harrison and Glover 2008, 94). Minority population including Black, Hispanic and women borrowers experienced higher rates of denial for home loans than the average denial

rate. Additionally, there is evidence of predatory style home loans towards minority populations in Mississippi (State of Mississippi Development Authority 2014 , 5).

The study done by Ezeala-Harrison and Glover presented evidence of “redlining” geographical discriminatory practices towards minority home loan borrowers in Mississippi. This form of discrimination occurs when lenders deny loans to minorities to acquire property in transitional neighborhoods and it reinforces determined racial composition of neighborhoods. Thus, the practice of redlining tends to aggravate the residential patterns of segregation between different races (Ezeala-Harrison and Glover 2008, 77-78). According to Wyly et al., these residential patterns of neighborhood segregation are deeply shaped by historical and contemporary contexts of race and ethnicity. In the case of Mississippi, some of the residential patterns of neighborhood segregation still reflect the antebellum fabric of small towns that emerged from the old plantation network (Wyly, et al. 2012, 587).

### **2.3. Inequitable development**

Zoning ordinance defines the different land uses for residential, commercial, and industrial purposes. It specifies land-use restrictions related to lot size, square footage and height of buildings, number of building units per acre, and density. In the U.S., zoning ordinances and other restrictive mechanisms have been widely used as exclusionary planning practices. According to Bullard (2001), exclusionary zoning has been used against certain developments. This practice makes more vulnerable communities and groups that are not able to protect their environmental interests, specially affecting minority communities (Bullard 2001, 159).

Exclusionary zoning can intensify environmental injustices. For example, exclusionary zoning practices tend to produce discriminatory siting of landfills, incinerators, and unwanted facilities in marginalized communities. The placement of hazard waste landfills in predominantly African-American communities was a common practice in the region of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee (Bullard 2001, 160).

In some cases, exclusionary zoning practices also represent an important barrier to access to affordable and adequate housing by minority groups. According to Evans-Cowley and Canter, exclusionary zoning practices usually occur when communities try to protect their property values. An example of this, is the case of the Mississippi cottage which aimed to alleviate the housing demand for low-income and minority population after Katrina natural disaster in the gulf coast. This emergency housing solution was intended to be a transition into a more permanent solution but it encountered numerous zoning barriers supported at the local level, resulting in the displacement of low-income and minority population in different communities in the gulf coast area (Evans-Cowley and Canter 2010, 47-78).

## **CONCLUSION**

The studies cited in this article highlights the importance to address the social-spatial implications of unequal access to resources, food, and housing in disenfranchised communities with high concentration of poverty. It highlights the need for a spatial justice approach in the state of Mississippi, to facilitate access to community resources and infrastructure, and to empower communities through inclusive community development strategies enabling their right to space.

A research conducted by Mississippi State University studied the poverty spatial distribution in rural Mississippi. Its results highlight the vulnerability of rural places, small towns and villages of less than 2,500 people with a concentration of low-income population; and it emphasizes on the importance of “building places” by improving the built environment in impoverished rural communities and by focusing on the development of infrastructure, such as transportation and child care to facilitate access to more thriving labor markets (Parisi , et al. 2005, 481-482). This and other studies from the South encourage us to critically think about traditional community development strategies in the context of limited resources.

This multidisciplinary literature review attempts to inform future research and policy as well as to propose innovative and inclusive ways for community development focusing on generating social, economic, and spatial conditions necessary to improve the well-being of vulnerable and disenfranchised communities in rural Mississippi.

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