

How America's Cities are Growing

The Big

Suburban sprawl has been the dominant form of metropolitan-area growth in the United States for the past 50 years. This article analyzes the nature of such sprawl, why it occurs in U.S. metropolitan areas, the problems it causes or aggravates, and some alternative possible forms of future metropolitan-area growth.

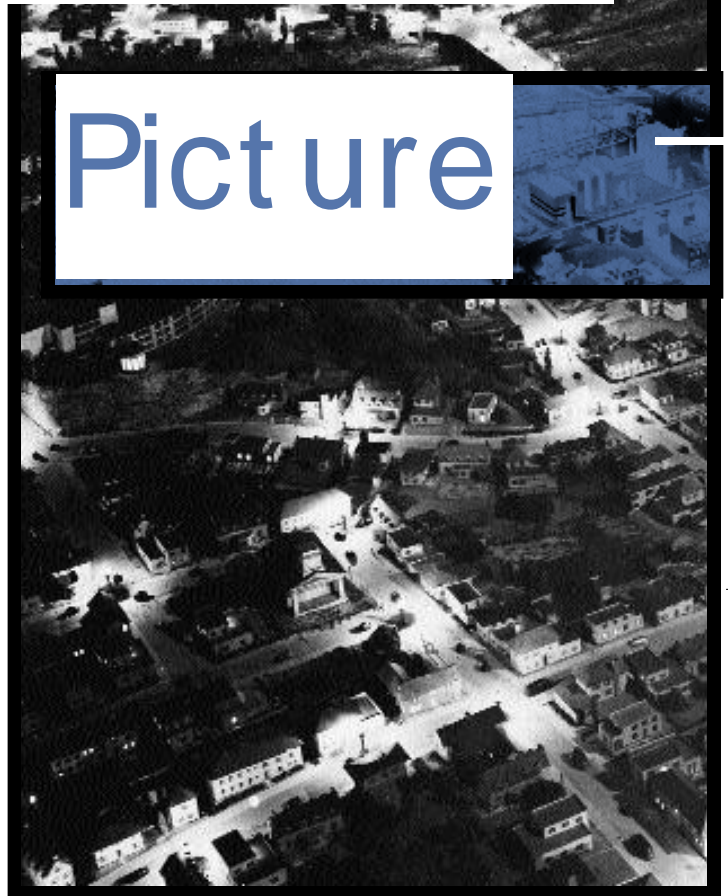
What Is Suburban Sprawl?

Suburban sprawl is not *any form* of suburban growth, but a *particular form*. The definition I will use was not developed deductively from some coherent underlying concept of "sprawlness." Rather, I looked inductively at all the criticisms of sprawl in the literature and derived those specific traits that seemed most likely to cause them. The 10 traits are

- Unlimited outward extension of new development.
- Low-density residential and commercial settlements, especially in new-growth areas.
- Leapfrog development jumping out beyond established settlements.
- Fragmentation of powers over land use among many small localities.
- Dominance of transportation by private automotive vehicles.

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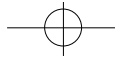
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- No centralized planning or control of land uses.
- Widespread strip commercial development.
- Great fiscal disparities among localities.
- Segregation of specialized types of land uses in different zones.
- Reliance mainly on trickle-down to provide housing to low-income households.

Why Sprawl Has Been So Dominant

Opponents of suburban sprawl are quick to point out its problems and social costs. But they are loathe to admit that sprawl also produces many benefits for large numbers of metropolitan citizens—probably a majority in most regions. Those benefits include low-



By Anthony Downs

density residential lifestyles, relatively easy access to open space both at one's own home and in the countryside, a broad choice of places to work and live, relatively short commuting times for most of those who both live and work in the suburbs, ease of movement except in peak periods, the ability of middle- and upper-income households to separate themselves spatially from problems associated with poverty, and their ability to exercise strong influence on their local governments. Persuading those who receive these benefits to support future limits on sprawl will require proving to them that its costs to society as a whole—and therefore to them—outweigh their own gains.

Sprawl's Negative Impacts

Suburban sprawl generates, or at least aggravates, two different sets of economic and social problems that reduce the quality of life for millions of Americans.

The first set of problems occurs mainly in fast-growing areas, but spreads to other areas too. It includes traffic congestion, air pollution, large-scale absorption of open space, extensive use of energy for movement, inability to provide adequate infrastructures to accommodate growth because of high costs, inability to locate certain region-serving facilities like new airports that have negative local spillover effects, and suburban labor shortages because of inadequate low-income housing near new jobs. Low-density growth also tempts governments to spend too much of their limited resources on building highly visible new infrastructures rather than on the nearly invisible process of properly maintaining older existing ones. So we finance growth by gradually undermining the sustainability of the existing infrastructure inventory.

All these directly growth-related problems are essentially regional, not purely local. Therefore, purely local growth management policies adopted by individual municipalities cannot succeed without some strong regionwide mechanism for coordinating them.

The second set of problems affects mainly big cities, inner-ring suburbs, and a few outer-ring suburbs. These problems arise because suburban sprawl concentrates poor households, especially poor minority households, in certain high-poverty neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods then suffer from high crime rates, poor-quality public schools,

other poor-quality public services, and fiscal resources that are inadequate for the services needed. These problems soon spread to inner-ring suburbs too. And many outer-ring suburbs with low commercial tax bases but a lot of relatively low-cost housing have inadequate taxable resources to pay for decent schools and other services, so they have high tax rates and poor services.

Sprawl and Concentrated Poverty

How sprawl generates directly development-related problems is obvious. How it concentrates poor people within the boundaries of many large cities and inner-ring suburbs and undermines their fiscal strengths is more complex.

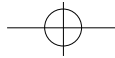
Since 1950, some type of peripheral new development around American metropolitan areas has been inevitable because of their tremendous population growth. Cities had to expand outward from the center. Mainly vertical expansion would have required increases in density inconsistent with rising real household incomes and innovations in both transportation and communications.

But the particular form of U.S. peripheral growth has resulted in intensive concentration of very poor households, especially those in minority groups, in the older, more central portions of our metropolitan areas. This development is not inevitable. Similar mainly core-area concentrations of the poor do not arise in either most developed Western European nations or most still-developing nations. They have been caused in the United States by specific policies adopted to produce them.

The first American policy generating core-area poverty concentrations is the requirement that all new housing meet quality standards that are so high that most poor households cannot afford them. Unable to live in newly built housing, very poor people become concentrated in older neighborhoods found mainly toward the central part of each metropolitan area.

A second policy combines fragmented control over land uses in many small outlying municipalities with exclusionary zoning and other strategies designed to raise local housing costs. Suburban residents want to exclude poor people from their neighborhoods to protect their housing invest-

Photo: FPG



ments, to maintain their social status, and to isolate themselves spatially from what they see as undesirable traits of low-income households. So suburban behavior is partly responsible for the core-area concentration of the poor, even though most suburbanites claim no connection with central-city problems.

The third cause of inner-core poverty concentrations is racial segregation in housing markets. Repeated and recent studies of realtor and homeowner behavior prove that racial discrimination is still widespread in housing transactions. Reducing racial segregation is hard because even if both whites and blacks desire racially integrated living, the different ways they define it cause almost total segregation to emerge from free choice of locations. African Americans regard a neighborhood containing about half blacks and half whites as desirably integrated, whereas most whites regard desirable integration as involving less than one-third or one-fourth blacks. Given these disparate views, blacks will continue moving into a partly integrated neighborhood beyond the fraction that keeps the neighborhood desirable to whites. That causes other whites to stop moving in, and the inevitable annual turnover in neighborhood residents (about 16–20 percent in most areas) results in more blacks moving in but no more whites doing so. Eventually, the neighborhood becomes almost entirely black—thus racially segregated—even without anyone's explicitly desiring such segregation. Racial segregation against Hispanics is less pervasive but real.

Results of Concentrated Poverty

Core-area poverty concentrations contribute to adverse neighborhood traits that “push” many businesses and middle- and upper-income households of all races—mainly households with children—out of central cities into suburbs. When these firms and households leave core areas, they take their fiscal resources with them. Because our fragmented governance system does not permit core-area cities to tap into most suburban tax bases, core areas are left disproportionately burdened with providing costly services to many poor households. A self-aggravating downward fiscal spiral weakens the ability of core-area governments to provide quality public services and results in grossly unequal environments across our metropolitan areas. Such disparities in the neighborhoods in which children are raised make a mockery of the American ideal of equality of

opportunity.

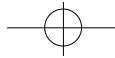
How is this process related to suburban sprawl? In theory, sprawl's specific traits have many roles in producing core-area concentrations of poverty. Unlimited extension into space removes new jobs from accessibility by unemployed inner-core residents; fragmented controls over land uses permit exclusionary zoning policies; and heavy dependence on private vehicles deprives poor people and nondrivers of mobility. However, when I have tried to verify these linkages empirically for 162 large metropolitan areas, most of the 10 traits of sprawl exhibit no statistically significant relationship to measures of urban decline. Even so, I believe the core-area concentration of minority poverty built into the American metropolitan development process aggravates urban decline. But that relationship may be inherent in all forms of American peripheral suburban growth, not just suburban sprawl, or it may be based on just a few of sprawl's basic traits.

Other Growth Strategies

What other forms of metropolitan-area growth might avoid or reduce the problems generated by sprawl? Two possibilities exist. One involves major alternative overall development strategies, the other, specific tactics to overcome sprawl's deficiencies. I will discuss both briefly, defining sprawl as unlimited low-density development.

There are three major alternative development strategies. The first, tightly bounded higher-density development, is typical of many Western European metropolitan areas. It features close-in urban growth boundaries, prohibition of almost all urban development outside them, high-density residential and other development within the boundary, greater stress on public transit for movement, centralized coordination of land use plans drawn up by local governments, and widely scattered new housing for low-income households. This alternative is such a radical change from existing American practices that it is unrealistic to believe that anything like it might even be considered in most U.S. metropolitan areas.

The second strategy, loosely bounded moderate-density development, lies between unlimited sprawl and tightly bounded high-density development. It has a loosely drawn growth boundary, permits some development outside the boundary, raises densities somewhat above sprawl levels, has some increase in public transit and carpooling, has centralized coordination of local land use planning, and provides some new low-income housing in



growth areas. This strategy would nevertheless be a very great change from the unconstrained, low-density, auto-oriented growth now prevalent in most U.S. metropolitan areas.

The third strategy is new outlying communities and green spaces. It has a tightly drawn urban growth boundary, can incorporate the other features of either of the other strategies, but permits substantial growth outside the boundary within designated new communities centered on existing outlying towns. This alternative sounds nice but has gained little political support in areas that have actually considered it.

It is obvious that continuation of suburban sprawl will surely not solve the serious problems I have described. In fact, it would make them worse. But it is not theoretically obvious, nor has it been decisively proven in practice, that any of these alternative strategies will largely solve the problems either. In theory, these alternative strategies would at least ameliorate them, as compared to continuing sprawl. Yet the advantages of these strategies have not been powerfully enough demonstrated to the American people to persuade them to give up the advantages they perceive in sprawl.

Specific Anti-Sprawl Tactics

The other way to attack the problems is with specific tactics aimed at them. The first such tactic is some type of urban growth boundary to limit the outward draining of resources from core areas. This boundary need not be airtight to produce benefits. It should, however, be linked to public provision of key infrastructures, which should not be publicly financed outside the boundary. But no growth boundary will have any significant impact unless strong controls limit growth outside it. Moreover, an urban growth boundary that is the "accidental" sum of many separate boundaries adopted by individual communities is not likely to work. If there are no constraints on development in counties lying just outside the growth boundary, developers will leapfrog into those areas and put new growth there. That will simply accelerate sprawl, as has happened in the Twin Cities and around Toronto. In the San Francisco Bay area, several communities have adopted local growth boundaries and several others are considering doing so. But unless these efforts are coordinated, they will not be effective in solving the problems of the region as a whole.

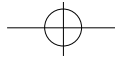
The second tactic is regional coordination and rationalization of local land use planning, done by some regional planning body, such as the

Metropolitan Council in the Twin Cities. Relying solely on individual communities to adopt growth management plans without any overall planning or coordination is like relying on a group of subcontractors to build a house with no overall blueprint. Yet very few U.S. metropolitan areas have been willing to adopt this tactic. Local officials universally resist it, because they claim it would reduce their "local sovereignty." In reality, they have no real control—and thus no true sovereignty—concerning growth-related problems, because those problems are all regional, and no purely local policies can solve them.

Experience suggests that communities individually responding to growth-related problems will adopt plans that lock in low density locally. Each locality will try to shift multi-family housing elsewhere to avoid the fiscal burdens such housing loads on to local taxpayers. Each locality will also adopt other exclusionary policies to protect single-family home values and keep poorer people out. These beggar-thy-neighbor plans will force growth either to more outlying areas less hostile to new development or into inner-city areas through illegal overcrowding. As a result, purely localized growth management will cause sprawl to become worse, not better. Growth will then be shifted to more outlying communities when existing ones refuse to permit higher densities.

The third tactic is some form of regional tax-base sharing, with all additions to commercial and industrial tax bases shared among all communities in the region, not just captured by the places where those developments are built. Such tax-base sharing would reduce fiscal disparities among local governments and thereby provide more equal opportunities for citizens across the entire area.

The fourth tactic is regionwide development of housing for low-income households, either by regional vouchers or regional new subsidies or by requiring developers to build a share of affordable housing in each new project. This tactic is controversial, but our society must begin deconcentrating poverty. David Rusk has recently proven that focusing on improving core-area poverty neighborhoods through community development has almost universally failed to prevent such neighborhoods from falling further and further behind the region. Yet most suburbanites who support any policies to ameliorate the problems of concentrated poverty would rather try to upgrade inner-city neighborhoods than help the residents there move into better neighborhoods. They prefer the failed upgrading tactic because it does not require them to face the prospect of accepting



more poor residents into their neighborhoods and schools. In the long run, however, such acceptance is probably essential to reducing the serious national problems generated by concentrated inner-core area poverty.

A fifth tactic is regional operation of public transit systems and highways, including new facility construction. Several metropolitan areas have adopted this tactic, although whether their transportation systems produce results superior to those elsewhere has not yet been proven.

A final tactic is vigorous regional enforcement of laws against racial discrimination. Very few American metropolitan areas have carried out this tactic or seem about to do so.

Effectively adopting any of these tactics, or certainly most of them together, would likely require a strong regionwide implementing body. Yet hardly any U.S. metropolitan areas have been willing to consider doing this. Even if all these tactics were adopted, it is not certain that they would overcome the ill effects of core-area concentrations of poverty. The best that can be said is that they have a chance of doing so if they are carried out at a large enough scale over a very long time. Nor is it certain that these tactics would overcome a region's growth-related problems. For example, I am positive that traffic congestion will get worse almost everywhere, no matter what tactics anyone adopts.

Gaining Political Support

Until advocates of limited future sprawl can overcome the metropolitan majority's belief that the benefits of sprawl outweigh its social costs, they are not likely to notably reduce sprawl's dominance. How can they overcome that political resistance? Dealing with this critical issue is beyond the scope of this article. Some discussion of it is presented in the article by Myron Orfield.

Most of the few states that have adopted effective growth management programs have been motivated by some crisis—usually an environmental issue such as new subdivisions disrupting Florida's Everglades. It is neither easy, nor desirable, to generate such crises on demand! Therefore, until more crises occur spontaneously, advocates of checking sprawl will have to grind away at the slow task of educating the majority of citizens who believe sprawl is good that its costs outweigh its benefits, even for them. I hope this article contributes some ammunition for that long struggle. ■