



Efforts to Promote Smarter Growth in America: A Sociologist's Perspective

Xavier de Souza Briggs
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

June 16, 2006

National Research Council/National Academies
Meeting on Urban Development and Land Use Governance
Washington, DC

Outline

- **What have sociologists studied in this (broad) domain?**
- **Consensus points**
- **Debates**
- **Summary and conclusions:
What might an NAS panel contribute?**

What have sociologists studied?

- **Forms and formation of “community”** (affective and instrumental) in distinct settlement types, going back to the 1920s. Includes lifestyle, neighboring, trust, exclusion, etc. *Urban and community sociology.*
- **Forms, causes, and consequences of segregation by race and income** (including “neighborhood effects” on children and families and mechanisms of “spatial mismatch” between workers and housing locations). *Urban and community sociology, sociology of the family, economic sociology, social stratification.*
 - *Desegregation dynamics and impacts* (mostly in schooling, some in housing or neighborhood integration).
- **Political institutions and behavior in urban and suburban communities** (and multi-jurisdictional ones trying to connect them). *Urban, political sociology.*

All three are relevant for the “so what” (social costs of sprawl) and “now what” questions.

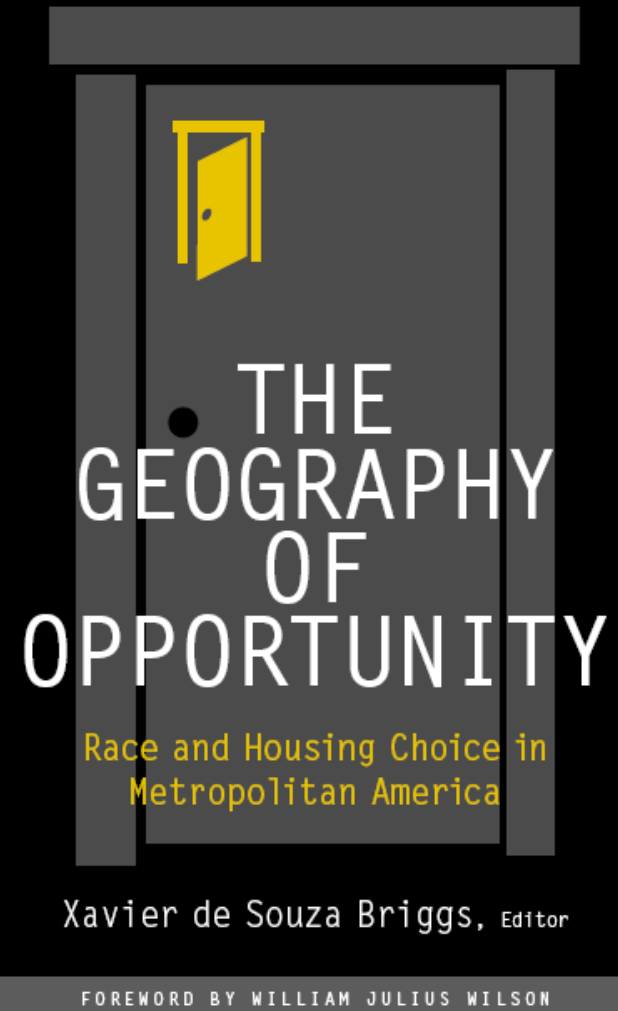
Implications so far ...

- **Sociology has made major inroads into “social costs” but usually not in the context of planned changes in “sprawl.”** (Exceptions: desegregation, planned new towns)
- **The major subfields don’t interact with each other much, let alone with other disciplines.**



Key consensus points (slide 1 of 3)

- *Disparate impacts:* The dominant sprawling pattern contributes to segregation by race and income, giving some households fewer options to “exit” areas of poverty and social distress.
- *Disparate treatment:* Discrimination in housing markets (by race, status, other) is one contributor.
- But so are households’ *preferences* for a social “comfort zone” (leading to avoidance) and segregated *social networks/social worlds*.



Consensus points (2 of 3)



- **Context effects are really hard to pin down:**
- ***Places as social worlds* (interactive, affective, socially influential)**
- ***Places as locations* (economic, politico-administrative, crime), where key issue is access, not influence.**

Consensus points (3 of 3)

- “**Suburbanism**” (dominant “way of life” for households with wider choice) is mainly about life stage (childrearing), security, and status. Life cycle leads some empty nesters back to “urban” living (whether in central cities or not).
- ***It’s the institutions, stupid:*** Communities increasingly extra-local, organized by key institutions in our lives (work, school, church/civic), not propinquity.
- ***Politics of suburbia:*** Fundamentally territorial, protectionist, class-driven, often anti-poor.
- Suburbs ***diversifying*** quite rapidly (as a category), with new segregation emerging (economic, older vs. newer ‘burbs, by function). *Poverty suburbanized in 1990s, new immigrant gateways.*

Debates: Open questions

- **Not your grandmother's suburbs:** What do new settlement patterns mean for family opportunity, political behavior, and the formation of community in suburban America? E.g., Putnam on sprawl (longer commutes → less time → less engagement).
- **Beyond simple notions of sprawl impacts:** How do family-level strategies interact with larger systems, such as public transport and services and labor market institutions, outside of cities? *Need typologies, interventions that address variance.*
- **Porches and transit and ... what?:** What *institutional* designs should accompany *physical* redesign? E.g., Daybreak in UT, Columbia, MD.

What might an NAS panel add?

- **Synthesize the evidence across subfields, offer a less myopic and advocacy-driven view of sprawl's social and economic implications.**
- **Rein in grand claims about physical design impacts alone—situate vis-à-vis institutions.**
- **Outline research priorities and methods for (a) diversified suburban America; and (b) experiments in planned change.**