

Growing Smarter to Achieve Livable Communities and Regional Equity

By Robert D. Bullard

It has now been more than 105 years since W. E. B. DuBois' classic *The Souls of Black Folks*, in which he predicted that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.¹ The color line is no imaginary line. In 1945, St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton wrote *Black Metropolis* documenting the role racism played in creating racial inequality and the black ghetto.² Today, six decades later, all communities are still not created equal. Enforcing existing federal fair-lending laws is one area where more work is needed.³ Middle-income homeowners in black neighborhoods have fewer services, retail shopping, banking, good schools, and other residential amenities—amenities that most middle-class white neighborhoods take for granted.⁴ Although a majority of African Americans live in cities in the nation's large metropolitan regions, a growing number now also resides in the suburbs.

Suburbs were principally encouraged, financed, and supported by federal government taxation, transportation, and housing policies. But the period between 2000 and 2006 saw a reversal of white flight from many of the nation's large cities. For the first time in decades a number of majority black cities have lost black population.⁵ At the same time, the white population in more than half of the nation's counties has declined. As of 2007, people of color make up more than half the population in 302 of the nation's 3,141 counties.⁶ It is likely that the number of counties with predominantly people of color will increase as white baby boomers retire from densely populated communities. At present, one in four counties is near the tipping point where black, Hispanic, and Asian children constitute a majority of the under-20 population. Overall, people of color now account for 43 percent of Americans under 20. This demographic shift confirms that people of color—now about a third of the population—are positioned to constitute a majority of all Americans sooner than 2050, as projected by census demographers.

Why Regional Equity is Essential

Many urban problems do not stop at the city limits, and some require regional solutions. The question is, how do we forge equitable and inclusive solu-

tions to address disparities in transportation, housing, economic opportunity, land use and infrastructure, education, environmental justice, and health?⁷

Regional equity is built on three basic premises:

- Regional health depends on the health of all sectors of the region;
- Central cities and declining suburbs cannot confront the problems of racialized concentrated poverty independently and without a regional focus;
- A regional approach will support rather than undermine the political power, social cohesion, and sense of place of all residents of the region, but particularly of those communities that have long been denied an effective voice.⁸

It is commonplace for jurisdictions to compete in a “race to the bottom” by reducing taxes, lowering wage standards, and easing environmental regulations—all in an effort to lure new investments.⁹ Angela Blackwell and her colleagues at the Oakland-based think tank, PolicyLink, Inc., see “community-based regionalism” as an important strategy for promoting equitable development and sustainable solutions to regional disparities and injustice.¹⁰ Similarly, John A. Powell calls for a racially just “federated regionalism.”¹¹ In his *Racism and Metropolitan Dynamics*, Powell writes, “[Racially just] federated regional-

WE'VE APPEASED NON-SMOKERS...
 NOW, LET'S APPEASE NON-DRIVERS!!
DIVIDE CITIES INTO TWO SECTIONS:
DRIVING AND NON-DRIVING



ism is a model in which a regional authority controls access to the opportunities that have regional dimensions, but local authorities control other matters. This way identity, governmental responsiveness, and community are preserved. Regionalism—specifically, a racially just form of regionalism that not only facilitates access to fundamental life opportunities but protects against harm and nourishes political power and community strength—is simply a tool to gain greater traction [on] existing efforts.”¹²

The absence of a national urban policy has left hundreds of financially strapped cities and their aging first-ring suburbs in a “sink-or-swim” position. Generally, central cities and their older suburbs grow increasingly resource poor, while developing and sprawling suburbs grow resource rich. The socio-spatial layout and negative relations between cities, older suburbs, and newer suburbs has resulted from decades of policies and practices to isolate poor people of color.¹³

Over the years, however, central cities and suburbs have become more alike. Many social ills, such as poverty, unemployment, infrastructure decline, environmental degradation, crime, and drugs, once associated primarily with big cities, are now commonplace in many older suburbs. Reducing inequities within regions makes economic, social, environmental, and health sense since the future of cities and suburbs are inextricably linked. The fate of business is linked with the workforce, and of the middle-class with the poor.¹⁴ Poverty and inequality within cities can stifle development in the whole region. Problem-ridden cities and declining suburbs are two sides of the same coin. They are interconnected across the metropolitan landscape because of region-level economic restructuring.¹⁵

Building Regional Transportation Around Equity

Transportation investments, enhancements, and financial resources have benefited new suburban communities, even as older urban communities have been disadvantaged by transportation decisions. To access many of the new suburban developments one needs an automobile, since public transit is usually inadequate or nonexistent. Transportation sprawl, which creates a car-dependent citizenry, is consuming land faster than the population growth in many areas across the country.

Meanwhile, the infrastructure in most American cities is crumbling, as illustrated by the collapse of the eight-lane bridge in Minneapolis, Minn. in August 2007. About 11 percent of the nation’s outmoded steel bridges, mostly from the 1950s and 1960s, lack the redundant protection to reduce such failures.¹⁶ Taken as a whole, infrastructure decline has a negative impact on the well-being and quality of life for everyone—not just inhabitants of older central cities.

Policies that address transportation sprawl can also combat the adverse impact of climate change. Global warming will increase temperatures on hot summer days, potentially leading to more unhealthy “red alert” air pollution days in the coming years.¹⁷ A 2007 study of 50 cities in the United States found that future ozone concentrations and climate change could detrimentally affect air quality and thereby harm human health.¹⁸ The most vulnerable populations will suffer the earliest and most damaging set-

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Global Warming



backs, even though they have contributed the least to the problem of global warming.

Americans living in compact urban neighborhoods where cars are not the only transportation option drive a third fewer miles than those in automobile-oriented suburbs. Less auto-dependent development is key to shrinking the nation's carbon footprint and mitigating climate change. Experts pin carbon dioxide (CO₂) reduction on a "three-legged stool, with one leg related to vehicle fuel economy,

a second to the carbon content of the fuel itself, and a third to the amount of driving or vehicle miles traveled—VMT."¹⁹ If sprawl development continues, the projected 48 percent increase in the total miles driven between 2005 and 2030 will nullify expected gains from vehicle efficiency and low-carbon fuels.

Better Health Through Smarter Growth

Smart growth can also save lives by reducing deadly air pollution, which claims 70,000 lives a year; nearly twice the number killed in traffic accidents.²⁰ More than half of the nation's population lives in counties with unsafe air (American Lung Association, 2007). Transportation accounts for one third of the nation's CO₂ emissions and motor vehicles account for 75 percent of the carbon monoxide emissions, nearly half of the smog-forming volatile organic compounds (VOCs), more than half of the nitrogen oxide (NO_x) emissions, and about half of the toxic air pollutant emissions in the United States.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, African Americans and Latinos are almost three times more likely than whites to die from asthma.²¹ One in every four American children—about 27 million under age 13—lives in an area that regularly exceeds the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) ozone standards. These areas also account for about half the pediatric asthma popula-

tion—around two million children.

High ozone levels cause more than 50,000 emergency room visits each year and result in 15,000 hospitalizations for respiratory illnesses. Ozone pollution is responsible for 10 percent to 20 percent—nearly 50 percent on bad days—of all hospital admissions for respiratory conditions. Moreover,

ground level ozone sends an estimated 53,000 persons to the hospital and 159,000 to the emergency room, and triggers 6,200,000 asthma attacks each summer in the eastern half of the United States.²²

Another important point to consider is that spending on transportation is lowest in metropolitan regions with strong public transit systems.²³ Rising gas prices take money out of consumers' pockets and food off the table. They also hit low-income and working class family budgets the hardest.²⁴ For working-poor homeowners, nearly 25 percent of their household income is consumed by housing and commuting expenses, compared with just 15.3 percent for other households.

In June 2008, gas prices reached a national average of \$4 a gallon for the first time. Nationally, American families are now spending about four percent of their take-home income on gasoline. By contrast, in some rural counties in the mostly black and poor Mississippi Delta, that figure has surpassed 13 percent.²⁵ Gasoline expenses are rivaling what many families spend on food and housing. At the same time, more Americans are using public transit. Urban transit systems in areas like New York and Boston have seen an increase in ridership of five percent. But many metropolitan areas in the South and West where the driving culture is strongest and bus and rail lines are more limited report surges of 10 to 15 percent in transit use.²⁶

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Moving Beyond the Color Line

Addressing equity in the nation's metropolitan regions, cities, suburbs, and rural areas will have positive economic, environmental, and health impacts. Regional equity initiatives will also help build strong institutions and better infrastructure with policies that foster equitable public and private investment. If regional housing, economic development, land use, and transportation policies were more democratically accountable, they could have great potential for community change that is racially and economically just and environmentally sustainable. The movement for regional equity has traveled a long way. Yet, it still has many miles to go before we eliminate inequities within and between regions. Encouraging a balanced regional approach makes economic, social, environmental, and health sense since the future of cities, suburbs, and rural areas are interdependent. ■

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