

## Job Sprawl and the Geography of Metropolitan Employment

A Q&A with Elizabeth Kneebone, senior research analyst at the Metropolitan Policy Program and the author of the forthcoming report, “Job Sprawl Revisited: The Changing Geography of Metropolitan Employment”

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**Q:** *What does the current recession and shedding of jobs mean for job sprawl?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** The downturn may slow the trends for some metro areas, but the recession alone will not permanently reverse these patterns. The more important question is about the nation’s eventual economic recovery, and where the new jobs grow. New policies could redirect what we view as a negative trend.

**Q:** *What are the potential problems associated with job sprawl?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** It can undermine the economic health of cities and regions by boosting energy consumption, adding to building costs, increasing commuting times and isolating low-income and minority workers in the urban core from employment opportunities in the outlying areas.

**Q:** *How did you determine the job sprawl ranking?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** I analyzed ZIP Business Patterns data for 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006. These data are derived from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Business Register and include business counts by employment size and industry as well as employment totals at the ZIP code level. The data have not been released for 2008, but since these trends have persisted regardless of changes in the economic cycle, employment will most likely continue to decentralize unless we see a shift in policy.

**Q:** *What policies might shape better job development patterns across the country?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** The recently passed American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 will result in billions of dollars in spending and create millions of jobs. If used wisely by federal, state and local leaders, these investments could help spur cohesive planning and policies that lead to more compact and sustainable development. If not, these investments

could accelerate low-density exurban development and exacerbate the range of challenges associated with unchecked sprawl.

**Q:** *Is there any evidence that policies can curb job sprawl?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** Yes. Honolulu and the Lexington-Fayette metro in Kentucky lead the list for most centralized employment areas. Both of these regions were early adapters of policies to contain urban sprawl in the late 1950s. Honolulu has had urban containment policies in place since Hawaii officially became a state, while Lexington and Fayette County have been credited with the nation's first urban containment effort—an urban service line that limited development in the green fields surrounding the urban area.

**Q:** *Can you explain the causes of job sprawl?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** It varies greatly by region. In metro areas that were booming over this period—like Phoenix, Austin, Cape Coral—we see these trends because the region added jobs in the metropolitan fringe at an exponentially faster rate than it gained jobs in the urban core. But job sprawl is not solely the product of growth. Regions that have shed jobs and population—like Detroit, Cleveland, and Youngstown—also experienced job decentralization, even as they saw a net decrease in regional employment. The types of industries a region specializes in may also affect the location of jobs within the metro. Detroit leads the list for job sprawl, but it is one of many older industrial metro areas that exhibit higher-than-average employment decentralization. In contrast, metro areas that specialize in the more centralized information industry—like New York and Des Moines—have more jobs concentrated in the urban core than average.

**Q:** *What does the “rebirth” of downtown areas mean for the job sprawl trend?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** We did witness a renaissance in urban living in major metros throughout the country in the 1990s. The population living in downtowns grew by 10 percent over that decade, after 20 years of decline. Unfortunately, that upswing has remained a residential rather than a jobs-based phenomenon.

**Q:** *Why did that happen?*

**Elizabeth Kneebone:** Many of the jobs that attract young professionals and tend to be located downtown also shifted outward over the eight-year period in the study. For instance, the 31 metro areas that specialize in professional, scientific and technical services—including Austin, Albuquerque and Oklahoma City—experienced a shifting of job share away from the downtown. Metropolitan cores that want to attract and retain young and talented workers may have to rethink “brain gain” strategies.