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Urban Sprawl

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Urban Sprawl

Urban Sprawl

In the early 21st century, urban sprawl continues to be a source of considerable controversy and political debate, yet many Americans quietly accept sprawl. They express their acceptance by moving farther away from central cities into housing and business developments on land that was formerly rural and undeveloped. While a significant number of suburban communities have existed in the United States since the late 19th century, the greatest growth in suburbs occurred after World War II. At the dawn of the 20th century, the suburban population represented less than 12 percent of the total U.S. population. By 1950, that figure doubled, and it doubled again by 2000, so that 52 percent lived in suburban communities. While the U.S. Census does not officially define *suburban area*, the term generally refers to the territory within metropolitan areas that is outside of the central city.

The term *sprawl* refers to a pattern of metropolitan growth characterized by low-density, primarily single-family residential development, low-density commercial and employment establishments, and the resulting heavy dependence on the automobile for travel. These developments occur on the periphery of the metropolitan area. In the early 20th century, many affluent and middle-class families moved out to the suburbs deliberately to escape the large and dense city populations. Following the Great Depression and World War II, several U.S. government programs further encouraged and facilitated this exodus. These included the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration GI Bill, which provided low-cost mortgages for more than 11 million new single-family homes. With many central cities already developed and thus with little land available for large, new housing developments, most new construction occurred in suburban areas. Strongly supported by the automobile industry, the federal government also established the Interstate Highway System in 1956. The federal government paid up to 90 percent of the cost of the new highway system, which resulted in over 40,000 miles of new highways. The highways enabled people to travel more easily, including traveling from suburban homes to jobs in the city. The growing economy and more widespread prosperity of the period provided more Americans with the means to purchase their homes and automobiles. Retail businesses followed the populations to the new areas, and by the 1970s, many corporations were closing their city offices to move to business parks in the suburbs.

The sprawl phenomenon continued as most metropolitan areas expanded their land areas at rates that far surpassed their population increases. Between 1982 and 1997, the amount of urbanized land in the United States increased by 47 percent while the nation's population increased by only 17 percent. The population density of metropolitan areas, which is one quantitative measure of sprawl, declined by 15.7 percent during the same period. Sprawl generates several problems, including environmental damage, cost

inefficiency, quality-of-life changes, city decline, and economic and racial segregation.

Sprawl significantly affects the natural environment, each year claiming more than 2 million additional acres of land for development. Over half of this land is farmland, with the rest divided between forests and other undeveloped land. The loss of this land disrupts small town and family farming operations, threatens wetlands that protect residents from damaging floods, and threatens wildlife by destroying their natural habitats.

The automobile makes sprawl possible, and in turn, sprawl makes us increasingly dependent on the automobile to get to work, school, stores, and other numerous destinations. The low-density developments make walking or public transportation inefficient methods of transit. Between 1980 and 2003, an 11 percent increase in the number of private and commercial automobiles occurred, as well as a 187 percent increase in private and commercial trucks registered in the United States. Between 1970 and 2003, there was a 22 percent increase in the average number of miles traveled each year by each of those automobiles and a 100 percent increase in annual miles per truck.

Despite efforts to make automobiles more energy efficient and to use cleaner, less polluting gasoline, the increased use of motor vehicles reduces the benefits of these efforts. Motor vehicles are a major source of air pollution, particularly in the sprawling metropolitan communities. They account for most of the carbon monoxide and many of the hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides in major urban areas. These pollutants have serious effects on human health. Among the diseases known to be related to motor vehicle pollution are asthma, bronchitis, upper respiratory tract infections, and various types of cancer. Automobiles and light trucks are responsible for about 20 percent of the nation's carbon dioxide emissions, the gas that causes global warming.

The dependency on the automobile also affects people's quality of life. The length of time that people must travel to get to work has increased from 22 minutes in 1980 to 25 minutes in 2000. This increase adds 25 hours a year to the average commuter's travel time, raising the total time spent commuting to about 208 hours per year. Because other services, including schools, shopping, and recreational centers, tend to be more spread out in sprawl communities, families spend more time in cars than do families in more densely developed areas. The increased use of the automobile leads to further traffic congestion, which exacerbates environmental damage.

Considerable research documents the increased cost of service in sprawled communities. When sprawl occurs, new schools, roads, water and sewer lines, and other physical infrastructure must be added. The sprawling communities must add police, fire, and other personnel to provide the necessary services. The distance between developments in these communities makes providing these services more costly than in higher density areas. While the private developers of these new areas frequently pay a fee to cover some of these new expenses, the fees do not cover the full costs of the projects. Residents in the new areas, both the new and long-term residents, frequently experience significant tax increases to cover these costs. Because much of the infrastructural support is paid by state and federal agencies, taxpayers outside the area also support these sprawled developments.

It is ironic that city residents are among those who pay state and federal taxes that support the development of sprawling communities. As cities lose residents to the new

communities, the cities are left with a smaller tax base. The vitality of downtown areas is diminished as cities lose their population and jobs as well as their retail, entertainment, and corporate presence to the new suburbs and their malls and office parks. Houses and buildings in the city are abandoned and public services decline.

Cities are also harmed by sprawl because those who move from the city to these new developments tend to be from upper- and middle-class households. City residents who are left behind are disproportionately poor and minority. Thus, cities are left to serve needier populations with less revenue than in earlier decades when they had more revenues and wealthier populations. The degree of economic segregation has increased because the sprawling communities tend to offer housing that is accessible only to wealthier households. The economic segregation is now reinforced by the physical separation of the social classes. The withdrawal of the wealthier groups from the city saps the neighborhood and civic groups, churches, community centers, and other cultural, social, and recreational organizations of the social and financial capital that once maintained them.

Broader changes in the economy combine with the phenomenon of sprawl to aggravate the challenges of the inner-city poor. The significant loss of manufacturing jobs in cities after 1960 and the increase of jobs in the higher-end service sector, including the information exchange and high technology areas, have a dramatic effect on those without higher levels of education. A spatial mismatch developed, such that the less-educated populations live in the less expensive housing of the central city while the growth of lower-end service sector jobs, including retail, restaurants, maintenance, and landscaping that service the middle and upper classes, has occurred in the outer suburbs. Many city residents have difficulty reaching the suburban jobs because they do not own cars and public transportation systems are absent or inadequate.

Across the nation and in particular cities, numerous efforts are under way to address urban sprawl and its related problems. The smart growth movement consists of planners, developers, community and environmental activists, nonprofit groups, and political leaders. The movement encourages a range of development and design patterns, including a mix of land uses, viable public transportation systems, preservation of open space and farmland, the creation of walkable communities and communities with a strong sense of place, greater regional cooperation in planning and revenue sharing, the revitalization of central cities to make them more desirable places to live and work, and policies to ensure that development decisions are fair to all parties and cost-effective.

Patrick Donnelly *See also*

[Skills Mismatch](#)

[Urban Decline](#)

[Urbanization](#)

Further Readings

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