

The Geography of Opportunity: Race and Housing Choice in Metropolitan America

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Dr. Xavier de Souza Briggs, Editor

Reviewed by Reginald Tucker-Seeley

Research across many fields (e.g., economics, political science, public health, education, and sociology) has consistently shown that there is something about where we live that influences a host of individual- and population-level outcomes. Such outcomes include health status, employment opportunities, and education quality. The conclusion drawn from this research is that place matters.

The Geography of Opportunity: Race and Housing Choice in Metropolitan America is a book edited by Dr. Xavier de Souza Briggs. Dr. Briggs states that this book was inspired by a project cosponsored by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project, Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, and the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. This project assembled researchers, practitioners, and policy officials for a symposium that was held in November 2001. This text includes the invited papers from that symposium as well as additional papers to fill the "gaps in coverage." The result is a collection of essays describing and prescribing topics on an important social policy issue facing metropolitan American: the confluence of race and housing choice.

The book is organized into four parts with a foreword written by Dr. William Julius Wilson of Harvard University and two introductory chapters written by Dr. Briggs. In the foreword, Dr. Wilson sets the tone for the book by introducing many of the problems in the current urban environment: sprawl, regionalism, and demographic shifts within central cities, suburbs, and satellite cities. Dr. Wilson argues that the geography of housing choice is not a singular issue, but that housing with-

Dr. Xavier de Souza Briggs is an associate professor of sociology and urban planning in the department of urban planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He is the former acting assistant secretary for policy development and research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in the Clinton Administration (1998-1999). He is the creator of The Community Problem-Solving Project at MIT.

Reginald Tucker-Seeley is a doctoral student in health and social policy at the Harvard School of Public Health. His dissertation focuses on modeling urban social systems using geographic information systems and agent-based modeling methodologies to better understand health status and health decision making within urban environments.

in the metropolitan region is linked to many other broader problems/issues within the urban environment that contribute to the fiscal and physical health of the region.

The two introductory chapters by Dr. Briggs provide the reader with a sense of the focus of the text as well as an introduction to the national policy context. He contends that U.S. metropolitan areas are sprawling and segregated by class and race, and as a result a disparate “geography of opportunity” is created. He suggests that failure to address this disparity in opportunity will continue to affect outcomes related to education, employment, health, and other integral areas over the next generation. In these two chapters, Dr. Briggs also situates the topics in the book (e.g., housing, education, race, poverty) within the national social policy dialogue—a dialogue that is basically silent on issues related to race and housing choice. Yet, the confluence of the changing demographic, resident preferences, fiscal pressures, and competing public objectives in metropolitan regions presents policy makers and the local citizenry with tough challenges and difficult decisions to make. Nevertheless, consistent with the aforementioned research in other social science disciplines, Dr. Briggs asserts that location matters, and it matters for economic, education, health, and many other quality-of-life issues.

Part I includes chapters on topics such as housing choice and racial attitudes and the discrimination in mortgage lending. This section asks some very interesting questions related to housing choice in cities. For example, what drives neighborhood composition preferences? Is the mortgage-lending market guided by risk or race? How does geographic steering of racial/ethnic minorities to specific neighborhoods contribute to segregation patterns? The authors provide information and data in response to these questions, yet clear-cut answers currently elude researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

The chapters in Part II begin with setting the historical context to give the reader a framework from which to evaluate the specific topic under review. For example, there is a chapter on the history of public housing transformation in Chicago with information and data on the players and the context. The authors summarize this particular chapter by noting that historically federal housing programs have produced differential benefits to families. Collectively, these chapters illustrate the difficulties faced when attempting to carry out housing research.

The chapters in Part III show the complexity involved in attempts to address housing policy issues. The authors in Part III emphasize the importance of history, race, and area-based politics in any attempts to address housing policy changes. They contrast housing policies across places, show barriers to much needed coalition building in local areas, and illustrate the importance of land use policies/regulations to equitable housing choices.

Part IV consists of two concluding chapters. The first section offers suggestions for state and local policy makers based on the authors’ experience in addressing housing issues, and the second section consists of Dr. Briggs’s summary and concluding remarks. The authors of the first section describe “equitable development,” which is their notion of the fair distribution of affordable and racially inclusionary housing. They also provide strategies necessary to implement equitable development. Finally, Dr. Briggs concludes with a summary of the text as well as suggestions for America’s metropolitan troubles. He outlines four core dilemmas

that the policy agenda for change in the uneven geography within our nation's cities will have to address. These dilemmas include the unsatisfactory fair housing laws, managing competing public priorities, coalition building among the various competing interest groups, and ensuring a fair local political process. Yet, at the heart of the issue of the geography of opportunity, argues Dr. Briggs, is the nation's ambivalence about civil rights and race-based policy.

Dr. Briggs's efforts here are critical to the debate of housing choice in metropolitan America. He interjects a discussion of the politics of race and place into the current housing debate and suggests that an evaluation of underlying social mechanisms and processes to understand the effects of our changing American cities is necessary. At the intersection of fields such as regional science/planning, geography, economics, sociology, and behavioral science, Dr. Briggs has edited a superb text that is not constrained by disciplinary boundaries. A review of his text shows that he and the other authors are really interested in highlighting a set of problems that simmer and sometimes overflow in our nation's cities. Housing choice in metropolitan America presents many policy challenges, and anyone interested in learning more about these challenges would do well to pick up Dr. Briggs's text.