Housing Policy Debate • Volume 13, Issue 4 **669**

Comment on Scott A. Bollens's "In Through the Back Door: Social Equity and Regional Governance"

Mark Alan Hughes
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Although Scott A. Bollens argues that an emerging portfolio of policies is addressing regional equity through the back door, state and federal policies and guidance are in fact often a venue for thwarting, not supporting, equity-related goals. Three examples where regional equity gains have have been inhibited by state or federal involvement center on Mount Laurel housing in New Jersey, the Jobs Access title of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), and the administrative geography of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). Perhaps we do not see more regional cooperation because the potential gains are small compared with the gains made by those who benefit from a fragmented status quo.

Keywords: Growth management; Poverty; Urban policy

Scott A. Bollens poses an important question about regionalism and then constructs a subtle answer—one that is sure to provoke considerable debate. The question, stated a bit more starkly than Bollens does, is this: If regional settlements suffer a competitive disadvantage from internal disparities, then why don't we see more regional policies designed and implemented to reduce those disparities? This question is a constructive challenge to what he calls "new regionalism," the loose collection of theory, empirical research, and policy development that emerged in the 1990s.

The key assertion of this new regionalism is that disparities (my abbreviation for concentration of poverty, ethnic segregation, and resource inequality by place) reduce overall regional productivity and thus lay the foundation for policies of enlightened self-interest: In other words, everybody wins when regions cooperate to reduce disparities, suburban fortunes are tied to city prospects, the inside game of fighting poverty and the outside game of fighting sprawl are two sides of the same coin, and other familiar policy arguments.

The question itself, it should be noted, limits the regional equity debate to a range of efficiency-related points. That is a concession probably worth making, given the powerful mechanisms and incentives that have generated the disparities in the first place (Downs 1968). Some will argue that such a concession, almost by definition, dooms any real equity gains. Others will argue that the premise of the question, that regions are interdependent to an extent that fully compensates cooperators, is not proven by the empirical literature. Personally, I am not altogether convinced that demonstrated correlations between city and suburban performance within regional economies to date are not the result of specification and measurement error in our models.

A careful review demonstrates just how thin the evidence that suburban economic performance and welfare depend on central-city performance is (Gottlieb 2000). There is perhaps one compelling article bearing on the city/suburban dependency hypothesis and employing post-1970 data (Voith 1998); virtually everything else in the recent literature consists of bivariate scatterplots. And the consensus founded on this weak body of research has critics, ranging from those skeptical about method (Hill, Wolman, and Ford 1995) to those supportive but unconvinced (Harrison 2000). The research question is fraught with demanding data issues in which even distinguishing gains and losses is hard. It reminds me of the evaluation of time in traffic in the study of congestion and sprawl: Do people code an additional 15 minutes a day in the solitude—or soundstage—of their single-occupancy vehicle as a cost or a benefit? Furthermore, the geocoding of our employment data is so variable as to constitute hand-waving: Middlesex County, MA, and Maricopa County, AZ, are hardly same-scale observations.

But regardless of whether its premise is true or not, the question provides a useful organizing device for debating regional policies that are being examined and implemented across the country. Bollens sustains the new regionalism by arguing that an emerging portfolio of policies is, in fact, addressing social equity through the back door. He does not quite claim that this is an intentional strategy of politically sophisticated policy development, a kind of progressive bait-and-switch. Indeed, he concludes the article with the suggestion that derivative back-door policies will mature only when equity becomes an explicit part of regional policy agendas. I am not so sure about that last twist in the argument. Bollens's real finding may well be that broad regional equity policies indeed rely on new regionalism more for rhetorical camouflage than for rational argument. To make equity policies explicit would seem to fly in the face of the back-door evidence that Bollens marshals.

My main comment on the article centers on Bollens's reading of this evidence. I argue that the record is more mixed than Bollens suggests. State and federal policies and guidance are often a venue for thwarting, not supporting, equity-related goals. Shifting equity claims from local to regional, or from regional to state or federal, does not necessarily improve the prospects for progressive equity policies. I outline three brief examples of policies, all cited by Bollens, where regional equity gains have been inhibited by state or federal involvement: Mount Laurel housing in New Jersey, the Jobs Access title of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), and the administrative geography of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA).

The full story of the Mount Laurel affordable housing strategy in New Jersey is complex and full of countervailing policy moves at the state level (Hughes and McGuire 1991; Hughes and Van Doren 1990). The policy grows out of three separate decisions by the state Supreme Court of New Jersey. Mount Laurel I in 1975 established a half-dozen policy goals regarding local housing opportunities in the state. After years of little progress toward those goals and in growing recognition that some of the goals represented potential trade-offs (for example, between low-cost housing production and suburban integration per se), the state Supreme Court issued Mount Laurel II in 1983; it was a strongly worded opinion that demanded action by local governments and specified explicit zoning and development remedies and measurement techniques to monitor compliance.

A major stalemate was building between the court and the state legislature, to which many localities had appealed for refuge from the court's rulings. In 1985, the legislature established a new administrative agency, the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH), and a new process by which local governments could exclude up to half of their "fair-share" housing goals determined under Mount Laurel II. The court's decision not to rule on the law and to cede housing policy to COAH is often referred to as Mount Laurel III. The Mount Laurel experience suggests that when intraregional conflict is displaced to the state, the three branches can continue the same debates, grinding to an exhausted political resolution in which not all the equity outcomes favor progressives.

The Jobs Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) segment of TEA 21 authorizes $750 million for fiscal years 1999 to 2003. I certainly support programs designed to help low-income city residents access suburban employment opportunities (Hughes 1991; but for a discussion of policy tensions, see Waller and Hughes 1999). The interesting thing for Bollens's argument is the illustration JARC provides of how conflict displaced to the federal level can simply continue existing unresolved debates between policy communities over a question like "what is equity?" The Jobs Access program is a public transit funding device. The process that governs those funding decisions makes a comprehensive approach to suburban job access, including nontransit options like car ownership and maintenance, nearly impossible. At the same time, the higher subsidies typically required by, say, express bus service to suburban job destinations can create enormous and destabilizing cross-subsidies within transit systems that weaken service levels between more central locations. JARC is a policy debate between antipoverty and environmental policy specialists, and between human service providers and transit providers. Moving to the federal venue, in this case, does not make regional equity issues any clearer.

The administrative geography of the WIA illustrates a third kind of problem that can emerge when regional equity is routed through the back door (Hughes 2000). In this example, federal administrative rules actually work to impede regional cooperation toward equity goals. Many workforce analysts argue that the service delivery areas of job training and placement programs should reflect regional labor market boundaries, and, indeed, rhetoric in legislative preambles on this point dates back to the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982. A close reading of the legislative record leading to WIA demonstrates how difficult it can be to improve federal administrative geography in the face of local interests.

Both the original House and Senate versions of WIA attempted to address this concern for regional labor markets and to replace rhetoric with requirements for drawing appropriate regional boundaries. To be sure, the original bills were not perfect. If anything, they probably did not go far enough in conforming local workforce areas with labor market boundaries. But even these modest reforms did not survive the conference that led to the final bill. Existing service delivery areas of 200,000 residents or more were granted the right to temporary designation (which must be made permanent after two years if the area has "substantially met the local performance measures for the local area"). In effect, the old fragmented administrative geography of the Job Training Partnership Act was grandfathered into the new WIA system.

This example is especially salient to Bollens's evidence because the policy and legislative debate occurred toward the end of the new regionalist decade of the 1990s. The WIA outcome runs counter to a supposed trend toward proregion federal law or rule making. Instead of a clear requirement to conform to regional labor market boundaries, WIA gave states only the option to require regional planning, information sharing, and coordination of services among designated local workforce areas. Entrenched local interests, both peripheral counties hoarding job growth for their own residents and central counties maintaining control over federal dollars and the vendors those dollars support, deftly acquired the federal legislation they needed to impede a strong move toward regional cooperation.

Perhaps this is all we can expect of the back door. The state and federal options Bollens presents are really little more than opportunities for local actors to cooperate regionally—just tools available for regions that seek to reduce their internal disparities. But that is a pretty low bar. Moreover, it returns us to Bollens's original question and suggests a very different answer. As we say in Philadelphia, there is no deal so screwed up that somebody is not getting something out of it. Maybe the reason we do not see more regional cooperation is because the potential gains are, in fact, small compared with the gains being made by the winners of the fragmented status quo.

Author

Mark Alan Hughes is the Robert A. Fox Distinguished Senior Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania.

References

Downs, Anthony. 1968. Alternative Futures for the American Ghetto. *Daedalus* 97:1331–79.

Gottlieb, Paul D. 2000. The Effects of Poverty on Metropolitan Area Economic Performance. In *Urban-Suburban Interdependencies,* ed. Rosalind Greenstein and Wim Wiewel, 21–40. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute for Land Policy.

Harrison, Bennett. 2000. It Takes a Region (or Does It?). In *Urban-Suburban Interdependencies,* ed. Rosalind Greenstein and Wim Wiewel, 141–60. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute for Land Policy.

Hill, Edward, Harold Wolman, and Coit Cook Ford. 1995. Can Suburbs Survive without Their Central Cities? Examining the Urban Dependence Hypothesis. *Urban Affairs Review* 31:147–74.

Hughes, Mark Alan. 1991. Employment Decentralization and Accessibility: A Strategy for Stimulating Regional Job Opportunities. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 57:288–99.

Hughes, Mark Alan. 2000. Federal Roadblocks to Regional Cooperation: The Administrative Geography of Federal Programs in Large Metropolitan Areas. In *Urban-Suburban Interdependencies,* ed. Rosalind Greenstein and Wim Wiewel, 161–80. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute for Land Policy.

Hughes, Mark Alan, and Therese J. McGuire. 1991. A Market for Exclusion: Trading Low-Income Housing Obligations under Mount Laurel III. *Journal of Urban Economics* 29:207–17.

Hughes, Mark Alan, and Peter Van Doren. 1990. Social Policy through Land Reform. *Political Science Quarterly* 105:97–111.

Voith, Richard. 1998. Do Suburbs Need Cities? *Journal of Regional Science* 38:445–64.

Waller, Margy, and Mark Alan Hughes. 1999. *Working Far from Home: Transportation and Welfare Reform in the Ten Big States.* Washington DC: Progressive Policy Institute.