

The Geography of Middle Class Economic Security:
Does Location Matter?

A Dissertation Proposal Presented to the Faculty of The Heller School for Social Policy
and Management and the Graduate Faculty of Brandeis University

By
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In the wake of the Great Recession, and within the context of other macro economic shifts, individual and household economic security has received sustained attention. While research suggests variation in individual stocks of human capital (education level, health, energy, vision, competencies) and social capital (set of relational networks) are key determinates of household security, implicit in this work are assumptions that one's stock of human and social capital have an intrinsic value; that, for example, comparable investments in higher education would translate into similar employment mobility, and in turn, income and wealth generating opportunities.

Assumptions of comparability across households with similar thresholds of resources including income range, occupational status and/or educational threshold often frame the construct of middle class. In comparing such a group across cities, regions and states, however, it becomes clear that the parameters of middle class shift according to geographical boundaries. Missing, then, from the literature on economic security is a consideration of how local environmental context mediates the 'value' or 'return on investment' for these stocks of individualized capital and the impact such variation has on a household's ability to create and maintain financial security.

Grounded within a resiliency (and risk) framework, this study will examine how families leverage sources of human and social capital within specific geographic contexts to both buffer against economic shocks, but also build and fortify economic security. To date, little research examines how variation in geographically based processes, defined here as 'geographical capital' overlap and interact with individual capacities and social context to shape differential resiliency pathways and economic outcomes for middle class families across and within cities.

Using a mixed methods research design, this project will draw from US Census and city administrative data to build a Geographical Capital Index, enabling the ranking of cities according to a range of place specific variables. Index variables will then be regressed against city outcome variables including a measure of aggregate household economic security. Using semi-structured interviews, phase two of the study will examine if and to what extent resiliency pathways for middle class households living in cities with strong versus limited geographical capital differ and why households decide to stay in such cities. This mixed methods design enables both the identification of quantitative trends among cities, while the qualitative data will offer deeper insights into the implications of such trends on financial health and well being of households living in those communities.

The aim of this dissertation is to foster a deeper understanding into the pathways through which middle class families build and maintain economic security, enabling a comparison of the processes cities outline as key pathways for expanding economic opportunity with the on the ground experience of families living in those cities. Untimely, this study seeks to inform policy recommendations so government officials can make more informed decisions regarding how and where to invest city resources to expand quality of life and economic opportunities for residents.

Dissertation Committee

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Proposal Defense Hearing

Monday, October 27th 2014 at 1:30pm

The Heller School, Room 147

