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## Rethinking Social Capital and Community Development

### *Background*

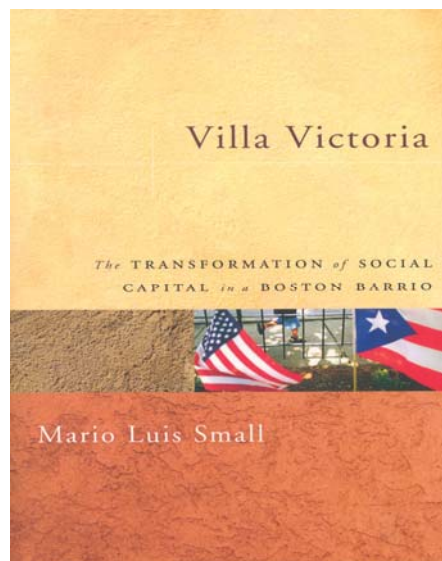
Are poor neighborhoods doomed to become ghettos—places of squalor, hopelessness, and deviance? Not always according to Mario Small's important addition to the literature on urbanization. In *Villa Victoria: the Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), Small offers a riveting account of collective achievement involving low-income Puerto Ricans living in Parcel 19 of Boston's South End in the 1960s.

That population thrived not at surpassing educational expectations or obtaining high-paying jobs but at the creation, against all odds, of Villa Victoria, a self-managed, architecturally sophisticated housing complex in the heart of what was then Boston's most dejected residential area. Within a decade, the *Villa*, as it was fondly known by its inhabitants, became a small treasure and a testament to the power of grassroots mobilization.

### *From Decline to Success*

Over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Boston evolved in tandem with rapid industrialization. European immigrants attracted by well paying jobs clustered in the narrow streets and homey brownstones of the South End, nurturing a new generation whose more prosperous members decamped to the suburbs. By the 1950s, Puerto Ricans—originally recruited by New England farm companies for seasonal employment—had become the latest immigrant group. Most of them came from rural environments. As late as 1968, over two thirds had migrated from either the countryside or from small towns. About 77 percent had incomes under 150 percent of the poverty line. Workers shared space with petty thieves and hustlers. Dozens of corners in the South End became hubs for drinking, gambling, prostitution, and, as the century progressed, drug trafficking and its related violence. After the Second World War, two trends exacerbated urban decay: a steady increase in crime and the gradual departure of stable working families. Parcel 19 became known to many as "Skid Row." The once vigorous neighborhood was on the brink of becoming a ghetto.

Then, something remarkable happened. In 1965 the area was targeted by the Boston redevelopment Authority whose goal was to raze old buildings and replace them with luxury housing.



Puerto Rican residents bent on preserving community cohesiveness and a shared historical legacy joined forces with activists, priests, seminarians, architects and other professionals to resist commercial development. That loosely organized consortium obtained financial support from local ministries and ecumenical organizations. Thus was born the Emergency Tenants' Council (ETC) Development Corporation, which spearhead affordable housing. Its efforts culminated with the construction of Villa Victoria, an award winning complex of three-story houses with pitched roofs and high stoops, communal gardens, and a central plaza surrounded by a cobblestone-layered *paseo* or promenade.

### *Building Social Capital*

Culture and tradition informed the design of Villa Victoria. Houses included large living room windows so that residents could easily look out making for the 'eyes on the street' that scholars have argued help keep crime down and community interaction up. By the 1970s, Villa Victoria epitomized an abundance of what sociologists call 'social capital,' that is, a wide array of activities bolstering community participation, reciprocity, and mutual support, including summer field trips, after-school tutoring programs, and workshops

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on topics such as gardening, cooking, and baton twirling. With help from outside sponsors, younger residents in the neighborhood assembled a tile mural on a large wall facing the plaza. In the 1980s ETC launched a closed-circuit television station run by one full time worker and twenty volunteers.

A finely tuned combination of mutually sustaining relationships and favorable spatial conditions accounted for success. Villa Victoria was an ethnically homogeneous community whose members shared a common experience, worked together to resist external pressures, and created a hospitable environment. What the group lacked in material resources it made up for in trust and connectivity resulting from purposeful daily interaction. Villa Victoria may have been poor but it was far from hopeless.

### ***'Framing' and 'Cohort Replacement'***

By the 1990s, however, community organization had fractured, the district system had been disbanded for insufficient backing and officials were elected sporadically rather than yearly. Dance classes, music instruction, community gardening, and mural painting came to a halt. Even the TV station ceased to operate leaving thousands of recorded tapes and video equipment collecting dust in a closet.

What happened? Small argues that to understand the trajectory of Villa Victoria is to understand the causes of community success and failure. He emphasizes “neighborhood framing”, that is, the way in which residents define their environs, and “cohort replacement,” that is, generational substitutions that alter perceptions. Activists responsible for the founding of the housing compound saw it as the apex of a crusade to improve living conditions while vindicating an experience marked by discrimination, economic scarcity, and political exclusion. Nevertheless, as the first cohort moved out, aged, or died, fewer and fewer residents “framed” the neighborhood in ways that made community participation seem important. Earlier generations saw Villa Victoria as a beautiful, historically significant place to be preserved through collective action; younger residents had no direct knowledge of the triumphant struggle behind the housing complex. They saw it only as a decaying old place. Tellingly, members of that cohort frequently used the word “project” to describe the Villa, while their predecessors almost never did.

### ***Lessons for Policy***

Key ideas of practical consequence emerge from Small’s investigation. Scholars and policy makers have identified social capital as a key factor in community development. Small shows, however, that the flow of social capital greatly depends on the way individuals ‘frame’ their surrounding environment. Trust, reciprocity, and mutual support do not emerge in a vacuum—they require structural and cultural underpinnings including

- Viable and durable community organizations,
- High levels of residential stability and ethnic homogeneity,
- Architectural designs that ease in or, at least, do not discourage social interaction,
- Attention to the way in which residents perceive their neighborhood, not just on “getting people involved.”

By documenting the central role of framing and cohort replacement in the accumulation and depletion of social capital, Small makes a major contribution to an interdisciplinary literature that focuses on urban development, migration, and economic sociology. ■

— **Mario Small** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Princeton University. His article, “Culture, Cohorts, and Social Organization Theory: Understanding Local participation in a Latino Housing Project” (*American journal of Sociology*) received the 2004 Robert E. Park Award from the American Sociological Association.

*Villa Victoria: the Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio* has been recognized with the prestigious 2005 C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

### **CMD Senior Thesis Prize**

Two outstanding monographs are the winners of the 2005 CMD Prize for Best Senior Thesis. Ann Glotzbach received the award for ***Springdale Atoll versus Ozarkia Nation: Adaptation of Marshallese and Hispanic youth in Springdale, Arkansas***. This theoretical, empirically based, and policy relevant paper analyzes the adaptation of Hispanic youth and little understood “non-immigrant aliens” from the Marshall Islands in a new and rapidly growing immigration site. It identifies the paradoxical ways in which social capital minimizes educational achievement among members of the two groups. Glotzbach conducted an extensive review of the theoretical literature, developed a set of

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testable hypotheses, designed her own survey, and systematically analyzed data. Her thesis offers specific recommendations for how to bolster educational achievement, college attendance, and a better future. In-depth interviews, field observations, and a photo essay enrich the analysis.

Rocío Rosales received an honorable mention for *Cuerpo Vendido, Orgullo Mantenido: A Study of Cuban Jineteras and the Critiques Confronting Ethnographic Research*. This project required the remarkable accomplishment of repeatedly traveling to Cuba, gaining the trust of closely guarded women, interviewing them in depth, and writing about the history of sex workers in the context of the Cuban Revolution. Rosales documents the complex relationships between predominantly Afro-Cuban women, their clients, and the public at large. The thesis also includes a critical analysis of ethnographic methods and of the author's own study.

### **Center for Migration and Development 2005 Graduate Student Summer Funding**

The Center for Migration and Development awards a limited number of summer fellowships for graduate students in support of research on migration and urbanization in less developed countries. The following students are recipients of the CMD's Summer Research Awards:

Adriana Abednur, Department of Sociology: *"The State and Class Conflict" Mediating Urban Land Use in Brazil*

Rina Agarwala, Woodrow Wilson School: *"From Work to Welfare: Informal Workers' Organizations and the State of India"*

Sarah Chartock, Department of Politics: *"Ethnodevelopment in Latin America: The Changing Model of Ethnicity and Targeted Policy in Ecuador, Peru, and Guatemala"*

Eric Moberand, Department of Politics: *"Moving Against the State: How Rural-Urban Migrants Undermined Officialdom in Sichuan and South Korea"*

Prerna Singh, Department of Politics: *Staying Alive: A Comparative Analysis of Social Development in India*

### **Center for Migration and Development 2005 Faculty Summer Funding**

The Center for Migration and Development recently completed a review of proposals in support of summer research initiatives by faculty members in the Department of Sociology and the Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs. These grants support research in the fields of international migration, internal migration and urbanization in less developed nations, and national development. The following faculty members are the recipients of the CMD's Summer Research Awards:

Miguel Ángel Centeno, Professor of Sociology: *"Visualizing Globalization"*

Sara Curran, Assistant Professor of Sociology: *"Migration, Development and Inequality: Uncovering the Black Box of Cumulative Causation"*

Mitchell Duneier, Professor of Sociology: *"Sidewalk: A Documentary"*

Patricia Fernández-Kelly, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Office of Population Research: *"The Moral Universe of Fabian Garramon: Religion and Spirituality Among Second Generation Immigrants"*

#### **Web Page Pickings** (<http://cmd.princeton.edu/>)

The Center for Migration and Development and the Institute of Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) co-sponsored a conference on **Mexican and U.S. Perspectives in the Study of International Migration** (January 2005). The event marked a first encounter between Princeton and other U.S.-based researchers on international migration issues with Mexican counterparts from the entire nation. The dialogues are expected to increase mutual understanding of the state of empirical research and theory on the topic and stimulate collaborative investigations in the future. Proceedings of this conference are expected to be published by UNAM in Spanish.

**Conference papers are available online**

