

Green, White, and Black: The City, The Suburbs, and the Color of Metropolitan Job Sprawl

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The Chicago Urban League considers metropolitan sprawl to be an issue of major policy concern. It is working with other metropolitan organizations to advance reforms that will encourage “smarter,” more balanced, less frenzied, and more ecologically balanced patterns of regional growth and living. These reforms include the implementation of comprehensive balanced growth planning at state and local levels, the provision of technical assistance to local governments for preparing and implementing comprehensive plans, the expansion of state support for “Live Near Work” programs, the establishment of a local legacy program to encourage local and county government to inventory their ecological, agricultural, and historic resources and to fund local resource protection. The CUL supports the expansion of public and rail transit to reduce the Chicago area’s dangerous over-reliance on the automobile.

Why Sprawl Matters to the Inner City

From one angle, it might seem paradoxical or at least counter-intuitive that an urban civil rights organization would care about sprawl. In the standard public image, the fight against sprawl is identified primarily with white middle class suburban and ex-urban

professionals, environmentalists, and land preservationists. It's seen as a "green" and "Not in My Backyard" issue of the relatively privileged.

The CUL, by contrast, is a civil rights organization whose primary constituency is found among inner-city minorities, primarily African-American, and the urban poor. Many of the League's clients and constituents would be pleased to be in a position to even begin to worry about the "quality of life" issues that increasingly and understandably concern people on the metropolitan periphery. Most of the people the League serves and represents don't have backyards to defend or basements to flood or wetlands to preserve. They would be happy for now with almost any decent job, with improved local services and opportunities, with more affordable housing, with minimally decent schools and health care, and with other basic prerequisites for the good life. The only extended stay many of them have ever had outside of the inner city has been in the sprawling downstate Illinois prison system, whose core inmate population is disproportionately recruited from black-inner city Chicago.

We should be a little skeptical, I think, about the claims of a report titled "*Common Ground*" recently released by the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC). On the basis of community forums held throughout the Chicago metropolitan area, this study reports that "local residents" of Chicago's disproportionately black South and West Sides are as concerned as people in Du Page and McHenry Counties with such core suburban sprawl issues as farmland preservation and traffic congestion. It also claims that South and West Side residents tended to be "optimistic" about the region's future.

But most of the small number of “local residents” surveyed by NIPC were leaders of nonprofit, business, economic development, government organizations, and not typical low-income inner-city residents. Just 4 percent of the West Side informants and 7 percent of the south Side informants fell into the category of what NIPC calls “private citizen.” The CUL, moreover, does not hear much from its core constituents about suburban sprawl issues. We don’t hear a lot of people feeling terribly optimistic about the region or anything else for that matter. In fact, our constituents do not seem to spend much time even thinking about the region and even about the future at all --- their concerns are much more immediate.

Still, as NIPC’s West and South Side respondents surely know, the social, economic, and related civil rights dilemmas of inner-city African-American communities and the problem of suburban sprawl are inseparably linked to one another. The same sprawl that is creating excess on the expanding metropolitan periphery is furthering scarcity in the poorest sections of the metropolitan core, exacerbating the longstanding mal-distribution of wealth between the suburbs and the inner city. The surplus of activity that causes traffic congestion, pollution, lost farmland, and increased infrastructure costs in Du Page County is intimately related to a deficit of opportunity in inner-city neighborhoods like Grand Boulevard (home to the CUL), where median family income is less than half the poverty level for a family of four.

The Color of Job Sprawl in Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1991-2000

Recently the League’s research department examined what might be called the color of metropolitan job sprawl in the Chicago area. Combining 2000 census data with

annual *Where Workers Work* reports produced by the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), we researched the geographic and racial aspects of Chicago-area job growth during the long economic expansion (the “Clinton boom”) of the 1990s. The connections between race and geography are especially relevant in the Chicago area, the third most segregated metropolitan area in the country. According to the recent analyses of block-level census data, 80 percent of Chicago area African-Americans would have to move in order to live in a community whose racial composition equaled that of the region as a whole.

The results of the League’s research are revealing. In the Chicago area as throughout most of the US, the 1990s were a period of significant overall employment expansion. Between 1991 and 2000, according to IDES, the number of jobs covered by unemployment insurance (UI) in the six-county Chicago area rose by 16 percent. The Chicago region added nearly half a million such jobs. Beneath the overall expansion, however, the League finds that whites enjoyed considerably greater proximity to expanding labor market opportunities than did Blacks. The longstanding tendency of job growth to move out of Chicago, home to the great majority of the area’s African-Americans, and to the predominantly white suburbs, continued. Fully 98 percent of the metropolitan area’s job growth measured by IDES occurred outside the city. Just 2 percent occurred within the city, which is 37 percent Black and home to more than two-thirds (68 percent) of the area’s African-Americans.

It is true that Blacks’ share of the Chicago area’s suburban population rose slightly during the 1990s from 7.4% to 9.4%. But African-Americans are not found in large numbers in the suburbs that experienced the most dynamic job growth as measured

by IDES. Of the area's leading 20 municipalities outside Chicago ranked by percentage job growth among the 104 Chicago area communities for which IDES provides complete job growth data, only two (Aurora and Lansing) have a Black population percentage higher than average for the suburban metropolitan area (9.4%). More than 95 percent of the region's job growth outside Chicago took place in communities with Black percentages smaller than the suburban average.

Among the 20 IDES communities with Black population percentages higher than the average for the suburban metropolitan area, more than a third lost jobs between 1991 and 2000. Of the region's ten biggest job losers, four communities (Maywood, Evanston, Zion, and Harvey) have a black percentage higher than the suburban metropolitan average. Of the five communities that are more than three-fourths Black (Riverdale, Maywood, Dolton, Bellwood, and Harvey) and for which IDES data exists, all but one (Bellwood) lost jobs and Bellwood's gains were very modest. Consistent with these patterns, communities that became significantly more Black during the 1990s tended to experience weak and even negative growth in UI-covered jobs.

It is true that Chicago added nearly 10,000 jobs covered by unemployment insurance between 1991 and 2000 while possessing a Black population percentage three times the national average. The story becomes far less positive, from a Black perspective, however, when it is added that Chicago's percentage job growth was less than 1 percent

94th out of the 104 IDES communities when ranked by percentage increase -- and that job growth was very unevenly distributed throughout the city by race. Of Chicago's 56 zip-codes, exactly one half (28) experienced an increase in the number of jobs recorded by IDES between 1991 and 2000 and one half experienced a decrease. Among the 26

zip-codes that saw an increase and for which relevant racial and demographic data exists by zip code, nearly three-fourths -- 73 percent (19) --- possessed a proportionate white population in excess of the city-wide white percentage (37.9) at the time of the last census for which racial data is available by zip code (1990) Twenty two of those 26 zip codes (84.6 percent) possess a Black population percentage below African-Americans' citywide share (38.6%). Among the ten top job-growth zip codes, moreover, *all are disproportionately white* for Chicago and six of those ten are more than 60 percent white. Overall, the city's 19 disproportionately Black zip codes lost 18,080 IDES-recorded jobs between 1991 and 2000. By contrast, the city's 15 zip codes that were 75 percent or more white in 1990 collectively gained 19, 215 of those jobs during the same period. *The total job gains of the seven zip codes that were 90 percent or more white was equivalent to nearly 90 of the city's overall job growth.*

Policy Recommendations

This elementary analysis shows that job sprawl is heavily racialized in and around Chicago. The "green" issue of sprawl interacts with traditional "black" and civil rights issues of residential segregation and racial discrimination in hiring (another current CUL research interest) to exacerbate the great divide between "vanilla suburbs" and "chocolate cities," undercutting the common ground of experience and consciousness that democracy requires.

Part of the appropriate policy response is refine smart-growth policy sugar for reasonable injection into the roaring and dangerously unbalanced engine of sprawl (the automotive pun is intentional) and to redirect development towards the inner city.

Beyond the measures mentioned above, the CUL advocates reduction of high local property taxes and the high apartment and industrial assessments that discourage livable-wage employment and affordable housing in Chicago and Cook County, re-evaluation of numerous state spending and capital programs that encourage sprawl, and the expansion of public inducements for inner-city investment and job growth.

At the same time, since sprawl is not simply going to disappear overnight and because the “vanilla” periphery offers superior job and other opportunities, the League supports policies meant to increase poor urban minorities’ access to the periphery. One such policy is inclusionary zoning. Already successfully implemented in a number of municipalities and counties across the nation, inclusionary zoning requires that developers of large apartment subdivisions set aside a certain percentage – generally around 20 percent --- of units for low income tenants. In return the developer becomes eligible for a density bonus beyond what previous zoning rules allowed. In some cases, developers who refuse to build affordable housing are required to pay into a local or county fund meant to fund low cost units. The goal is to de-segregate poverty and race by increasing the number of affordable housing units outside central cities while avoiding the re-concentration of low-income housing in any one area.

Anyone who doubts that such a program (one of many possible schemes to increase poor African-Americans’ access to the suburbs) would make a difference for urban minorities should consult Leonard Rubinowitz and James Rosenbaum’s provocative *Crossing the Class and Color Lines: From Public Housing to White Suburbia* (Chicago, 2000). Rosenbaum and Rubinowitz found a unique research source among the roughly 6,000 low-income African-American families that were relocated to

non-majority black communities from Chicago public housing during the 1980s and 1990s. The authors found major differences in employment and educational outcomes between families assigned to the suburbs and those assigned to other neighborhoods within the city. Those who went to the suburbs did significantly better in both areas.

African-Americans need not have any particular desire to live next door to whites to see the desirability of living in an integrated community. They need only understand that, as University of Pennsylvania sociologist Doug Massey has argued, housing markets distribute far more than housing resources. Those markets also distribute relative degrees of access to educational, commercial, recreational, natural, civic, medical, and labor market opportunity. Particularly when job growth patterns are so clearly tilted in the geographical favor of whites, the not-so old-fashioned objective of desegregating our communities should be at the top of our policy agenda.

We must slow down sprawl but we should also democratize and colorize the socioeconomic and racial profile of development on the metropolitan periphery. It will not be good enough to reverse our region's dangerous, helter-skelter patterns of land use if that means freezing existing deep inequalities of race and class into permanent place.

Thank you.