

Letter from the CURA Director

The Twin Cities is one of a number of metropolitan areas across the country currently conducting an analysis of regional equity. Denver, Seattle, Portland, and others have previously examined equity in housing, education, transit accessibility, economic opportunity, and other areas. The quality and utility of a regional equity analysis mainly rests on two considerations: (1) how opportunity is conceived of and measured and (2) how segregation is analyzed.

Equity assessment can be a powerful tool for determining the uneven nature of opportunity within regions. To be most useful, however, equity analyses need to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of opportunity. It is a mistake to categorize communities along a single continuum of opportunity. Many types of opportunity exist, and they are distributed differentially across neighborhoods. We know, for example, that neighborhoods in the Twin Cities that score high for educational opportunity often score low for transit and employment access. In addition, neighborhoods that many regard as disadvantaged actually provide a number of opportunities for their residents, and conversely communities regarded as the most advantaged often lack certain opportunities. The best regional equity analyses therefore move away from simplistic and binary categories of “high/low” opportunity to characterize communities by the types of opportunities they do or do not offer. The approach taken in the Twin Cities equity analysis acknowledges the multiple dimensions of opportunity and allows for the examination of the strengths and weaknesses of all communities in the region.

In the typical equity analysis, the “geography of opportunity” described above is matched to the distribution of racial/ethnic groups and/or to the distribution of poor households to demonstrate how some populations have greater access to opportunity than others. In funding the current Twin Cities assessment, the federal government imposed a requirement to identify “racially concentrated areas of poverty” (RCAPs) for that purpose. However, a sole focus on RCAPs, would produce a myopic view of regional equity, and as some advocacy groups in this region rightly argue, forfeit an excellent opportunity to fully analyze segregation and opportunity in the region. A more robust analysis of segregation and opportunity in this (or any other) region would require examination not only of RCAPs, but also of an equally important form of residential segregation: “racially concentrated areas of wealth” (RCAW).

Although it is important to know where concentrations of people of color and of households in poverty live, it is equally important to know where they are absent. A sole focus on RCAPs stigmatizes minority communities, suggesting that such concentrations are unhealthy for the region and for the residents of those neighborhoods. The consequences of such a single-minded analysis are clear—the Metropolitan Council’s RCAP maps are already being used as a justification for opposing affordable-housing proposals in areas in or near RCAPs. Furthermore, a singular focus on RCAPs suggests that the distribution of the white population and the geography of affluence are not problematic and that they constitute a “natural” landscape against which the problems of nonwhite neighborhoods are set. Ignoring RCAWs also obscures the socio-political-economic forces that bring about segregation and will likely constrict the range of potential policy options for remediating regional inequities.

On this second critical element, those responsible for preparing the Twin Cities equity assessment should go beyond the federal requirement to analyze RCAPs and conduct a more complete analysis of the full range of race/poverty segregation in the region. Doing so would provide the federal government and other regions a powerful model for understanding regional equity.

Sincerely,
Edward Goetz



Director, CURA