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Towards More Reliance on Social Science

A pilot study of how social scientists might more effectively help public officials in dealing with problems of metropolitan growth and housing was begun recently by the Brookings Institution of Washington, D.C., a nonprofit research organization. Called the Committee on Problems of the American Community, the group conducting the study does not itself propose to investigate housing problems, or to come up with recommendations for their solution, but rather to study a problem of communication. The committee's task is to determine what can be done to make investigators in the social sciences, and the organizations that support them, more aware of the problems in housing that need research. Conversely, its task is also to determine what can be done to make officials in federal, state, and local governments more aware of those findings in the social sciences that bear on housing problems.

As an illustration of the aid social scientists might render public officials, consider the following problem. In a fast-growing suburb, the land needed for schools, libraries, playgrounds, and parks must be acquired while such land is still readily available, for as the region fills in, prices may rise prohibitively. But how does one know that a housing trend will continue? Suburban growth may slacken because of changes in, say, construction costs and family income. Accordingly, one use of the social sciences may be in examining the elements that govern housing trends. Further, housing trends do not only affect public policy, but are, in part, affected by such policy—or the lack of it. Thus, a second use of the social sciences may be in evaluating the effects of such measures as revising the building codes to permit more economical methods of construction. The social sciences may also have something to say about such factors influencing the housing scene as the increase in leisure time resulting from shorter working hours.

In seeking ways to improve communication between social scientists and public officials, the Committee on Problems of the American Community will examine, among other things, the use now being made of the social sciences. Specific fields to be investigated will include housing for the elderly, improvement of neglected urban areas, and the effect of building codes on the supply of new houses. The committee consists of 16 distinguished representatives from the natural and social sciences and from public life, and the committee staff of two plans to make extensive use of outside consultants. The Brookings study will run for one year, when it will be decided whether further work is desirable.

Use of the social sciences in setting public policy is similar to use of the natural sciences for this purpose, but there are differences. For one thing, results in the social sciences are likely to provide a considerably less firm basis for decisions than are results in the natural sciences. Selecting the best route for a new expressway through a city is not quite the same thing as selecting the best route for a road across a mountain range. For another, use of the social sciences can pose its own special paradoxes. If research reveals that people who throw stones should not build glass houses, it may also reveal that such people like glass houses. Nevertheless, to act on the basis of knowledge, whatever its limits, is better than acting blindly, provided one is aware of those limits.—J.T.