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Urban Decline

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Urban Decline

Urban decline refers to a process that includes population loss and the concentration in cities of major social, economic, and environmental problems, such as high levels of unemployment and poverty and the deterioration of housing and public infrastructure. Sometimes used interchangeably with the terms *urban decay* and *urban distress*, urban decline is frequently measured by changes in population (particularly in relation to middle- and upper-income residents), unemployment, and poverty rates; changes in median household income; and changes in property values, housing tenure, and vacancy rates.

While many metropolitan areas in the United States experienced significant population increases in the second half of the 20th century, the growth was not even, either across or within regions of the country. In general, cities in the South and West experienced significant growth, whereas older, industrialized cities in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest experienced significant declines in population. Part of the decline in the Rustbelt cities reflects the migration of people from these regions to the Sunbelt, but more generally, much of the decline in the older city reflects the decentralization of the population from central cities to suburbs. In 1950, 63 percent of the total U.S. population lived in metropolitan areas. Of this population, 57 percent lived in the central city and 43 percent lived in suburban areas. By 2000, 80 percent of the total U.S. population lived in metropolitan areas, but only 38 percent of those people lived in the central city.

Many of the older cities reached their population peaks in 1950 or 1960 and have shrunk considerably since then. For example, the population of Baltimore was 31 percent smaller in 2000 than it was in 1950. Other major cities in the East and Midwest also had significant declines: Cleveland, 46 percent; Boston, 26 percent; Chicago, 20 percent; Detroit, 49 percent; and Philadelphia, 27 percent. New York City, the largest city in the United States, is an exception in that its population has increased slightly over this time. The demographic characteristics of the central city populations also changed significantly during this time. The large numbers of residents who left the city were disproportionately white, middle and upper classes.

The growth of suburban developments tends to draw middle- and upper-income residents because only they can afford the housing in these areas. Many of the suburbs adopt zoning regulations that prevent the construction of low-cost housing, particularly multifamily housing. At the same time, African Americans continued their migration from the rural South to the cities of the North and Midwest. By 2000 African Americans had become the majority of city residents in Baltimore, Detroit, Newark, and Gary (Indiana) and over one third of the population in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Chicago, and numerous other cities.

Along with the decline of residents, older cities also experienced significant job losses. There has been a major decline in the basic manufacturing industries, including steel and automobiles, which dominated the local economies of these cities. These industries, which offered thousands of well-paid jobs to city residents, underwent major transformations due to changes in technology and the expanding global economy. Since the 1970s, New

York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, and Baltimore all lost more than 70 percent of their manufacturing jobs. Although the economy also created new jobs, in most of these cities, the transformation to a service economy did not replace the number of jobs or the pay of these manufacturing positions. This is due to at least two factors: the location of the new jobs and the skill requirements for the service jobs. Many businesses that were formerly located in the central city relocated to the suburban communities. Most new businesses, including offices and retail stores, were established in the suburban fringe. Many of the service jobs that remained or were created in the central city require advanced skills, training, and education, which many of the city residents do not possess. This is referred to as a “spatial mismatch.” While unemployment rates vary across areas and time periods, urban unemployment rates are generally higher than suburban rates. For example, the unemployment rate for large cities in the United States in 2000 was 35 percent higher than that of their suburbs. Without jobs that pay good wages, urban residents experience much higher poverty rates than do suburban dwellers. While the ratio of urban-to-suburban poverty rates varies over time, in 2000 the poverty rate in central cities was more than double the rate in suburban areas.

The loss of population and jobs has significant consequences on cities. The tax base of central cities declines as people and jobs leave. Revenue from both property taxes and income taxes drops for central city governments. This lessens the ability of the city government to serve the needs of the remaining residents and to develop strategies to reverse the processes of urban decline. Economic problems and the struggle to address human needs affect the overall quality of life in urban areas. School systems that rely heavily on local taxes in trying to maintain quality educational programs and staff for their students face serious shortfalls. While crime rates in many cities have declined in recent years, the likelihood of being a victim of crime is still 37 percent higher for city residents than for suburban residents. The older housing stock of the central cities requires more upkeep and repair than does the newer suburban housing.

Numerous efforts have been, and are being, made at several levels to rejuvenate central cities. These range from efforts of the federal government to the efforts of local grassroots groups. As early as the 1950s, the federal government sponsored urban renewal programs that cleared away slums and blighted areas of central cities. In the 1960s, federal efforts turned to promoting economic development through support for downtown office buildings; hotel, convention, and tourist enterprises; and upscale housing units. Many state governments seek to improve job opportunities in urban areas by enacting legislation relating to urban enterprise zones. These programs offer grants and tax incentives to private businesses that locate in certain areas. The federal government endorsed and expanded this concept in the 1990s with its empowerment zones. This program encouraged local communities to develop plans to focus on not only job creation but also better coordination of social services and educational programs. Local governments, strained by the lack of resources, seek to develop plans that are consistent with federal and state priorities. They also seek to recruit new businesses to their communities by offering whatever limited resources are available to them. Other cities have adopted living wage ordinances tied to the actual cost of living in that city as opposed to the federal minimum wage. Other cities require companies receiving government contracts or any kind of city support to hire a certain number or percentage of city residents. Finally, nongovernmental

organizations are also involved in city rejuvenation efforts. Community and neighborhood development corporations are local groups that seek to address community needs. Community development corporations (CDCs) are typically not-for-profit organizations that try to raise capital and outside assistance to provide for a range of activities and programs. CDCs are locally controlled organizations that may draw resources from foundations, hospitals, universities, and other private and public institutions. They are frequently involved in establishing home construction and rehabilitation programs, credit unions to offer low-interest loans to neighborhood residents, job training programs for residents, and other educational and social programs. Many local groups also form neighborhood associations that most often focus on the specific needs of their particular communities that may include housing, crime, or youth programs.

Efforts to address urban decline are constrained by the inability of the various actors and groups to control the factors that precipitate the decline. The transformation of the global economy continues to be a primary source of many urban problems. Many cities that were in decline in the 1960s and 1970s continue to show signs of distress. Yet, many cities have marshaled their local resources and assets to adapt to the broader social forces to bring about some successes. In cities across the United States, there are numerous success stories of both downtown and neighborhood revitalization.

Patrick Donnelly *See also*

[Globalization](#)

[Skills Mismatch](#)

[Urban Infrastructure](#)

[Urban Renewal](#)

[Urban Sprawl](#)

Further Readings

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