The Urban Seminar Series
ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY

Building Coalitions to Bring About Change

Metropolitan areas across the country are facing common problems, including concentrated poverty in central cities, declining public schools, and deteriorating housing conditions in older suburbs surrounding the urban core. To tackle these pressing issues, elected officials from cities and suburbs, corporate leaders, minority and low-income community advocates, and religious leaders are coming together to form powerful regional political coalitions. They seek to revitalize struggling communities and to improve the quality of life for urban children and families by promoting urban reinvestment, creating affordable housing, and improving access to transportation in order to link inner-city residents with rapidly growing suburban jobs. Their work is based on the premise that a metropolitan region is an interrelated system and that cities and suburbs cannot solve their social and economic problems in isolation.

Serving as a bridge between the academic research community and practitioners, the two-day seminar hosted at Harvard University convened nationally known researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who shared their expertise and lessons from the field about how to build successful regional coalitions. The discussion focused on several themes including: What are the most effective strategies for building successful coalitions? What issues are important to consider in building cross-class and multiracial collaborations? What can current research tell us about the roles collaboration builders play in creating the most enduring coalitions? Notable research findings and discussion themes addressing these issues are summarized in this brief.

The seminar, "Building Coalitions to Bring About Change," part of the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety, was held December 6-7, 2001 at Harvard University. For more information please visit our website at www.ksg.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty.

Research Findings and Lessons from the Field

Successful coalitions use four crucial strategies

These strategies include building relationships; defining common interests; analyzing complex data; and operating on multiple political levels.

Skillful relationship building is essential to the formation of effective coalitions. In fact, members of successful and durable coalitions tend to have links to influential parties that can help move their agenda (1). Such ties can be particularly useful in providing knowledge, resources, or political support at critical moments. Moreover, it is vital for regional coalitions to identify and build relationships with local members from the health care, religious, and labor communities. These leaders can prove to be useful allies in forwarding the goals of the collaborative.

Successful coalitions also have the ability to unite disparate groups around a common agenda. By highlighting issues of mutual interest, alliances can begin to develop a common mission and achieve successful integration. A case in point is the Smart Growth movement, which succeeded in uniting the divergent interests of developers and environmentalists around the theme of environmentally friendly urban revitalization. This strategy allowed both sides to support policies that improved the housing options and quality of life of urban neighborhoods while at the same time preserving the distinctive and historical infrastructure of US cities.

Access to detailed information germane to regional issues, including economic indicators, socioeconomic characteristics and needs assessments of residents as well as public spending data, offers coalition builders an invaluable resource to better define a problem and assess what measures may be applied to its solution. However, having data readily available does not mean that consensus builders have the means to interpret it. Intermediaries that specialize in data analysis are often critical to successful regional coalitions (see the section "Sustaining the Coalition" for further elaboration of this point).

Coalition Building for Political Leverage

Even if advocates are focused on local issues, the importance of regional collaborations cannot be underestimated. For instance, the support of key policy makers in other parts of the state is often crucial to moving the agenda of the coalition. Consequently, many scholars advocate a regional perspective, even if entities are locally focused (1). Access to state politics is also particularly important for coalitions, since most key regional decisions are made at the state level (1). But state politics can be a difficult arena for regional collaborators due to partisan division and entrenched localism in

decision making. To succeed in state level politics, it might be a more effective strategy to create statewide campaigns supported by a variety of local groups united by "thin agreement" rather than deep common interest.

Several significant demographic and market trends have been shaping metropolitan areas, and seminar participants explored how these trends affect the potential for coalition building. Some of the most notable themes of the discussion are summarized below.

Suburbs are growing faster than cities

During the 1990s, the 100 largest U.S. cities grew 8.1 percent in population, compared to 6 percent growth during the 1980s. In fact, some cities, such as Chicago, Atlanta, and Memphis, experienced population growth after decades of losses. However, a closer examination of the data reveals that the population expansion experienced by cities was largely due to an increase in Hispanic and Asian immigrant populations (2). Moreover, during the 1990s, an estimated 2.3 million middle-income white residents moved from the central city to outlying metropolitan areas. Consequently, the rate of population growth for the suburbs was approximately twice that of the central cities—17 percent compared to 8.1 percent (2).

Employment is decentralizing

The movement of middle-income white residents from the city to outlying suburbs in the 1990s has had significant implications for metropolitan regions. For instance, as middle income white residents moved to the suburbs, suburban job growth began to outpace that of cities. According to some observers, the American economy is rapidly becoming an "exit ramp economy" with office, commercial and retail facilities located along suburban freeways (2). This is particularly true in leading technology regions like Washington, DC, Austin, and Boston, where high-tech firms have located in suburbs far from the city.

Recent statistics indicate a consistent pattern of economic decentralization across the 100 largest U. S. metropolitan areas. On average, only 22 percent of people work within a three-mile radius of a city's center. In cities like Chicago, Atlanta, and Detroit more than 60 percent of the regional employment is located more than 10 miles from the city center.

While opportunity is decentralizing, poverty remains concentrated

Outlying suburbs are strong employment centers in their regions (2). In fact, they are the predominant source of new jobs in metropolitan areas. In the 1990s, for instance, 87 percent of new entry-level jobs in the service and retail sectors were created in the outlying suburbs. However, as job growth in the U.S. moves from central business districts in cities, new areas of opportunities are retreating further from areas of concentrated poverty and the working poor. According to recent reports, metropolitan areas continue to be highly stratified by race, class, and income with the highest concentrations of poverty among minority populations in the central city (2, 5). Although entry-level jobs in manufacturing,

wholesale trade, and retail are available in the suburbs, the lack of affordable housing, low rates of car ownership, inadequate public transit, and persistent residential racial discrimination tend to prevent inner-city workers from obtaining these jobs. Furthermore, inner-city workers constrained by poor information networks often may not even know that these jobs exist. This leads to a spatial mismatch between where jobs are increasingly located and where low-wage workers live.

Decentralization has also led to negative consequences for suburban residents
Urban sprawl has led to problems such as longer commute times, traffic congestion, increased air pollution, and loss of open space for middle-income residents of outlying suburbs.

Potential for Coalition Building Between City and Suburb

Given the disturbing trends in metropolitan growth outlined above, it may seem unlikely that larger alliances can be formed to address all the associated problems. However, many of these problems are shared and this becomes evident in a closer examination of the development of suburbs.

A Typology of Suburbs

Decentralization is transforming the suburban political landscape
The suburbs are often thought of as an undifferentiated band of stable, affluent middle class white communities. But research indicates that urban sprawl gives rise to three different categories of suburbs in the United States—at-risk suburbs, bedroom development suburbs, and affluent job centers.

The at-risk suburbs are located in the inner ring, immediately outside the central city, and often resemble the central cities from the perspective of their socioeconomic indicators, declining schools, poor housing conditions, and unproductive commercial areas. Most often, they lack the fiscal capacity to sustain economic viability.

Bedroom development suburbs are located about 40 miles from the central business district, and are characterized by affordable housing for mostly white, moderate-income families with high percentages of school-age children. However, growing middle-income communities such as these are developing without a sufficient property tax base to support schools and other public services, and thus these communities are at risk of becoming tomorrow's troubled suburbs.

The affluent job centers are often seen as the places that are winning in the new economy and are considered the most attractive places to live, with a steady flow of jobs, high-end housing, and large retail outlets. However, these suburbs struggle with congestion, a lack of open space, and environmental degradation.

Urban/Suburban Commonalities

The typology of suburbs just outlined is based on a study of the 25 largest metropolitan areas in the United States (2), and clearly indicates that suburban communities are not a monolith with common needs and experiences. Rather than reinforcing divisions between central cities and suburbs, the delineation of these distinct residential patterns highlights the commonalties shared by central cities and the inner ring suburbs which range from fiscal constraints and deteriorating infrastructure to inadequate transportation and housing. In fact, by underscoring such commonalities and shared fiscal interests, visionary leaders have successfully forged metro-majority political coalitions between the central city, and at-risk and low-tax-base development suburbs (6). In Minnesota, for instance, such a regional coalition helped pass significant state legislation between 1993 and 1998 involving regional tax base sharing, fair housing, transportation and transit reform, and land use planning. Given the history of political fragmentation and competition in metropolitan areas, regional coalition building efforts such as these represent innovative alliances among groups that might historically have found little in common.

New regional alliances are attempting to reverse trends toward concentrated urban poverty and sprawl
In metropolitan areas across the country, new coalitions are forming to promote a regional agenda that addresses issues such as concentrated urban poverty and sprawl. Many of these coalitions are advocating smart growth strategies to curb uncontrolled development outside urban centers and to promote urban reinvestment. For instance, in Cleveland, a coalition of inner ring suburban and city officials has been advocating changes in public investment priorities so that state and federal funds for transportation, housing, and schools are directed to existing downtowns and neighborhoods instead of outward to the urban fringe. In Boston, Portland, and Chattanooga, metropolitan leaders have targeted urban sprawl by choosing infrastructure repair, mass transit, and anti-congestion strategies over road expansion and consumption of open space.

Acoalition of city, inner ring, and bedroom development suburbs in the Twin Cities has been successful at creating affordable housing options for urban children and families (6). By creating low cost housing in suburban areas, they hope to ensure that poor families have access to rapidly growing suburban jobs and good schools. Furthermore, policymakers contend that as affordable housing becomes available at the region's periphery, the growth of concentrated poverty in central cities will be reduced (2, 6). The Twin Cities coalition also advocated regional tax sharing in order to spread the cost of concentrated poverty among wealthy and struggling jurisdictions. Such tax sharing has allowed the revitalization of declining urban and older suburban areas by providing resources to rebuild aging infrastructure and rehabilitate housing. Other regional collaboration efforts have also focused on linking inner-city residents to job opportunities throughout the region by investing in public transportation (7).

Multi-Racial Coalitions

Coalition builders must consider how local histories of race relations in different U.S. cities affects the collaboration building process

Although coalitions can form around mutual interests such as economic development, they are often fragile. The tenuous nature of such alliances is rooted in a history of racial tension and present-day differences between potential partners. Thus, coalition builders need to recognize the important role of race and help constituents find a common ground for alliance forming that takes the local history of racial division and antagonism into consideration.

Creative solutions to multiracial coalition building include an appreciation of class-based solutions

Some consensus builders have found creative solutions to multiracial political coalition building (3). For instance, by making the case for a class-based solution to problems, advocates of the Texas Ten Percent Plan were able to achieve consensus on college enrollment quotas for historically underrepresented minority groups. By framing the problem around the issue of class and economic inequality, advocates were able to garner the endorsement of multiple groups that are often at odds. The initiative was led by Latino and black activists who argued for class-based affirmative action, which also appealed to low-income, working-class white families from rural West Texas with limited access to flagship state universities. The plan attracted Latino and black families since minorities tend to be disproportionately poor and there-fore likely to benefit from economic preferences.

In contrast to often divisive race-based affirmative action, the Texas Ten Percent Plan brought the interests of working class white families and minorities together. Because of the plan's widespread appeal, activists were able to forge a political coalition among Latino, black, and white state legislators. The bill was passed by the legislature and was signed into law in 1997. The implementation of the Texas Ten Percent Plan has significantly increased the number of Latino, black, and low-income white students enrolled at the University of Texas.

Commonly held religious beliefs or lifestyle choices can serve as the social glue that holds a cross-class coalition together

Efforts to organize across lines of education, income, and occupational status are difficult to sustain. As a result, cross-class political movements rarely endure unless they are grounded in a strongly held ideology, such as religious conviction or a core lifestyle choice. Common religious values, for instance, ease communication and facilitate cooperation among groups.

Sustaining the Coalition

In today's information age, public attention is an increasingly precious commodity, and coalitions must keep their issues visible on the public agenda

Advocates need to recognize how issues can be transformed from mere social conditions to problems that influential players recognize and are willing to help solve. Three strategies are essential in accomplishing this task. First, it is critical to present an issue in concrete terms, as a clearly defined problem whose solution seems feasible. Second, advocates must carefully choose indicators—numbers, words, images—to grab and hold public attention, whenever possible emphasizing comparisons to other countries, states, or cities. Third, advocates need to continually connect important coalition issues with other topical issues receiving public attention. By helping policy makers and constituents make these connections, coalitions are able to gain greater exposure and support for their initiatives.

Important intermediaries can serve as trusted mediators between all sectors of the city and region

Intermediaries can serve as brokers of relationships between diverse stakeholders and as agents promoting collective action and collective change. Examples of intermediaries discussed during the seminar include the Rheedlen Center for Children and Families in their work with the Harlem Children's Zone, the Urban Strategies Council, and the D. C. Agenda. It is crucial for intermediaries to be seen as nonpartisan and motivated only by the desire to eradicate a particular social or economic problem. In this way, intermedi-aries can be regarded with trust by the majority of the stakeholders in a particular issue and help to bring disparate groups together without alienating any particular entity or perspective.

Depending on the specific local conditions they encounter, intermediaries can perform a variety of functions to achieve their goal of building alliances between multiple stakeholders. For instance, they can be compelled to act as "facilitators" or "knowledge managers" when conflicts in real or perceived interests ("turf") arise among collaborators. In these situations, intermediaries perform the task of educating parties about each other and can work to mend fractured or tenuous relationships.

Intermediaries can also function as "performance investors" whose work is to create a sense of a common mission for diverse and multiple collaborators and to define consequences for nonperformance by major players. Performance investors can help groups or organizations define and achieve credible targets, especially when established partnerships become unfocused or underperforming. Intermediaries may also serve as "organizers" and help stakeholders identify important entities missing from the coalition and find ways to engage them. Most often, intermediaries act as organizers when members of a collaborative lack the capacity to make progress or achieve consensus.

General Conclusions

Nonprofit independent intermediaries can play a critical role in engaging residents, civic groups, political leaders, grassroots organizations, public and private sector l eadership, and faith-based organizations in a comprehensive effort to achieve positive outcomes for poor children and families
Intermediaries perform the vital role of coordinating a sustainable effort by diverse stakeholders to revitalize impoverished communities and expand healthy youth development programs for low-income children. Their work is often multifaceted and includes gathering and analyzing state and regional data, strengthening the capacity of community-based organizations, and overhauling the systems that serve low-income families. They create strategic partnerships among public and private sectors, conduct evaluations to improve programs for poor families, and support community leadership. Presenters at the seminar agreed that an intermediary is crucial to orchestrating and sustaining comprehensive change in communities that are often neglected and suffer from the effects of persistent poverty.

Coalition builders must identify and build relationships with the political elites
The political elites, defined as a small group of local opinion leaders typically from the business, health care, religious, and labor communities, can prove to be powerful allies to regional coalition builders, given their ability to influence state legislators on major issues.

To create effective multiracial political coalitions, one needs to be aware of the unique histories of racial conflict in different U.S. cities and the diversity within racial groups
Asuccessful alliance must consider the unique circumstances of race relations in different U.S. cities and not attempt to institute a "one size fits all" strategy across different regions.

Advocating for more central city and inner suburban repre - sentation on regional governing bodies could lead to better outcomes for urban children and families
Regional governing bodies do not sufficiently represent the central city or the diversity of suburbs. Increasing central city and inner suburb representation on appointed commissions will aid in balancing agendas between decentralization and urban reinvestment.

Establish regional forums for elected leaders
Many seminar participants agreed that in general, the suburbs are under-organized, and that we must strive to establish new political institutions that reflect the growth of the suburbs. Regional forums for elected leaders have been effective in identifying common regional problems and potential solutions. For instance, Mayors Daley (Chicago) and Webb (Denver) organized suburban mayors around issues such as air quality, shared utility purchase agreements, economic development, affordable housing, and balanced growth. Seminar participants predicted that these regional forums would help facilitate policy debates and changes beneficial to working class families.

References

The first four papers were commissioned for this seminar. Other references were cited during the seminar discussion.

1. Margaret Weir. "Metropolitan Coalition-Building Strategies."

2. Bruce Katz. "Bridging the Regional Divide."

3. J. Phillip Thompson. "The Politics of Building Regional Multi-racial Political Coalitions."

4. Xavier de Souza Briggs. "The Will and the Way: Local Partnerships, Political Strategy, and the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth."

5. William Julius Wilson. *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

6. Myron Orfield. *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998.

7. Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf, and Todd Swanstrom. *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the Twenty-First Century.* Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

Margaret Blood, President of Strategies for Children; Hillary Pennington, President of Jobs for the Future; and Angela Glover Blackwell, President and CEO of Policy Link were invited discussants for the seminar.

The **Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety** brings together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who have a common interest in improving the health and well being of urban children. The series is sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and directed by William Julius Wilson at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. The seminars highlight the latest research on selected topics related to children's health and safety, and are designed to complement RWJF's Urban Health Initiative.

The mission of the **Urban Health Initiative** (UHI) is to improve the health and safety of children and youth. Local campaigns in Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Richmond participate in the UHI. Each campaign seeks to change the major systems that serve children in order to improve youth health and safety statistics throughout the entire city or metropolitan area. The UHI National Program Office is located at the University of Washington and is headed by former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer.

Core Group participants include the following:

Advisory Panel Members

Melissa Berman, President and CEO, The Philanthropic Collaborative; Douglas Besharov, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research; Geoffrey Canada, President, Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families; Lindsay Chase-Lansdale Professor and Chair, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University; Ronald Ferguson, Lecturer in Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government and Senior Research Associate at the Wiener Center for Social Policy; Robert Granger, Senior Vice President, William T. Grant Foundation; George Latimer, Distinguished Professor of Urban Studies, Macalester College and Former Mayor of St. Paul; Nicholas Lemann, Staff Writer, The New Yorker; Sara McLanahan, Professor, Department of Sociology and Public Affairs and Director of the Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University; Lawrence M. Mead, Professor, Department of Politics Princeton University; Melvin Oliver, Vice President, Asset Building and Community Development, Ford Foundation; Manuel Pastor, Jr., Professor and Chair, Latin American and Latino Studies Department, University of California at Santa Cruz; Robert J. Sampson, Lucy Flower Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago; Kurt Schmoke, Partner, Law Firm of Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering and Former Mayor of Baltimore; Marta Tienda, Director, Office of Population Research, Princeton University; Beth Weitzman, Associate Professor of Health Policy & Management, Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University; Barry Zuckerman, Chairman, Department of Pediatrics, Boston University

Urban Health Initiative

Julie Cooper, Research Director; Cynthia Curreri, Deputy Director; Charles Royer, National Program Director, Urban Health Initiative, and Senior Lecturer, University of Washington

Site Directors

Grenae Dudley, Executive Director, Youth Connection; Hathaway Ferebee, Executive Director, Baltimore Safe and Sound; Laura Pinkney, Executive Director, Safe Passages; Naomi Post-Street, Executive Director, Philadelphia Safe and Sound; Veronica Templeton, Executive Director, Youth Matters

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Paul Jellinek, Vice President; James Knickman, Vice President; Katherine Kraft, Program Officer; Paul Tarini, Communications Officer

Harvard University

Susan Chang, Research Associate; James Quane, Associate Director of the Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, Kennedy School of Government; William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor and Director of the Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, Kennedy School of Government

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Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone: 617.496.4514
Fax: 617.495.5834

www.ksg.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty