

# Catholic School Closures and the Decline of Urban Neighborhoods

*What is the cause, and what the effect?*

## **Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America**

By Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett

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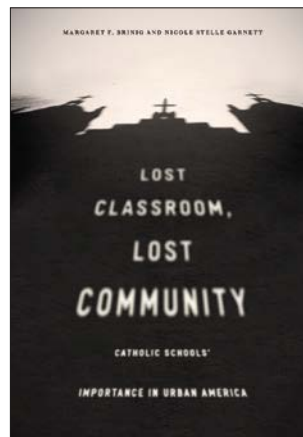
*As reviewed by Nathan Glazer*

Thirty years ago, research by James Coleman, Anthony Bryk, Andrew Greeley, and others showed surprisingly that Catholic inner-city schools were enrolling black students and educating them effectively. Only a small minority of American blacks are Catholic, but black parents were sending their children to Catholic schools, despite tuition fees and instruction in a religion the parents did not themselves follow. These parents made this decision primarily because of the schools' reputation for effective discipline, and in reaction to the observable disorder of their local public schools.

Meanwhile, as Catholics, along with others, left the central cities for suburbia, Catholic schools were losing their local Catholic parish students. As the costs of maintaining these schools rose, dioceses and archdioceses were forced to close many of them, often against fierce local opposition. Catholic schools also lost their traditional teaching force. Fewer young women were taking up the religious life, and the nuns were replaced by much more expensive

lay teachers. Catholic churches are territorially fixed, that is, tied to a defined parish; they do not move along with their constituents, as Protestant churches and Jewish synagogues and temples can and do. Emptying out, the parish schools were forced to either close or adapt to a changing local population, which could not provide the same financial support as those departing.

So, ironically, the high reputation of Catholic schools for educating black children in the inner cities was accompanied by an increasing financial crisis, which radically reduced their number. In Chicago, the major site of the research reported on in *Lost Classrooms, Lost Community*, 130 Catholic schools closed or were merged with others between 1984 and 2004. The Archdiocese of Chicago educated 300,000 students in 1965; by 2012 that number was reduced to 87,000. Of these, 22 percent were not Catholic, and 30 percent were "racial minorities" (one assumes Latino as well as black). In the major cities of the Northeast, where Catholic immigrants from Europe had settled in large numbers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the reduction in the number of Catholic schools was similar. (In Philadelphia, the second site for



research reported in this book, enrollment peaked at 250,000 in 1961 and totaled just 68,000 in 2011.)

Brinig and Garnett assume Catholic schools' effectiveness with lower-income inner-city children and take up a different story: the effect of school closures on the quality of the social life in their surround-

ing neighborhoods. The authors lean heavily for this analysis on the concept of "social capital," which for James Coleman explained the educational effectiveness of these schools. "Social capital" is a murky concept, and Brinig and Garnett make heroic efforts to give it substance. It may be considered as a "factor of production," paralleling the use by economists of physical capital, financial capital, and human capital (the effectiveness of the individual, defined by education) as factors in the production of goods. But whereas financial and human capital can be given specific measures and meaning, this is not so easy with social capital. Social capital is best envisioned as something that helps produce a good society: less crime, less disorder, more trust.

Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, defined social capital as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." Brinig and Garnett argue that

“Catholic schools in Chicago appear to bolster neighborhood social cohesion and suppress crime—findings that, we hypothesize, stem from the fact that these schools generate social capital.... neighborhoods experiencing a Catholic school closure during the relevant time period were more disorderly, and less socially cohesive, than those that did not.” The originality of the book is that this thesis, which could be argued anecdotally from many cases, is based on statistics, relying primarily on survey data collected by the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods—on detailed observational data collected by the project, block by block, of the state of order or disorder on the block—and on crime data, at the police-beat level. The study is replicated, insofar as data are available, for Philadelphia, which seems to tell the same story, and for Los Angeles, which does not seem to be a parallel case. But of course Los Angeles’s Catholic population is so different in ethnicity, and in its relation to the Catholic Church, from the European ethnic groups that have made up most of the Catholic population of the large eastern and midwestern cities, that one would not expect the same effects of school closings.

But how is one to make the case? The areas in which Catholic schools are closing are also areas in which overall population may be declining, black and minority population increasing, and poverty rising. Do these not explain the increase in crime and disorder and the decline of trust? The authors make the ingenious argument that they can detect the distinct influence of the closing of a Catholic school because such events are not related only to the increase of poverty and the growth of minority populations. Which schools in such areas close, they argue on the basis of detailed knowledge of how Catholic schools operate, depends on the commitment of the pastor of the

parish. Those more committed to the school and parish will fight harder to enable them to remain open. And the authors argue they can measure commitment by a number of factors: how old the pastor is, how long he has served in the parish, whether he has been ordained in the archdiocese

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or belongs to a religious order and is subject to its authority, whether there is some irregularity—like a sexual abuse charge—involving the pastor, and whether a temporary administrator heads the parish.

So one has a chain of statistical arguments: which schools close depends on the pastor, not only on the social conditions in the parish, and the neighborhoods of schools that close suffer a loss of social capital. Their chain of arguments may not convince everyone, but their hypotheses on the effect of pastoral leadership, independent of the percentage of Latino, black, and in poverty, is borne out by the statistical analysis. The authors write, “The factor that most predicted whether a school would close—more so than income or race—was whether there was something ‘irregular’ about the parish leadership....”

Will other schools that are free of the bureaucratic net of the public school system have such an effect? While Catholic schools were closing, the number of charter schools was increasing, and various states were setting up voucher programs for low-income students to attend (some) private schools. The question is particularly pertinent because in some states Catholic schools have been reorganized as charter schools, educating in the same building, with many of the same students and teachers. The authors tell a number of stories of such transformations, which do “save the school.” The authors consider the effect of the opening of charter schools in Chicago on their neighborhoods and whether they have the same “social capital” effects, but these schools are too various, and the time since their opening generally too short, for any clear conclusion to be drawn. And there is no way for them to disentangle the effect of a charter school, as they could with Catholic schools, by using the commitment of the local pastor as an independent variable. But one suspects that the effect of the Catholic school on its neighborhood is unique, as the commitments between school, teachers, administrators, parents, and students are strengthened by residence in the same neighborhood, as well as the tie of a common religion binding many of them.

If Catholic schools have such effects, one must raise the question, and the authors do, of why these schools cannot get public funds: they do as good a job of educating their students as public schools, perhaps better. But while voucher programs, for example, have overcome legal prohibitions in some states, political resistance to the flow of substantial public funds to schools not under the control of districts remains intense.

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