



Fannie Mae Foundation  
and  
Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy  
Census Note (May 2001)\*



## Downtown Rebound

Rebecca R. Sohmer and Robert E. Lang  
Fannie Mae Foundation

### Overview

“[Houston’s] downtown business area is made up almost entirely of high-rise office buildings and large department stores, with a few smaller restaurants to refuel the denizens of both, but nobody lives there...” (Sale 1975, p. 52). Kirkpatrick Sale’s 1975 description of downtown Houston aptly described what was happening to most American downtowns in the 1970s and 1980s. But downtown Houston 2000 is a different story. Houston’s downtown population rose 69 percent in the 1990s—the most for any city in our sample.

“Downtown is Back” seemed to be a common observation throughout the 1990s. It turns out that this was more than wishful thinking. Among this sample of 24 cities, 18 downtowns saw increases in their downtown populations.

In a lot of ways, the story of downtown is a counter trend of what is happening in the rest of urban America. While most central cities are losing population relative to their metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), most downtowns are gaining a larger share of MSA population. While cities such as Charlotte and Phoenix are booming, their downtowns are getting weaker. Race and immigration play a different role in downtowns as well. Compared to cities’ overall population changes, the downtown population gain is less weighted toward blacks and Hispanics. Increases in white residents led the resurgence in downtown living—in stark contrast to the general decline in city white population.

The actual numbers of downtown growth are relatively small. The trend of downtown living is still more of a trickle than a rush. Nevertheless, the downtown population gain is important because it may be the

harbinger of future central-city growth. If people continue to move downtown, neighboring areas may experience spillover effects. The stronger downtown gets, the more likely it is that the surrounding central-city neighborhoods will strengthen as well.

## **Methods**

Because the U.S. Bureau of the Census does not officially define “downtown,” a standardized definition was unavailable. What constitutes “downtown” varies from city to city. Depending on the city, a downtown can be several square miles, or it can be several square blocks. But downtowns do have some things in common. They contain the 100 percent corner (place of maximum rent for commercial office space) and are their city’s central business district. The downtown is often the oldest, most established part of a city.

Building on research conducted by Fannie Mae Foundation and The Brookings Institution, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania are in the process of trying to define downtown boundaries in cities throughout the country. The researchers determined downtown census tracts through interviews with city organizations and municipal government leaders and by examining historic maps of each city’s downtown.

The downtowns surveyed vary by region and size. The University of Pennsylvania mapped boundaries for more than 30 downtowns using 1990 census numbers. The 24 downtowns in this study are derived from that list. The list was reduced from 34 to 24 because some cities (such as Dallas, Minneapolis, and Pittsburgh) changed their 2000 census tracts, making it impossible to accurately track population. Other cities were eliminated to round out the regional representation of these downtowns.

## **Findings**

### *Downtowns Vary*

Like census tracts themselves, downtowns vary widely in population size and geographic area (table 1). San Antonio is the geographically largest downtown at 5.5 square miles, while the downtowns in Norfolk, Cincinnati, and Lexington are each just 0.8 square miles. Boston had the largest downtown population in 2000, with almost 80,000, while Norfolk had just under 3,000.

Most downtowns are getting denser, while a few are losing density (table 2). The most densely populated downtowns are Baltimore and Philadelphia, but the downtowns that had the highest density percentage gains are Seattle, Chicago, and Houston.

TABLE 1.

**SELECTED DOWNTOWN POPULATION CHANGE, 1990 TO 2000 (ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

	1990			2000			Change between 1990 and 2000		
	Downtown	City	MSA	Downtown	City	MSA	Downtown	City	MSA
Atlanta	19,763	394,017	2,959,950	24,731	416,474	4,112,198	4,968	22,457	1,152,248
Baltimore	28,597	736,014	2,382,172	30,067	651,154	2,552,994	1,470	(84,860)	170,822
Boston	75,823	574,283	3,227,707	79,251	589,141	3,406,829	3,428	14,858	179,122
Charlotte	6,370	395,934	1,162,093	6,327	540,828	1,499,293	(43)	144,894	337,200
Chicago	27,760	2,783,726	7,410,858	42,039	2,896,016	8,272,768	14,279	112,290	861,910
Cincinnati	3,838	364,040	1,526,092	3,189	331,285	1,646,395	(649)	(32,755)	120,303
Cleveland	7,261	505,616	2,202,069	9,599	478,403	2,250,871	2,338	(27,213)	48,802
Colorado Springs	13,412	281,140	397,014	14,377	360,890	516,929	965	79,750	119,915
Denver	2,794	467,610	1,622,980	4,230	554,636	2,109,282	1,436	87,026	486,302
Des Moines	4,190	193,187	392,928	4,204	198,682	456,022	14	5,495	63,094
Detroit	5,970	1,027,974	4,266,654	6,141	951,270	4,441,551	171	(76,704)	174,897
Houston	7,029	1,630,553	3,322,025	11,882	1,953,631	4,177,646	4,853	323,078	855,621
Lexington, KY	5,212	225,366	405,936	4,894	260,512	479,198	(318)	35,146	73,262
Los Angeles	34,655	3,485,398	8,863,164	36,630	3,694,820	9,519,338	1,975	209,422	656,174
Memphis	7,606	610,337	1,007,306	8,994	650,100	1,135,614	1,388	39,763	128,308
Milwaukee	10,973	628,088	1,432,149	11,243	596,974	1,500,741	270	(31,114)	68,592
Norfolk, VA	2,390	261,229	1,443,244	2,881	234,403	1,569,541	491	(26,826)	126,297
Philadelphia	74,655	1,585,577	4,922,175	78,349	1,517,550	5,100,931	3,694	(68,027)	178,756
Phoenix	6,517	983,403	2,238,480	5,925	1,321,045	3,251,876	(592)	337,642	1,013,396
Portland, OR	9,528	437,319	1,515,452	12,902	529,121	1,918,009	3,374	91,802	402,557
San Antonio	23,588	935,933	1,324,749	22,206	1,144,646	1,592,383	(1,382)	208,713	267,634
San Diego	15,417	1,110,549	2,498,016	17,894	1,223,400	2,813,833	2,477	112,851	315,817
Seattle	9,824	516,259	2,033,156	16,443	563,374	2,414,616	6,619	47,115	381,460
St. Louis	9,109	396,685	2,492,525	7,511	348,189	2,603,607	(1,598)	(48,496)	111,082

Sources: University of Pennsylvania Department of City and Regional Planning; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990 and 2000.

TABLE 2.  
DOWNTOWN DENSITY

	City	Area (Square Miles)	1990 Density	2000 Density	Change
<i>Downtowns increasing density</i>	Seattle	1.2	8,485	14,202	5,717
	Chicago	3.7	7,422	11,240	3,818
	Houston	1.8	3,950	6,676	2,727
	Portland	1.8	5,425	7,346	1,921
	Denver	0.9	3,234	4,895	1,662
	Atlanta	3.5	5,710	7,146	1,435
	Philadelphia	4.3	17,476	18,341	865
	Boston	4.4	17,282	18,063	781
	Norfolk	0.8	3,053	3,680	627
	San Diego	4.3	3,611	4,191	580
	Baltimore	2.5	11,228	11,805	577
	Cleveland	4.3	1,707	2,256	550
	Los Angeles	4.6	7,550	7,980	430
	Memphis	3.9	1,928	2,280	352
	Colorado Springs	3.9	3,428	3,675	247
	Detroit	1.4	4,264	4,386	122
	Milwaukee	2.2	4,911	5,032	121
Des Moines	2.5	1,705	1,710	6	
<i>Downtown decreasing density</i>	Charlotte	3.0	2,116	2,101	(14)
	San Antonio	5.5	4,307	4,055	(252)
	Phoenix	1.5	4,295	3,905	(390)
	Lexington	0.8	6,452	6,058	(394)
	St. Louis	3.4	2,718	2,241	(477)
	Cincinnati	0.8	4,893	4,066	(827)

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990 and 2000.

### *More Winners than Losers*

Three-fourths of the downtowns gained population. Only six downtowns were smaller in 2000. Overall, downtowns are winners in the population game. Each downtown falls into one of four scenarios (table 3):

- **Downtown Population Up; City Population Up.** Twelve of the 24 downtowns fall into this scenario. The city as a whole is gaining population and downtown is growing as well. In addition, most of the downtowns in the category are outpacing the city's growth rate. Houston, Seattle, Chicago, and Denver's downtowns are growing anywhere from 2.5 times as quickly (Denver) to 12 times as quickly (Chicago) as their cities. Only Colorado Springs and Des Moines' downtowns are growing at a slower rate than their cities.
- **Downtown Population Up; City Population Down.** Six downtowns are in this category. This is the most interesting group. These downtowns are the surprise heroes of their cities. While downtown

population is up, the city is losing people. Even in an environment where city population is slumping, these downtowns are managing to attract new populations. While the city of Cleveland saw a 5 percent population loss in the 1990s, its downtown population grew by a third.

- **Downtown Population Down; City Population Up.** Four downtowns are in this group. This scenario and the one following were familiar stories to the metropolitan America of the postwar years. It appears that the tide has turned. The scenario of a downtown losing population despite increases in the city overall is no longer the dominant pattern. Here the surprise is that downtowns in these fast-growing cities are losing population. The city of Phoenix grew by 34 percent, yet its downtown lost 9 percent of its residents. Possibly, people are leaving downtown in these cities to be closer to employment centers that are in the areas' burgeoning suburbs.
- **Downtown Population Down; City Population Down.** In cities losing population, it is not surprising to see their downtowns also losing population. However, Cincinnati and St. Louis—the only two downtowns in this category—are both outpacing their respective cities in losing people.

TABLE 3.

**THE FOUR DIFFERENT TRENDS:  
POPULATION CHANGE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CITY POPULATION CHANGE**

Category	Area	Percent Change	
		Downtown	City
<i>Downtown Up, City Up</i>	Houston	69.0%	19.8%
	Seattle	67.4%	9.1%
	Chicago	51.4%	4.0%
	Denver	51.4%	18.6%
	Portland, OR	35.4%	21.0%
	Atlanta	25.1%	5.7%
	Memphis	18.2%	6.5%
	San Diego	16.1%	10.2%
	Colorado Springs	7.2%	28.4%
	Los Angeles	5.7%	6.0%
	Boston	4.5%	2.6%
	Des Moines	0.3%	2.8%
<i>Downtown Up, City Down</i>	Cleveland	32.2%	-5.4%
	Norfolk, VA	20.5%	-10.3%
	Baltimore	5.1%	-11.5%
	Philadelphia	4.9%	-4.3%
	Detroit	2.9%	-7.5%
<i>Downtown Down, City Up</i>	Milwaukee	2.5%	-5.0%
	Charlotte	-0.7%	36.6%
	San Antonio	-5.9%	22.3%
	Lexington, KY	-6.1%	15.6%
<i>Downtown Down, City Down</i>	Phoenix	-9.1%	34.3%
	Cincinnati	-16.9%	-9.0%
	St. Louis	-17.5%	-12.2%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990 and 2000.

The downtowns on this list are gaining a bigger share of their MSAs' population, while their respective cities are losing. Although the raw number of people moving into downtown is relatively small, those numbers are registering a percent increase in the downtowns' share of MSA population (tables 4 and 5). All but three downtowns either improved or maintained their standing in the MSA. Seattle again tops the list—it increased its share of the overall MSA population by 0.3 percent. Meanwhile, only two cities as a whole increased their share of MSA population: Charlotte and San Antonio (both of which lost downtown population during the 1990s). The rest of the cities fared poorly. Downtown's relative importance is growing despite the weakening importance of the cities they are in.

TABLE 4.

**DOWNTOWNS' SHARES OF MSA POPULATION\***

	Area	1990	2000	Change
<i>Downtowns that increased their share of MSA population</i>	Seattle	0.4%	0.7%	0.3%
	Colorado Springs	2.6%	2.8%	0.2%
	Portland, OR	0.5%	0.7%	0.2%
	Chicago	0.3%	0.5%	0.2%
	Memphis	0.7%	0.8%	0.1%
	Atlanta	0.5%	0.6%	0.1%
	Houston	0.2%	0.3%	0.1%
	Cleveland	0.3%	0.4%	0.1%
	Boston	2.2%	2.3%	0.1%
	San Diego	0.5%	0.6%	0.1%
	Philadelphia	1.5%	1.5%	0.1%
	Denver	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%
	Baltimore	1.1%	1.2%	0.1%
<i>Downtowns that maintained their share of MSA population</i>	Norfolk, VA	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%
	Los Angeles	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%
	Milwaukee	0.7%	0.7%	0.0%
	Detroit	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
	Des Moines	0.9%	0.9%	0.0%
	Charlotte	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%
	Phoenix	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%
Cincinnati	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	
<i>Downtowns that decreased their share of MSA population</i>	St. Louis	0.3%	0.3%	-0.1%
	Lexington, KY	1.1%	1.0%	-0.1%
	San Antonio	1.5%	1.4%	-0.1%

\* Primary metropolitan statistical area used when provided.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990, 2000.

TABLE 5.

## CITIES' SHARES OF MSA POPULATION\*

	Area	1990	2000	Change
<i>Cities that increased share of MSA population</i>	Charlotte	34%	36%	2.0%
	San Antonio	71%	72%	1.2%
<i>Cities that decreased their share of MSA population</i>	Boston	18%	17%	-0.5%
	Los Angeles	39%	39%	-0.5%
	San Diego	44%	43%	-1.0%
	Colorado Springs	71%	70%	-1.0%
	Lexington, KY	56%	54%	-1.2%
	Portland, OR	29%	28%	-1.3%
	Cleveland	23%	21%	-1.7%
	Seattle	25%	23%	-2.1%
	Houston	49%	47%	-2.3%
	Philadelphia	32%	30%	-2.5%
	Denver	29%	26%	-2.5%
	St. Louis	16%	13%	-2.5%
	Chicago	38%	35%	-2.6%
	Detroit	24%	21%	-2.7%
	Norfolk, VA	18%	15%	-3.2%
	Atlanta	13%	10%	-3.2%
	Phoenix	44%	41%	-3.3%
	Memphis	61%	57%	-3.3%
	Cincinnati	24%	20%	-3.7%
	Milwaukee	44%	40%	-4.1%
Baltimore	31%	26%	-5.4%	
Des Moines	49%	44%	-5.6%	

\* Primary metropolitan statistical area used when provided.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990, 2000.

### *Downtown's Racial Composition*

Comparing 1990's downtowns with 2000's is complicated by the fact that the U. S. Census Bureau adjusted race categories for the 2000 census—separating Asian and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and adding a category for two or more races (table 6).

Grouping the 24 downtowns together, there are 7.5 percent more whites living downtown than there were in 1990. There are 4.8 percent more Hispanics living downtown, and 6 percent more blacks. This contrasts sharply with city data. There are 10.5 percent *fewer* whites living in those 24 cities in 2000 than in 1990. Meanwhile, 43 percent more Hispanics and 2.4 percent more blacks lived in the same 24 cities.

TABLE 6.

**RACIAL COMPOSITION IN SELECTED DOWNTOWNS, 1990 AND 2000**

City	Year	Total	Hispanic	White	Black	Amer. Ind.	Asian/Island.	Asian	Hawaiian	Other	2 or more
Atlanta	1990	19,763	161	2,328	17,077	29	154	n/a	n/a	14	n/a
	2000	24,731	1,002	4,466	18,750	50	n/a	299	8	45	311
Baltimore	1990	28,597	502	18,793	8,507	83	692	n/a	n/a	20	n/a
	2000	30,067	690	18,263	9,012	80	n/a	1,490	14	85	433
Boston	1990	75,823	4,368	57,916	3,562	164	9,681	n/a	n/a	132	n/a
	2000	79,251	5,432	57,227	3,486	128	n/a	11,416	39	244	1,279
Charlotte	1990	6,370	205	2,309	3,811	28	17	n/a	n/a	-	n/a
	2000	6,327	97	2,710	3,332	27	n/a	62	10	6	83
Chicago	1990	27,760	1,424	20,916	4,170	49	1,185	n/a	n/a	16	n/a
	2000	42,039	2,216	27,623	6,912	62	n/a	4,388	25	71	742
Cincinnati	1990	3,838	24	2,350	1,391	9	62	n/a	n/a	2	n/a
	2000	3,189	78	1,737	1,241	9	n/a	61	6	2	55
Cleveland	1990	7,261	228	2,500	4,285	27	213	n/a	n/a	8	n/a
	2000	9,599	311	2,663	6,012	21	n/a	384	3	20	185
Spartanburg Spartanburg	1990	13,412	1,379	10,815	903	129	155	n/a	n/a	31	n/a
	2000	14,377	1,681	11,132	842	90	n/a	195	13	34	390
Denver	1990	2,794	230	2,217	164	14	163	n/a	n/a	6	n/a
	2000	4,230	445	3,147	229	26	n/a	271	1	19	92
Des Moines	1990	4,190	70	3,310	670	24	111	n/a	n/a	5	n/a
	2000	4,204	271	2,978	674	20	n/a	100	8	56	97
Detroit	1990	5,970	92	1,687	4,133	25	31	n/a	n/a	2	n/a
	2000	6,141	124	1,290	4,518	13	n/a	84	-	11	101
Houston	1990	7,029	1,370	2,061	3,449	48	76	n/a	n/a	25	n/a
	2000	11,882	2,688	4,158	4,837	11	n/a	131	2	2	53
Lexington KY	1990	5,212	70	3,718	1,360	17	42	n/a	n/a	5	n/a
	2000	4,894	182	3,153	1,368	17	n/a	88	6	7	73
Los Angeles	1990	34,655	20,648	5,198	5,456	195	3,048	n/a	n/a	110	n/a
	2000	36,630	18,529	4,621	6,481	199	n/a	6,098	40	46	616
Memphis	1990	7,606	36	1,820	5,706	19	24	n/a	n/a	1	n/a
	2000	8,994	138	4,158	4,369	21	n/a	208	-	7	93
Milwaukee	1990	10,973	330	8,160	2,238	45	185	n/a	n/a	15	n/a
	2000	11,243	341	8,141	1,998	38	n/a	513	16	12	184
Norfolk	1990	2,390	36	1,269	1,034	8	43	n/a	n/a	-	n/a
	2000	2,881	46	1,474	1,274	1	n/a	52	3	3	28
Philadelphia	1990	74,655	2,404	57,707	11,067	147	3,250	n/a	n/a	80	n/a
	2000	78,349	3,172	57,419	9,707	132	n/a	6,226	35	234	1,424
Phoenix	1990	6,517	1,977	3,163	860	455	60	n/a	n/a	2	n/a
	2000	5,925	1,763	2,931	751	320	n/a	78	1	3	78
Portland OR	1990	9,528	429	7,611	516	154	806	n/a	n/a	12	n/a
	2000	12,902	645	9,651	831	213	n/a	1,032	29	38	463
San Antonio	1990	23,588	18,191	3,131	2,010	51	116	n/a	n/a	89	n/a
	2000	22,206	16,837	3,375	1,640	66	n/a	104	11	19	154
San Diego	1990	15,417	4,504	8,086	2,139	156	506	n/a	n/a	26	n/a
	2000	17,894	4,354	9,728	2,079	136	n/a	1,007	29	56	505
Seattle	1990	9,824	573	6,372	1,194	280	1,398	n/a	n/a	7	n/a
	2000	16,443	1,004	9,901	1,830	310	n/a	2,622	46	57	673
St. Louis	1990	9,109	79	2,399	6,555	30	43	n/a	n/a	3	n/a
	2000	7,511	106	1,614	5,580	28	n/a	79	2	7	95

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990 and 2000.



In 2000, the group of 24 downtowns was 54.9 percent white; 21.2 percent black; 13.4 percent Hispanic; 8 percent Asian; 0.6 American Indian, Hawaiian, or Other; and 1.8 percent was of more than one race. Compared with 1990, there were small percentage increases in the Asian and Hispanic populations and small decreases in the white and black populations (white, 57.2 percent; black, 22.1 percent; Hispanic, 14.4 percent; Asians and Pacific Islanders, 5.4 percent; and American Indians or other, 0.6 percent).

In individual downtowns, whites gained more of a percentage share of the population in 7 of 24 downtowns in 2000. Eighteen downtowns have a greater percentage of Hispanics, and 11 downtowns have a higher percentage of blacks.

### *Why Is Downtown on the Rebound?*

Several trends are helping downtown's new period of growth. The population of empty nesters will continue to grow as baby boomers age. Without children, empty nesters often change their lifestyles in a way that favors downtown. Besides having more leisure time to dine out and take part in cultural activities (museums, concerts), empty nesters often choose to downsize their housing—trading in the lawn care and upkeep of a large home for the convenience of living in a downtown condominium. If even a modest portion of empty-nester households trades suburban homes for urban ones, downtown populations will continue to grow. The other emerging population that is probably aiding downtown's comeback are young professionals in their 20s and 30s who have yet to start families. This group—often consumers of downtown-friendly amenities such as coffeehouses and nightclubs—are frequently in the market for low-maintenance, urbane housing convenient to work and amenities.

Downtowns throughout the country are capitalizing on their historic character. Downtowns offer a niche market for those seeking a “sense of place” (Sohmer and Lang 1999; Sohmer 1999). For example, downtown San Diego gained residents in part because it offers an alternative to rapidly expanding (and often monotonous) suburban developments that dominate the region. Perhaps Charlotte and Phoenix lost downtown population in part because their downtowns do not offer enough to distinguish themselves from their suburbs.

The unique history of downtown areas in combination with their central location and proximity to mass transit, work, and amenities offers potential for the growth of the 1990s to continue into the next decade.

### **Authors**

Rebecca R. Sohmer is Research Fellow of Urban Metropolitan Research at the Fannie Mae Foundation. Robert E. Lang is Director of Urban and Metropolitan Research at the Fannie Mae Foundation. The authors thank Dr. Eugenie Birch for her contributions to this analysis.

### **\*About the *Census Notes* Series**

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progress and their findings considered preliminary. This Census Note on the Downtown Rebound was produced in collaboration with The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy.

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[Rev. 5/08/01]