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Beyond the Urban-Suburban Dichotomy: A Discussion of Sub-Regional Poverty Concentration

GEORGETTE C. POINDEXTER†

I. INTRODUCTION

Many theories of regionalism assert that for reasons of global economic competitiveness and social justice, political boundaries within the region must be dissolved.¹ While the level of dissolution may vary (from a complete melding into one political machine to a multi-layered federation to cooperation between political jurisdictions), the common thread entails the economic (if not social) blending of the central city of the region and its suburbs.² To bolster the political attractiveness of regionalism, some proponents attempt to ally the interests of “close-in” or “inner-ring”

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1. See, e.g., MYRON ORFIELD, *METROPOLITICS: A REGIONAL AGENDA FOR COMMUNITY AND STABILITY* (1997); Scott A. Bollens, *Concentrated Poverty and Metropolitan Equity Strategies*, 8 STAN. L. & POL'Y. REV. 11 (1997); Paul Boudreaux, *E Pluribus Unum Urbs: An Exploration of the Potential Benefits of Metropolitan Government on Efforts to Assist Poor Persons*, 5 VA. J. SOC. POL'Y & L. (1998); Richard Briffault, *Who Rules at Home?: One Person/One Vote and Local Governments*, 60 U. CHI. L. REV. 339 (1993); Anthony Downs, *The Challenge of Our Declining Big Cities*, 8 HOUSING POL'Y DEBATE 359 (1997); Robert H. Frelich & Bruce G. Peshoff, *The Social Costs of Sprawl*, 29 URB. LAW 183 (1997); Jerry Frug, *Decentering Decentralization*, 60 U. CHI. L. REV. 253 (1993); Richard Voith, *Central City Decline: Regional or Neighborhood Solutions?*, BUS. REV., FED. RESERVE BANK OF PHILADELPHIA, Mar./Apr. 1996.

2. See Norman Krumholz, *Regionalism Redux*, 57 PUB. ADMIN. REV. 83 (1997) (describing how we are presently in the fifth phase of interest in regional planning by developing cooperative public, private and nonprofit partnerships to reform government); see also, Voith, *supra* note 1 (suggesting the need to reexamine the appropriate roles of suburban, city and regional governments).

working class suburbs with those of the center city.³ These regionalists admonish residents of inner-ring suburbs to preview their own future social and economic problems by looking across the street to the center city. While this may make for a powerful visual image, it only captures part of the story. Aligning the interests of these inner-ring suburban residents with the city fails to account for the position of the poor living in the suburbs.

At first read, this concept of the suburban poor may sound at best, trivial, and at worst, oxymoronic. Upon further investigation, however, the notion of the plight of the poor in the heart of the suburbs is more complex. The socio-economic situation of the suburban poor leaves them with no method to form effective political alliances. The working class suburbs have joined with the city—in large part to keep from becoming poor. Zoning insulates the middle class and the wealthy. Dilution mutes the voice of the suburban poor as they are scattered throughout the suburbs in pockets of poverty.

This paper will probe the questions of a regional approach to the problems of poverty as applied to a suburban context. Rather than working from the assumption that the suburbs are an economic and social monolith defined only by what they are not (the central city), I will examine how the suburbs need the same economic and social integration on a sub-regional level that others are proposing on a regional level. Specifically, this paper will address new federal housing regulations promoting deconcentration of poverty. Deconcentration of suburban poverty proves more difficult than deconcentration of urban poverty because, there is nowhere left to deconcentrate. This dilemma underscores the necessity for place-based revitalization efforts in the suburbs on a more urgent basis than in the city.

As a case study, I will use the housing and educational problems faced by the city of Norristown in suburban Philadelphia. I will analyze low income housing concentration in one of the most wealthy counties in Pennsylvania. From this discussion will flow proposals for policy directives that incorporate regional and sub-regional goals.

3. ORFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 4.

II. PLAYERS IN THE REGIONALISM GAME

Regionalization efforts often recognize two participants: the city and the suburbs. These participants are sometimes cast as opposing warriors with diametrically opposed goals. The suburbs are havens for those who have escaped from the ills of the city, a dying economic beast and a drain on the region. Suburban residents disassociate from the city, disconnecting their social lives while denying the impact their departure has had on their economic lives. The city tries to tap the suburban pocketbook to pay for social programs.⁴

As several studies have proven, however, this caricature of regional existence is (at least in part⁵) false. Suburbanites cannot completely disassociate themselves from the central city because local regional economies are inextricably linked.⁶ Suburban employment is closely tied to the economic well-being of the central city.⁷ In fact, when *central city income* lags too far behind income in the suburbs, *suburban* employment is adversely affected.⁸ When the growth rate of incomes in the central city increases, there is a positive effect on the growth rate of suburban incomes.⁹ Hence, regional planning should be in everyone's economic best interest.

This evidence of interdependence, though, operates on a theoretical level that most people fail to appreciate in their

4. See Anthony Downs, *Are Suburbs Really Independent from Central Cities?*, 38 NATL. REAL EST. INVESTOR 28, 32 (1996). Professor Frug refers to the "love/hate" relationship between cities and their suburbs. See Frug, *supra* note 1, at 279.

5. It is true that in many cases cities have become the centers for concentrated poverty. For example, in 1990, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia combined contained 2.14 million people living in extreme poverty census tracts (equaling approximately 28% of all such resident of central cities in 1990). See Downs, *supra* note 1, at 383. To the extent that this concentration of poverty exacerbates existing pulls on the economic resources of the city and pushes central cities further and further into economic turmoil, the caricature of a distressed central city is correct.

6. H.V. Savitch et al., *Ties That Bind: Central Cities, Suburbs, and the New Metropolitan Region*, 7 ECON. DEV. Q. 341 (1993) (citing Richard P. Nathan & Charles Adams, *Understanding Central City Hardship*, 91 POL. SCI. Q. 47 (1976) and *Four Perspectives on Urban Hardship*, 104 POL. SCI. Q. 483 (1989)).

7. Savitch, *supra* note 6, at 342.

8. *Id.* (citing Larry C. Ledebur & William R. Barnes, *METROPOLITAN DISPARITIES & ECON. GROWTH*, 1992).

9. See Voith, *supra* note 1, at 5.

day-to-day lives. The need for suburban-city cooperation stands in bold relief when the inner ring suburbs are viewed as the next stop on the route of the creeping doom of urban blight. To forestall this doomsday scenario, close-in suburbs have begun to join with the city. For example, in Cleveland, suburbs are forming a coalition with city officials called the "First Tier Consortium."¹⁰

Inner ring suburbs may have more in common, economically speaking, with the city than with outer ring suburbs, simply because of the usual methods of suburbanization. Historically, as workers from the city moved into blue-collar suburbs, the middle class took up residence in the more distant bedroom communities, and the very wealthy bought vast and great estates removed from them both.¹¹ As development moves further and further from the central city (either linearly or in a leapfrog fashion), older suburbs begin to confront "city problems": homelessness, crime, substandard housing, and decaying commercial strips.¹² In fact, inner suburbs have as much, if not more, to gain from regionalization as the central city does.¹³ Regionalization spares them from becoming mired in the economic and social challenges of the city while demanding that the outer suburbs contribute to their well-being. Forming an alliance between the inner suburbs and the city begins to break the two player regionalization game into a troika.¹⁴

Myron Orfield, in his book *Metropolitics*,¹⁵ suggests tranching this process even further. He tells of the reform

10. *The 'Burbs Fight Back*, BUS. WK., June 2, 1997.

11. See Savitch, *supra* note 6, at 346.

12. ORFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 15-16; see Downs, *supra* note 1, at 387; Ruth E. Knack, *The Once and Future Suburb*, 52 PLANNING 6, 7 (1986).

13. Myron Orfield suggests that these blue-collar suburbs are the biggest winners in regional reform. See Myron Orfield, *Metropolitics: Coalitions for Regional Reform*, 15 THE BROOKINGS REV. 6, 9 (1997). He also asserts that because these inner suburbs lack a central business district and elite neighborhood tax base, they face prospects even bleaker than those of the core city. See *id.* at 7.

14. Another interesting player to add here would be those neighborhoods within a city that function more like suburbs except for their spatial embedding within the political boundaries of the core city. They stand, quite possibly, to gain even more than the inner suburbs because they already are bearing the brunt of the redistribution of the cost of the urban poor. Regionalization would lift that burden from them.

15. ORFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 124-25.

coalition in Minnesota that pushed an agenda of regionalization. In his account, the central city, the inner suburbs, and the low-tax-base developing suburbs¹⁶ band together to battle the high-tax-base, affluent suburbs. Other scholars have endorsed this policy because it has the advantage of transforming the support base from a minority of the region's citizens—those in the city—to a majority by bringing in other suburbs.¹⁷

This approach does recognize that the suburbs are not a monolith. It gives tacit approval, however, to the maintenance of the status quo by quarantining regional poverty. In fact, an important factor in formulating the alliance is that if nothing is done regionally, urban problems will seep into the inner-ring suburbs. The poor must remain immobile;¹⁸ regionalization merely insures that everyone in the region pays for it.¹⁹ While the central city may benefit from the regionalization of the expenses of concentrated poverty, this approach does not address the question of the poverty concentration already located in the suburbs.

III. BEYOND A FOUR HANDED GAME

What approach, then, would better speak to the needs of the suburban poor? One method may begin by recognizing the social and economic diversity that exists within the suburbs themselves. I am not talking about the difference between the working class suburb and the gated enclave.

One of the “eight myths of poverty” is that most people in poverty live in inner city ghettos.²⁰ In 1997 the poverty rate in the United States was 13.3% (approximately 35.6

16. Their low tax base results from lack of commercial development coupled with high demand for school expenditures. *See id.* at 124-25.

17. *See* Downs, *supra* note 1, at 399-400.

18. When Myron Orfield discusses the need for regional “fair share” of affordable housing, he acknowledges that even the inner suburbs do not have housing for the very poor. *See* ORFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 57.

19. I do not disagree with the end of this process. In fact, I have endorsed just such a scheme. *See* Georgette Poindexter, *Deconstructing the Legal City*, 145 U. PA. L. REV. 607, 655 (1997). My point here is that this process cannot be cloaked in terms of “fairness” and “equality” without explicitly stating that what is “fair” might still be separate and what is “equal” might still be divided.

20. Knack, *supra* note 12, at 9.

million people).²¹ Of these 35.6 million, the vast majority (approximately 27.3 million) lived inside metropolitan, urbanized centers of the US.²² However, 45% of the poor in the metropolitan areas live *outside* the central city, in the suburbs.²³

The poor in the suburbs appear less visible because their presence is more scattered. While central cities had a poverty rate of 18.8%, the suburbs' poverty rate was less than half of that—9.0%.²⁴ Even though they may be scattered across the suburbs, the suburban poor, when found, are concentrated into a few municipalities.²⁵ This pattern leads to an ironic situation of diluted concentrations of poverty. Because they are scattered, the suburban poor lack the political voice to engage in the regionalism debate.²⁶

Suburban redistributive efforts present a more difficult problem because it is easy to avoid redistribution simply by changing suburbs. To avoid wealth redistribution of the poverty-related expenses of the central city, one must move across the city line. Through political and legal boundaries, the movers thus insulate themselves from the city's redistributive efforts. In fact, regionalism is predicated on this issue. To move from the city to the suburbs requires effort on the part of the movers. They must break social ties formed by places of worship and friendships, and often families are left behind. They may have to break economic ties by finding a job in the suburbs if the commute into the city is too long. The costs of these changes may be great.

21. All statistics are taken from Joseph Dalaker and Mary Naifeh, *Current Population Reports, Series P60-201, Poverty in the United States: 1997*, U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS 1998.

22. *See id.*

23. *See id.*

24. In an even more stark comparison, in 1993, 5.3% of the population of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania lived below the poverty level. In neighboring Philadelphia County (which is co-terminus with the City of Philadelphia), 26.5% of the population lived below the poverty level. *See State and Metropolitan Area Data Book, 1997-1998* (5th ed.), U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS 149 (1998).

25. *See Dalaker & Naifeh, supra* note 21.

26. There is also a racial component here. To the extent African-Americans have suburbanized they have not escaped poverty. *See Rodney A. Erickson & Theodore K. Miller, Race and Resources in Large American Cities: An Examination of Intraurban and Interregional Variations*, 13 URB. AFFAIRS Q. 401, 414 (1978).

Once someone is a suburban resident, however, changing jurisdictions to avoid wealth redistribution is easier.²⁷ Because the political subdivisions within the suburbs are so highly fragmented, it is literally possible to move down the street and change political jurisdictions.²⁸ Social and economic ties therefore can remain intact. Thus, the poor in the suburbs suffer the same fate as those in the city: they lack the political voice to bring attention to their plight.

Since voluntary wealth redistribution is not likely to occur, regional cures of place-based efforts or poverty deconcentration must be implemented. Existing theories of regionalism must pay special attention to include all constituencies. For example, instead of a representative vote on the topics of regionalism, decisions should be made by direct vote.²⁹ The game of regionalism must be expanded beyond even the four players Myron Orfield suggested to include the unique challenges of suburban poverty. One example of the intricacies of solving suburban poverty is Norristown, Pennsylvania.

IV. POVERTY IN THE BELLY OF WEALTH—NORRISTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA.

Norristown is the county seat of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. While Montgomery County is contiguous to the City of Philadelphia, Norristown lies some 25 miles west of Philadelphia in the middle of the county. Montgomery County is one of the wealthiest counties in Pennsylvania and among the wealthiest in the United States.³⁰ Its population in the 1990 census was 678,111. The median income in 1990 was \$43,720. Norristown had a population of 30,754 in 1990. Its median income was

27. See Richard Briffault, *The Rise of Sublocal Structures in Urban Governance*, 82 MINN. L. REV. 503, 506 (1997).

28. This is a variation on the argument that the redistribution is best carried out at the highest level of government because the higher the governmental entity the more cost associated with moving out of the boundaries of that entity. See Voith, *supra* note 1, at 14.

29. This overcomes one of the obstacles to formation of regional governments cited by Professor Briffault. See Briffault, *supra* note 1, at 344.

30. See e.g., <<http://www.montcopa.org/commerce/norris.htm>>; <<http://www.montcopa.org/commerce/wnorr.htm>> ("Update on Montgomery County") (Dec. 15, 1999) (on file with BUFFALO LAW REVIEW) [hereinafter "Community Profiles"].

\$28,643. On either side of the borough of Norristown lie the townships of East Norriton and West Norriton. Their median incomes in 1990 were \$47,026 and \$43,803, respectively.³¹

Poverty within the county is concentrated in the Norristown area.³² In 1990, the countywide poverty rate was less than 4%; the poverty rate in Norristown was close to 10%. Using Section 8 housing program certificates as a proxy for poverty, Montgomery County has a total of 1,677 certificates issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As of December, 1998, 721 (43%) of these certificates were used in Norristown.³³ The remainder is spread throughout the county.³⁴

Together, the borough of Norristown and the townships of East Norriton and West Norriton comprise the Norristown Area School District (NASD). Montgomery County has a total of 23 school districts. The NASD houses almost half of the county's Section 8 units (virtually all within Norristown). The other units are spread amongst the County's school districts with the average district having 37 units.³⁵ As residents of East and West Norriton see their school district become home to more low income residents, they flee the district.³⁶ As they depart, the spiral of poverty concentration continues.

Norristown bears the brunt of poverty location within Montgomery County. It is easy to draw the connection between the incidence of poverty in Norristown and the concentration of Section 8 housing there. The hard question

31. *See id.*

32. To a lesser extent, poverty is found in Conshohocken, Bridgeport, and Pottstown. *See id.*

33. Fieldwork conducted by the author. Telephone Interview with Audrey McIntosh, Director of Rental Assistance, Montgomery County Housing Authority (Dec. 1998).

34. In the Section 8 program, low- and very low-income families are assisted in obtaining decent and safe housing in the private rental market through either the voucher or certificate program. Although families may select their own rental units, such housing must meet Housing Quality Standards and rents charged must be reasonable in relation to rents charged for comparable unassisted units in the market area. The units must be at or below the fair market rent ("FMR") for the area as determined by HUD. *See id.*

35. *See* Telephone Interview with Audrey McIntosh, *supra* note 33.

36. Both townships lost residents between 1990 and 1994 (latest available data) while the County as a whole increased in population. *See* Community Profiles, *supra* note 30.

is what to do about it. Policy can take several directions in addressing this problem. One approach would be to regionalize the poverty throughout the County by forcing dispersal of Section 8 housing throughout the County.

The vast majority of the legal cases challenging housing concentration involve central city public housing projects rather than suburban Section 8 housing. Also, starting with *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority*³⁷ through more recent cases today, legal attacks on the impropriety of concentration turn on the issue of race.³⁸ The issue of economic concentration has been a by-product of these discussions, but not the primary focus. Recently promulgated directives of HUD, however, have taken a new turn. First, they signal the acknowledgment of the ills of concentration of poverty through non-project public housing. Second, the new rules also address income level without regard to race. These rules have more ready applicability to the suburbs because they concern scattered site vouchers rather than traditional public housing projects.

The existing line of housing project concentration lawsuits were the building blocks for new HUD directives governing the Section 8 program. Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) provide rental assistance through the Section 8 rental assistance programs funded by HUD.³⁹ Enacted on September 10, 1998 and effective October 13, 1998, the new HUD rules established the Section 8 Management Assessment Program (SEMAP). SEMAP is designed to measure public housing agency performance in key Section 8 tenant-based areas in poverty concentration.⁴⁰

The SEMAP program was initially proposed in December of 1996.⁴¹ It articulated fifteen performance indicators HUD planned to use to evaluate housing agency performance under Section 8.⁴² One of these indicators, the "deconcentration indicator," purported to measure the efforts of a metropolitan-area housing agency to avoid concentration of poverty. The deconcentration indicator

37. 296 F. Supp. 907 (N.D. Ill. 1969).

38. See e.g., *Shannon v. HUD*, 436 F.2d 809 (3d Cir. 1970).

39. The Section 8 program requirements are codified at 42 U.S.C. § 1437 (1998).

40. See 24 C.F.R. § 985 (1998); 63 Fed. Reg. 48,548 (1998).

41. See 24 C.F.R. § 985 (1998); 61 Fed. Reg. 63,930 (1998).

42. See 61 Fed. Reg. 63,930 (1998).

would compare the dispersal of Section 8 families throughout a metropolitan area to the dispersal of fair market rent (FMR)-priced units⁴³ throughout the same area. By this comparison, the indicator would measure whether Section 8 families are at least as dispersed throughout the area as are FMR-priced units.

The intended purpose of the deconcentration indicator is to increase housing opportunities available to Section 8 families. Housing agencies "will be encouraged to provide more outreach to owners in all areas of their respective jurisdictions and more counseling and transportation assistance to motivate and increase housing choice on the part of families."⁴⁴

HUD dramatically revised the deconcentration indicator in the final version of the SEMAP rules. The Department received approximately 160 responses to its request for comments on the proposed rule.⁴⁵ Most of the comments generally approved the stated purpose of the SEMAP program, but the comments almost unanimously objected to the inclusion of the proposed deconcentration indicator.⁴⁶ The comments stated that deconcentration of families receiving rental assistance is outside housing agency control, since the tenant-based design of the program permits families to choose their own housing. The comments also argued that a performance requirement and the additional costs of administering an effective mobility program would constitute an unfunded mandate.⁴⁷ Some comments criticized the deconcentration indicator as complicated and confusing, and suggested that the data against which performance was to be measured was out of date.⁴⁸

In light of the nearly unanimous objection to the deconcentration indicator, HUD elected to revise the program. The new indicator was named "Expanding Housing Opportunities."⁴⁹ Its stated purpose was to

43. FMR-priced units are standard quality housing units, excluding zero- and one-bedroom units, that rent at or below the fair market rent as determined using census data and FMRs.

44. 61 Fed. Reg. 63,931 (1998).

45. See 63 Fed. Reg. 48,548 (1998).

46. See 63 Fed. Reg. 48,550 (1998).

47. See *id.*

48. See *id.*

49. *Id.*

measure a housing agency's efforts to encourage participation by owners of units located outside areas of poverty or minority concentration and to inform rental voucher and certificate holders of the full range of areas where they may lease housing. The revised indicator measures housing agency actions that are required by regulations funded by the administrative fee, which eliminated concerns regarding an unfunded mandate.⁵⁰

The final version of the rule contains a far more lenient approach to measuring a housing agency's efforts at deconcentration, and it does not measure where families ultimately choose to lease housing. HUD did state, though, the continued belief that "it is important to develop a reasonable measure of the extent to which the housing agency's actions to expand housing opportunities actually result in family choices to lease housing in low poverty areas."⁵¹ In light of this belief, HUD stated a plan to issue a new proposed rule containing a potential new SEMAP deconcentration indicator that would measure outcomes but would be less complicated than the deconcentration indicator in the initial proposed rule.

In the meantime, HUD developed a "Deconcentration Bonus Indicator" to acknowledge the effectiveness of housing agency actions in achieving deconcentration until a new SEMAP deconcentration outcome-measuring indicator is developed and adopted.⁵² The five-point bonus gives metropolitan-area housing agencies the option of providing data on the percent of Section 8 families who choose housing in low poverty census tracts.⁵³ The bonus points will be awarded if half or more of all Section 8 families live in low poverty areas or if the percent of Section 8 mover families who choose housing in low poverty areas exceeds by at least two percentage points the percent of all the housing agency's Section 8 families who live in low poverty

50. *See id.*

51. Section 8 Rental Voucher and Certificate Programs and Establishment of Section 8 Management Assessment Program, 63 Fed. Reg. 48,548 (1998).

52. 63 Fed. Reg. 48,551 (1998).

53. Low poverty census tracts are defined as those where the poverty rate in the tract is at or below ten percent, or at or below the overall poverty rate for the principal operating area of the housing agency, whichever is greater. The definition is a relative measure that may differ for the inner city and suburban portions of a metropolitan area.

areas.⁵⁴

The bonus indicator is intended to encourage housing agency outreach in the same manner as the initial proposed deconcentration indicator.⁵⁵ The bonus points are added on top of a housing agency's final SEMAP score, boosting their performance assessment. Since the SEMAP scores bear no direct correlation to funding, the only possible value of bonus points added to a SEMAP score is a sense of accomplishment on the part of an individual agency and commendation from HUD and/or local groups.

The SEMAP regulations suggest a firm commitment on the part of the federal government to reducing the concentration of poverty in Section 8 housing. This is a positive step beyond the limited purview of *Gautreaux's* rule forbidding racial concentration in public housing projects. In practice, however, achieving significant deconcentration may not be possible without a broad approach that reaches beyond the efforts of individual housing agencies. These directives are certainly a step in the right direction, but they do not alone suffice to ensure that Norristown and Montgomery County can and will achieve deconcentration.

A number of factors prevent the dispersal of Section 8 housing away from Norristown and throughout Montgomery County. Although there may be classist and/or racist discrimination in the de facto closing off of housing in the rest of Montgomery County, concentration in Norristown is primarily the result of economic factors.

First, there simply may not be available Section 8 housing in other parts of Montgomery County. Section 8 only permits a certain FMR as the maximum rent for a Section 8 unit. In many areas of Montgomery County, there exists little, if any, rental housing for such a low price. In contrast to the dearth of affordable housing in the rest of Montgomery County, Norristown has a particularly high level of low-income rental units. Norristown is a borough with an industrial history, and as that age passed, many of the old houses have been subdivided and rented out. Few rental units have been constructed in Montgomery County

54. For example, if twenty percent of all assisted families are in low poverty tracts, and twenty-two percent of mover families locate in low poverty tracts, the housing agency would then be awarded five bonus points in its SEMAP score.

55. See 63 Fed. Reg. 48,551 (1998).

over the past ten years, which means that older suburbs, such as Norristown, contain most of the rental housing.

Other important economic and practical factors in considering the location of low-income public housing are transportation and child care. Many Section 8 families do not own cars and must rely on public transportation to commute to and from work, as well as to shopping, medical, and other social services. Montgomery County has a poor inter-county transportation system that does not allow an individual to commute easily between points within the county. Norristown, however, is a transport hub.⁵⁶ In addition, Norristown has easily accessible shopping and all of the county's social service offices are in Norristown, because it is the county seat.

Beyond the practical factors, such as the availability of affordable housing, the corollary question is whether owners of housing outside of Norristown will be willing to participate as Section 8 landlords. Section 8 has a bad reputation in Montgomery County, and Norristown is an area where many things have been blamed on Section 8. In the mid-1990's, for example, the county began publicizing complaints that Section 8 tenants made up the vast majority of calls to the police emergency line. The Montgomery County Housing and Development Commission then conducted a study to refute these complaints, and showed that Section 8 tenants accounted for a far smaller number of calls than had been assumed.⁵⁷

V. POLITICAL REALITY OF POVERTY DISPERSION

The notion of dispersing poverty amongst wealth is neither innovative nor novel. Scholars advocated this method over 30 years ago.⁵⁸ The success of the *Gautreaux* program in Chicago not only spawned this latest Section 8

56. According to Karen Black, transportation is the most oft-quoted reason people offer for why they choose to use their Section 8 voucher or certificate in Norristown. Telephone Interview with Karen Black, Community Builder, HUD Office, Philadelphia, Pa. (Dec. 1998).

57. See Telephone conversation with Audrey McIntosh, *supra* note 33.

58. This idea can be found in the Report of the Kerner Commission in 1968. See Bollens, *supra* note 1, at 11-12. Also, Anthony Downs, in 1973, proposed to deliberately deconcentrate poor households by enabling many of them to move to scattered dwellings in outlying suburban communities. See Downs, *supra* note 1, at 390.

initiative, but also other HUD demonstration projects.⁵⁹ What is unique about the SEMAP is that it encourages housing authorities to deconcentrate within their own jurisdictions. Other programs have advocated deconcentrating central city poverty by moving recipients to the suburbs. SEMAP recognizes that poverty exists in the suburban jurisdictions and encourages suburban housing authorities to address such concentrations.

Wider suburban deconcentration of poverty, however, exacerbates an already tense political standoff between new Section 8 arrivals and existing community members. In the best of circumstances the arrival of Section 8 families prompts citizen complaints. Whether it can be empirically proven or not, the perception is that Section 8 tenants ruin property values and introduce a bad element into the neighborhood.⁶⁰ To some people, Section 8 residents violate their idea that a life in the suburbs should be the result of hard work. As one suburban mayor stated, "My constituents have been able to pull themselves up by the bootstraps to be here. People resent it when government tries to make somebody their economic equivalent by subsidizing them."⁶¹

In response to this resistance, when central city poverty is "dispersed" to the suburbs, it reconcentrates in transitional neighborhoods—turning some suburbs (such as Norristown) into "Section 8" corridors.⁶² This reconcentration is the antithesis of the goals of the section 8 program. However, the next deconcentration effort proves even more difficult than the first. Once poverty is concentrated in the suburbs, dispersing it among the other suburban jurisdictions is sure to meet with staunch opposition. SEMAP presents an attempt to achieve that suburban deconcentration.

59. For example, the Moving to Opportunity program. See DAVID RUSK, CITIES WITHOUT SUBURBS, 1993 (using *Gautreaux* as a model for metropolitan-wide dispersal of poverty); HENRY CISNEROS, INTERWOVEN DESTINIES: CITIES AND THE NATION (1993) (advocating wide spread implementation of the Moving to Opportunity program).

60. See James Bovard, *Suburban Guerilla*, in 27 THE AM. SPECTATOR 26, 30 (1994).

61. Bovard, *supra* note 60, at 29.

62. For example, 65% of Cook County's Section 8 families are clustered in 14 south suburbs. Bovard, *supra* note 60, at 28. The same experience occurred in Washington, D.C., where there is a concentration of Section 8 housing along Route 1 in Fairfax County, Virginia. See *id.*

VI. QUESTIONS GOING FORWARD

SEMAP is a very important first step in addressing the sub-regional issues sometimes overlooked by traditional regional theorists. It is not, however, the complete answer. There are limitations to such tactics. If urban to suburban dispersal proved difficult, one can only imagine the hurdles imposed by intra-suburban deconcentration. Dispersal, standing alone, can only go part way—an in-place poverty relief program must also be implemented. Place-based strategies generally meet with two criticisms. First, they keep the poor immobile and “in their place.”⁶³ Second, there is a consensus among social scientists that a strong middle-class presence is necessary for healthy and stable communities.⁶⁴

As to the first criticism, regional mobility in our nation is linked to economic success in large part because of factors such as exclusionary zoning, which corrals the poor by denying them access to non-poor areas. Attacks on exclusionary zoning, however, must be analyzed in light of the political reality that community consists of inclusion *and* exclusion.⁶⁵ Although economic exclusion offends a more egalitarian view of society, it continues to be one of the driving forces in suburban land use decisions. To dismiss place-based strategies ignores this reality.

The formidable barriers imposed by exclusionary zoning require place-based solutions such as community development grants, human development investment, etc. The difficulty with the placed-based suburban programs (just like those in the central city) comes down to paying for them. If one imagines a metropolitan area as a jigsaw puzzle, the central city is a fairly large piece. The suburbs are a collection of small pieces. If the one big piece had difficulty paying for its poverty, imagine the fate of one tiny piece trying to do the same. Of course, a quick response to this would be to prod the poor (and almost poor) little pieces to join with the big piece to form a formidable alliance

63. John A. Powell, *Race and Space: What Really Drives Metropolitan Growth*, 16 *THE BROOKINGS REV.* 20 (1998).

64. See Orfield, *supra* note 13, at 8.

65. Of course, I am purposely leaving aside issues of racial, religious, and gender exclusion which have no place in this economically driven decision.

against the rich little pieces for more regional funding.⁶⁶ This assumes, however, the poor small pieces have the political ability to join in such an alliance. This is the cruel irony of suburban poverty. Because it lacks the critical mass of urban poverty, it flies below the radar screen of suburban politicians. The suburban poor, if politically mobilized at all, cannot have the political clout of the urban poor because they lack the capacity seriously to affect the outcome of political races.

As to the second criticism of place-based strategies: the importance of a middle class community presence cannot be overstated. This is why the dispersal strategy is crucial. Therefore, a solution to the plight of the poor in the suburbs must join place-based suburban strategies with dispersal goals.⁶⁷ Ironically, if poverty deconcentration truly works, the suburban poor will be left even more politically muted. In the meantime, however, the voice of the suburban poor must be sought and their unique concerns should be addressed.

66. This, in essence, is Myron Orfield's thesis. *See, e.g.,* ORFIELD, *supra* note 1.

67. *See, e.g.,* Bollens *supra* note 1.