

URBAN SPRAWL: THE CONTROVERSY

Examining the Social Justice Implications

Lauren Bowen

In his pastoral letter, *The Church in the City*, Bishop Pilla argues that one must “examine the underlying causes of what has transpired” with regard to outmigration from urban cores if one is working for fundamental changes. This presentation will respond and develop this observation in two ways. Accepting Pilla’s premise that an analysis of root causes is key in achieving social justice and that social justice can and should be distinguished from individual acts of charity, I intend to argue that outmigration or urban sprawl compounds inequities on the basis of race, class and sex that are pervasive in American society. Although it certainly is part of American rhetoric to embrace equality of opportunity for all individuals, the impact of urban sprawl is to systematically deny options to those most likely to be disempowered in American society. Outmigration undermines economic opportunities, educational opportunities, and contributes to poor physical health. The data and observations contained in this presentation will support an argument that says urban sprawl contributes to environmental degradation. This coupled with the dearth of jobs, the declining tax base and corresponding eroding public education creates a fundamentally unjust society and those left behind are disproportionately poor, people of color and frequently women headed households.

Pilla goes on to argue that one must be cognizant of the policies at all levels of government—federal, state and local—if one is to challenge the status quo, as urban sprawl is not a spontaneous phenomenon. Outmigration in many ways is distinctly American and is fostered not just by the American psyche but by government actions that encourage and reward it. The second component of this presentation is to analyze a sampling of policies to demonstrate the extent to which government action, purposefully or not, promulgates the inequities alluded to above. Focusing special attention on the specifics of welfare reform in an era of outmigration, I will argue that equality of opportunity is a myth and that unless our analyses of these policies leads to a social movement demanding change, race and class divisions will deepen in American society and as that occurs, women of all races and classes will be economically marginalized. The ways in which sprawl not only reflects these larger trends but also helps to create them will be examined in detail in the presentation.