



Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy

Suburbs and the Census: Patterns of Growth and Decline

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“While it is common to talk about “the suburbs” as a group of homogeneous jurisdictions, careful analysis reveals that suburbs are highly diverse”

Findings

A survey of population growth in nearly 2,600 suburbs in the 35 largest metropolitan areas between 1990 and 2000 reveals that:

- **While suburbs as a whole grew between 1990 and 2000, population growth across individual suburbs was highly uneven.** The 2,586 suburbs in the 35 largest metropolitan areas grew on average by 14 percent. However, while 63 percent of all the suburbs grew, 37 percent actually lost population or stayed the same.
- **Declining suburbs were predominately located in slow growing metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest.** The highest number of declining suburbs and the suburbs that declined faster than their cities were located in places like the Cleveland, St. Louis and Philadelphia metropolitan areas.
- **Declining suburbs were not simply those immediately adjacent to, or near central cities, but were found throughout the metropolitan area.** While population decline was frequent in inner suburbs, many inner suburbs also grew, as did most central cities.
- **Small suburbs are not buffered against the forces of decline.** Nearly one-third of suburbs with populations less than 10,000 lost population during the 1990s. By contrast, only 18.4 percent of large suburbs declined.
- **Population growth in the 1990s was faster in unincorporated areas and in new suburbs than in existing suburbs.** Unincorporated areas and new suburbs in the 35 surveyed metropolitan areas grew by 22 percent; existing suburbs grew by only 14 percent.

I. Introduction

Historically, the typical image of metropolitan growth and decline is simplistic: central cities lose population and suburbs continually gain - often at city expense. However, this view is changing. The 2000 Census shows us that the median growth rate for cities during the 1990s more than doubled from that of

the 1980s. In addition, nearly three-quarters of cities grew during the 1990s.²

And contrary to popular perception, not all suburbs are growing. The 2000 Census shows that more than one-third of the suburbs of 35 metropolitan areas are either stagnant in terms of population growth or are actually losing residents—some at a rather rapid rate. Suburbs are no longer monolithic communities free from problems normally associated



with struggling center cities. While it is common to talk about “the suburbs” as a group of homogeneous jurisdictions, careful analysis reveals that suburbs are highly diverse. Although many newly developing suburbs experienced rapid growth in people and jobs, many older, frequently inner-ring suburbs in the Northeast and the Midwest experienced central city-like challenges. These include an aging infrastructure, deteriorating schools and commercial corridors, inadequate housing stock — and population decline.

II. Methodology

This study examines the 34 most populous metropolitan areas in the United States in 2000, plus the Buffalo metropolitan area.³ Individual suburbs within those metropolitan areas were chosen based on a population in 1980 of 2,500 or more. The 35 metropolitan areas in this study had 2,586 suburban governments and Census Designated Places (CDPs) in 1980. Military CDPs were eliminated, where possible, since their patterns of growth and decline generally do not reflect trends throughout a metropolitan area. The only criteria for suburb inclusion in this study were 1980 population size and consistent presence in U.S. censuses. Distance came into play only with the requirement that a place be within each metropolitan boundary. Thus, inner and outer suburbs are included, as are pre- and post-World War II suburbs.

It is important to note that the census includes many Census Designated Places (CDPs) as separate suburbs although they lack governmental responsibilities — this is especially true in the Baltimore and Washington metropolitan areas, and in some fast-growing areas in the West. Each suburb is listed, including an indication of type of government or CDP, in a separate table that can be found on the Brookings Urban Center web site (<http://www.brookings.edu/urban>).

The 35 metropolitan areas had 38 main central cities; Minneapolis, St. Paul, San Francisco, Oakland, Tampa and St. Petersburg all were treated equally as central cities. Another 10 secondary central cities, which sometimes were smaller than more generally recognized suburbs, were included in the sample of 2,586 suburbs. Large suburbs sometimes referred to as “boomburbs” complicate the distinction between central cities and suburbs.⁴ The largest of these suburbs, Mesa, outside Phoenix, has more than 400,000 residents. This makes Mesa larger than the populations of long established central cities like St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo.

Census designations for Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs), and Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (CMSAs) were chosen depending on which category included most of the suburbs of a given central city without, if possible, including other major central cities with their own metropolitan areas.

The spread of metropolitan areas into each other’s territory makes some metropolitan boundary distinctions awkward and arguable. The choices made among metropolitan designations did not alter significantly the percentages of suburban growth or decline in those metropolitan areas. Population changes result from net migration, births, and deaths. Data about these components of population change are not available yet.

III. Findings

A. While suburbs as a whole grew between 1990 and 2000, population growth across individual suburbs was highly uneven.

While the 2000 Census confirms that the decentralization of economic and residential life remains the prevailing trend in metropolitan America today, this trend is by no means ubiquitous. The 2,586 suburbs in the 35 largest metropolitan areas grew on average by 14 percent (Table 1). However, while 63 percent of all suburbs grew, 37 percent of the suburbs actually lost population or stayed the same (Figure 1).

Between 1990 and 2000, the overall population outside of central cities in these 35 metropolitan areas grew by nearly 12.5 million, of which 7,417,836 occurred in the suburbs analyzed here. The balance of the population growth (5,043,456) occurred in unincorporated areas and in new suburbs that did not have 2,500 or more residents in 1980, and that were

Table 1: Population Change by Geographic Area, 1990–2000

	1990 Population	2000 Population	Change in Population	Percent Change in Population
All 35 metropolitan areas	109,676,212	124,776,188	15,099,906	+13.8%
All 38 central cities	34,060,549	36,698,911	2,638,362	+7.8%
Outside Central City	75,615,915	88,077,207	12,461,292	+16.5%
Suburbs in Study	52,375,476	59,793,312	7,417,836	+14.2%
Declining Suburbs	11,087,890	10,449,347	-638,543	-5.8%

not included in our sample (see Finding E). However, 700 of the 2,586 suburbs in these metropolitan areas (or 27 percent of suburbs) lost a total of 638,543 residents, an average decline rate of 6.1 percent per suburb.

Table 2 provides a list of the 35 metropolitan areas and each of their overall and suburban population change in the last decade.

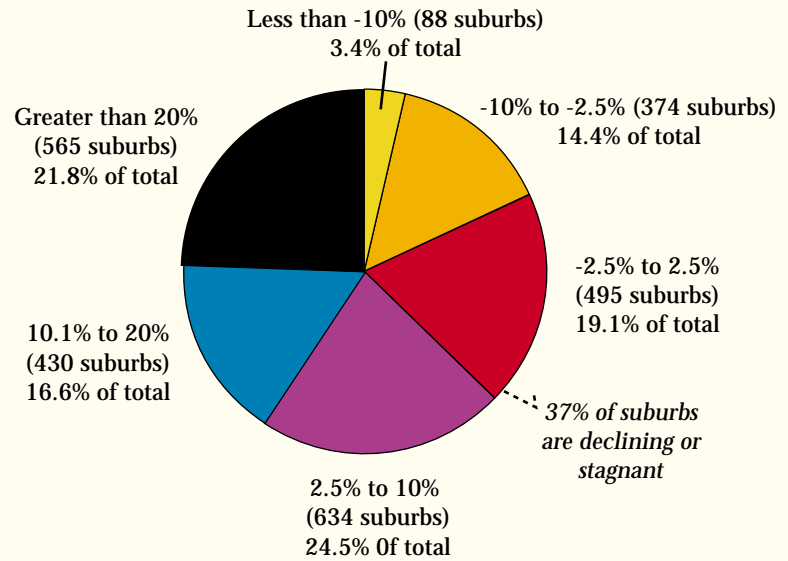
Figure 1 categorizes the suburbs by pace of population change. Rather than strictly define population change as one or more residents, this figure includes a “stagnant” category of suburbs that experienced very little population change (plus or minus 2.5 percent). By this definition, 18 percent of all the suburbs in the study declined, 19 percent were stable and 63 percent grew. Thus, it can be said that 37 percent of all suburbs in this study did not grow significantly — that is, their population declined or remained stable.

In metropolitan areas with a modest number of suburbs and a few very large population changes, a misleading picture of suburban transitions may occur. Some large changes are the result of new incorporations and boundary adjustments in unincorporated areas. There are, however, some notable exceptions: Wrightstown, NJ, a Philadelphia suburb, lost 80.5 percent of its 1990 population due to mission changes at McGuire Air Force Base; and the St. Louis suburb of Kinloch City, MO, because of the St. Louis Airport Authority’s buy-out of 175 acres for noise mitigation, showed an 83.4 percent population decline, the largest for any suburb that we examined.

B. Declining suburbs were predominately located in slow growing metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest.

While suburban growth and decline among individual suburbs was highly uneven, clear patterns of suburban change emerged between metropolitan

Figure 1: Number of Suburbs Grouped by Amount of Population Decline (2,586 total)



areas in the 1990s.

For example, the Pittsburgh metropolitan area had, by far, the greatest percentage and number of declining suburbs. There, 108 (84.4 percent) of its 128 suburbs lost population, at an average rate of 6.7 percent per suburb. In four other metropolitan areas, the majority of all suburbs declined in population - 71.4 percent of the suburbs in the Buffalo area, 66.7 percent in Philadelphia, 57.3 percent in Detroit, and 54.0 percent in Cleveland.

As this indicates, suburban population loss was heaviest in the Northeast, where 38.5 percent of metropolitan suburbs lost population, and in the Midwest, where population declines occurred in 31.8 percent of suburbs. By contrast, in the South only 13.6 percent of suburbs declined along with just 10.5 percent in the West. The South and West also experienced, by far, the greatest percentages of overall metropolitan population growth - both around 20 percent.

What this survey makes clear is that suburbs in metropolitan areas in different parts of the country are growing in different ways.

As Table 2 shows, suburban population growth and decline also appear to be closely correlated with overall metropolitan area condition. The top 5 declining metropolitan areas, or those demonstrating the least growth, were also the top 5 in terms of the percentages of declining suburbs. By contrast, metropolitan areas that grew very quickly (over 30 percent) all had relatively low suburb-decline percentages.

Table 3 separates metropolitan areas into three groups: metropolitan areas that grew by less than 10 percent, by 10 to 25 percent, and by 25 percent or more. Suburban population decline was much more frequent in the slow growing metropolitan areas, where 37.6 percent of suburbs declined. The Buffalo and Pittsburgh metropolitan areas, which fell in population, had the highest frequency of population decline in their suburbs.

Table 2: Metropolitan Areas and Their Declining Suburbs

Region and Metropolitan Area	Metropolitan Population			Suburbs			
	2000	1990	Percent Change	Number in Study	Percent Population Change	Number Declining	Percent Declining
<i>Northeast</i>							
Boston, MA-NH	3,406,829	3,227,707	5.5%	78	4.7%	20	25.6%
Buffalo-Niagara Falls, NY	1,170,111	1,189,288	-1.6%	28	-5.0%	20	71.4%
New York- NY-NJ-CT-PA	21,199,865	19,549,649	8.4%	515	6.4%	104	20.2%
Philadelphia, PA-NJ	5,100,931	4,922,175	3.6%	129	-1.6%	86	66.7%
Pittsburgh, PA	2,358,695	2,394,811	-1.5%	128	-4.0%	108	84.4%
Northeast Regional Totals:	33,236,431	31,283,630	6.2%	878	4.3%	338	38.5%
<i>Midwest</i>							
Chicago, IL	8,272,768	7,410,858	11.6%	213	18.0%	28	13.2%
Cincinnati—Hamilton, OH-KY-IN	1,979,202	1,817,571	8.9%	67	8.5%	27	40.3%
Cleveland—Lorain-Elyria, OH	2,250,871	2,202,069	2.2%	76	2.2%	41	54.0%
Columbus, OH	1,540,157	1,345,450	14.5%	28	16.4%	9	32.1%
Detroit, MI	4,441,551	4,266,654	4.1%	89	1.0%	51	57.3%
Indianapolis, IN	1,607,486	1,380,491	16.4%	26	29.9%	1	3.9%
Kansas City, MO-KS	1,776,062	1,582,875	12.2%	40	15.3%	13	32.5%
Milwaukee—Waukesha, WI	1,500,741	1,432,149	4.8%	39	10.6%	13	33.3%
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI	2,968,806	2,538,834	16.9%	96	20.4%	16	16.7%
St. Louis, MO-IL	2,603,607	2,492,525	4.5%	106	7.5%	49	46.2%
Midwest Regional Totals:	28,941,251	26,469,476	9.3%	780	12.2%	248	31.8%
<i>South</i>							
Atlanta, GA	4,112,198	2,959,950	38.9%	66	30.7%	5	7.6%
Baltimore, MD	2,552,994	2,382,172	7.2%	67	15.6%	12	17.9%
Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill, NC-SC	1,499,293	1,162,093	29.0%	24	30.2%	4	16.7%
Dallas, TX	3,519,176	2,676,248	31.5%	45	40.4%	0	0.0%
Houston, TX	4,177,646	3,322,025	25.8%	43	30.7%	4	9.3%
Miami, FL	2,253,362	1,937,094	16.3%	52	10.1%	10	19.2%
Norfolk-Va Bch-Newport News, VA-NC	1,569,541	1,443,244	8.8%	10	10.9%	1	10.0%
Orlando, FL	1,644,561	1,224,852	34.3%	37	28.9%	5	13.5%
San Antonio, TX	1,592,383	1,324,749	20.2%	15	18.7%	4	26.7%
Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL	2,395,997	2,067,959	15.9%	41	23.6%	4	9.8%
Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV	4,923,153	4,223,485	16.6%	130	13.1%	23	17.7%
South Regional Totals:	30,240,304	24,723,871	22.3%	530	21.1%	72	13.6%
<i>West</i>							
Denver, CO	2,109,282	1,622,980	30.0%	28	22.3%	1	3.6%
Las Vegas, NV-AZ	1,563,282	852,737	83.3%	8	81.7%	0	0.0%
Los Angeles and Orange County, CA	12,366,637	11,270,720	9.6%	138	9.8%	21	15.2%
Phoenix—Mesa, AZ	3,251,876	2,238,480	45.3%	28	56.5%	3	10.7%
Portland—Vancouver, OR-WA	1,918,009	1,515,452	26.6%	32	54.1%	3	9.4%
Sacramento-Yolo, CA	1,796,857	1,481,102	21.3%	29	22.2%	2	6.9%
San Diego, CA	2,813,833	2,498,016	12.6%	24	9.5%	6	25.0%
San Francisco and Oakland, CA	4,123,740	3,686,592	11.9%	73	14.4%	2	2.7%
Seattle—Bellevue-Everett, WA	2,414,616	2,033,156	18.8%	38	31.6%	4	10.5%
West Regional Totals:	32,358,132	27,199,235	19.0%	398	19.7%	42	10.5%
Study Totals	124,776,118	109,676,212	13.8%	2,586	14.2%	700	27.1%

Table 3: Declining Suburbs By Rate of Metropolitan Area Growth

Growth Rate	Metropolitan Population			Suburbs		
	Population 1990	Population 2000	Change 1990-2000	Number	Number Declining	Percent Declining
Less than 10% (13 metro areas)	58,590,734	62,501,575	6.7%	1,470	553	37.6%
10% to 25% (13 metro areas)	33,510,661	38,479,220	14.8%	805	122	15.1%
25% or More (9 metro areas)	17,574,817	23,795,323	35.4%	311	25	8.0%
Total and Averages	109,676,212	124,776,118	13.8%	2,586	700	27.1%

Table 4: Central Cities and Their Declining Suburbs

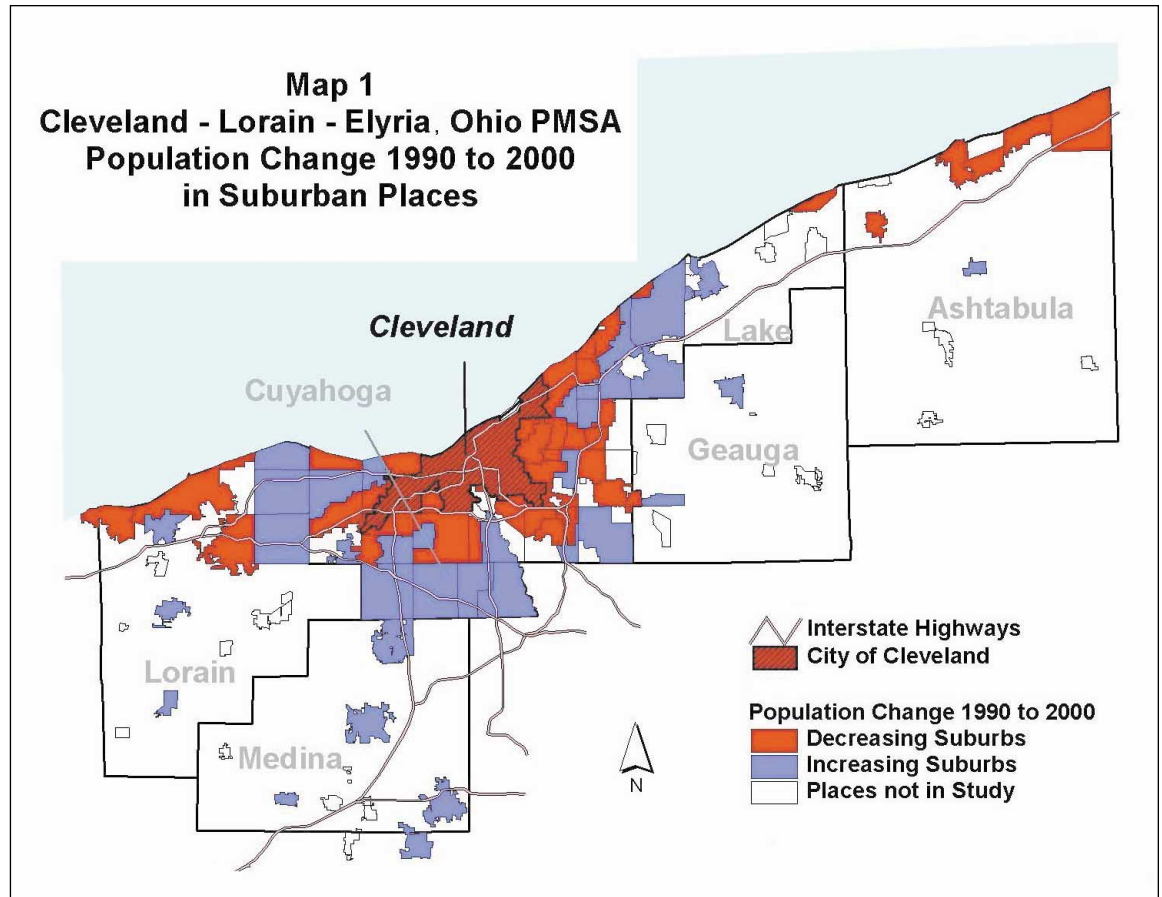
	Central City			Suburbs					
	Population 1990	Population 2000	% Change 1990-2000	Metro Area Total	Number Declining	% of Suburbs Declining	Average % Decline	Number Declining Faster Than Central City	Average % Decline
Atlanta	394,017	416,474	5.7%	66	5	7.6%	-27.6%		
Baltimore	736,014	651,154	-11.5%	67	12	17.9%	-3.1%	0	0.0%
Boston	574,283	589,141	2.6%	78	20	25.6%	-2.0%		
Buffalo	328,123	292,648	-10.8%	28	20	71.4%	-5.1%	0	0.0%
Charlotte	396,003	540,828	36.6%	24	4	16.7%	-4.7%		
Chicago	2,783,726	2,896,016	4.0%	213	28	13.2%	-3.8%		
Cincinnati	364,040	331,285	-9.0%	67	27	40.3%	-6.9%	6	-12.3%
Cleveland	505,616	478,403	-5.4%	76	41	54.0%	-3.8%	8	-8.3%
Columbus	632,958	711,470	12.4%	28	9	32.1%	-7.2%		
Dallas	1,006,831	1,188,580	18.1%	45	0	0.0%	0.0%		
Denver	467,610	554,636	18.6%	28	1	3.6%	-35.7%		
Detroit	1,027,974	951,270	-7.5%	89	51	57.3%	-5.6%	12	-10.0%
Houston	1,630,672	1,953,631	19.8%	43	4	9.3%	-5.4%		
Indianapolis	731,321	781,870	6.9%	26	1	3.9%	-1.6%		
Kansas City	435,141	441,545	1.5%	40	13	32.5%	-4.4%		
Las Vegas	258,295	478,434	85.2%	8	0	0.0%	0.0%		
Los Angeles	3,485,398	3,694,820	6.0%	138	21	15.1%	-5.1%		
Miami	358,548	362,470	1.1%	52	10	19.2%	-11.4%		
Milwaukee	628,088	596,974	-5.0%	39	13	33.3%	-3.0%	3	-5.6%
Minneapolis	640,618	669,769	4.6%	96	16	16.7%	-2.7%		
New York	7,322,564	8,008,278	9.4%	515	104	20.2%	-3.2%		
Norfolk	261,229	234,403	-10.3%	10	1	10.0%	-3.2%	0	0.0%
Orlando	164,693	185,951	12.9%	37	5	13.5%	-13.3%		
Philadelphia	1,585,577	1,517,550	-4.3%	129	86	66.7%	-6.4%	51	-9.4%
Phoenix	983,403	1,321,045	34.3%	28	3	10.7%	-2.8%		
Pittsburgh	369,879	334,563	-9.5%	128	108	84.4%	-6.7%	23	-13.3%
Portland	437,398	529,121	21.0%	32	3	9.4%	-8.7%		
Sacramento	369,365	407,018	10.2%	29	2	6.9%	-13.7%		
San Antonio	935,927	1,144,646	22.3%	15	4	26.7%	-4.2%		
San Diego	1,110,549	1,223,400	10.2%	24	6	25.0%	-29.8%		
San Francisco	1,096,201	1,176,217	7.3%	73	2	2.7%	-3.1%		
Seattle	516,259	563,374	9.1%	38	4	10.5%	-22.7%		
St. Louis	396,685	348,189	-12.2%	106	49	46.2%	-10.1%	12	-27.3%
Tampa	518,644	551,679	6.37%	41	4	9.8%	-9.4%		
Washington	606,900	572,059	-5.7%	130	23	17.7%	-8.7%	9	-18.1%
Total where cities are growing	27,250,424	30,390,413	11.5%	1,717	269	15.6%	-5.6%		
Total where cities are declining	6,810,125	6,308,498	-7.4%	869	431	49.6%	-6.4%	124	-12.5%

All slow growing metropolitan areas were located in the Northeast and Midwest, except for Baltimore and Norfolk. Suburban population decline was least common in fast growing metropolitan areas, where only 8 percent of the suburbs declined. These fast growing metropolitan areas were located exclusively in the South and West.

Suburban growth and decline were also correlated closely with the condition of their central cities (Table 4). In fact, the frequency of suburban population loss was much higher in the 11 metropolitan areas where central cities lost population. Where central cities declined, nearly half (49.6 percent) of suburbs lost population, compared with only 15.6 percent of suburbs where central cities grew.

In the 24 metropolitan areas where central cities grew, 269 suburbs declined in population. A majority of these declining suburbs occurred in just four places: New York (104), Chicago (28), Los Angeles (21), and Boston (20). More than 20 percent of suburbs declined in six places where central cities grew: Kansas City declined by 32.5 percent, Columbus by 32.1 percent, San Antonio by 26.7, Boston by 25.6 percent, San Diego by 25.0 percent, and New York by 20.2 percent.

There were 124 suburbs in eight of the declining central cities that lost residents at a faster rate than did their central city. Philadelphia had the most suburbs that declined faster



than the city (51 out of 129, or 39.5 percent). Pittsburgh was second with 18.0 percent of its suburbs declining faster than its central city; and Detroit was third with 12.5 percent. Clearly, the forces leading to central city population loss seemed to affect many of their suburbs, sometimes with greater impact.

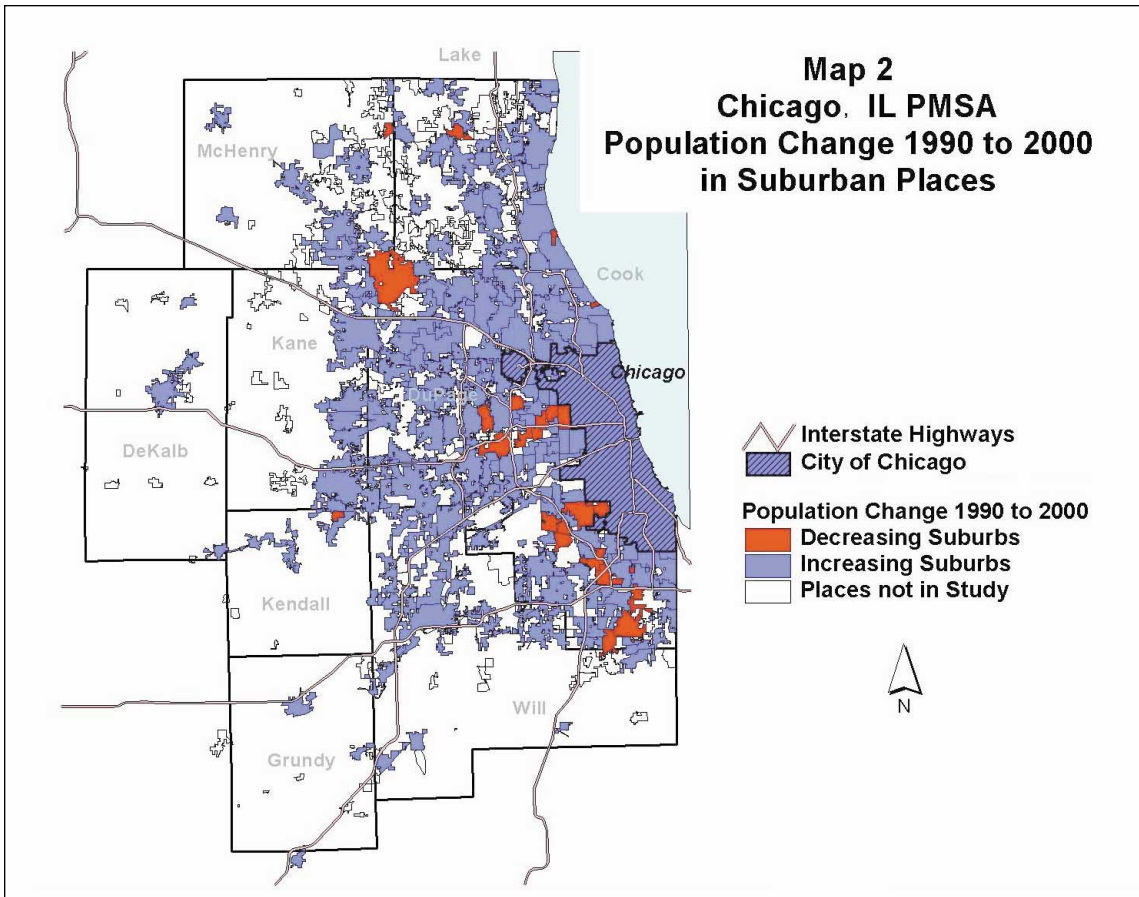
C. Declining suburbs were not simply those immediately adjacent to, or near central cities, but were found throughout the metropolitan area. Suburban decline is often referred to as an inner suburb phenomenon. Sometimes it is. But, while some inner suburbs experienced decline between 1990 and 2000, others grew and are quite healthy. For example, the inner suburbs of Alexandria and Arlington, Virginia, adjacent to Washington, D.C., grew by 15 and 11 percent, respectively. Suburban decline

between 1990 and 2000 was common around Washington, but was heavily concentrated in the inner suburbs of Prince George's County, on the Maryland side.

To more precisely analyze patterns of decline, maps were created to locate suburban decline geographically. In order for the maps to be properly illustrative, they focused on metropolitan areas where a large number of suburbs declined. Again this decline was exclusively found in the Midwest and the Northeast. In metropolitan areas in the South and West, declining suburbs were less numerous and were generally spread throughout these regions.

For example, in the Atlanta metropolitan area only 5 suburban places declined, each one located in a different metropolitan county at varying distances from the city. Only one Denver metropolitan area suburb declined, but it was an inner suburb

**Map 2
Chicago, IL PMSA
Population Change 1990 to 2000
in Suburban Places**



scattered, with more in a south side sector than elsewhere. A small number of suburbs declined that were outside of the inner ring, but the vast majority of these still grew.

In the Philadelphia metropolitan area (Map 3), population growth and decline were very uneven. As in Cleveland, most inner suburbs did lose population during the 1990s. To the southeast in New Jersey, a cluster of small suburbs declined, including one separated from Philadelphia by nine other suburbs. A similar line stretched to the southwest in Pennsylvania, with decline occurring as

adjacent to the city. Ten suburbs declined around Miami. Almost all were located 10 to 15 miles northwest and southwest of the city. The Los Angeles metropolitan area had the largest number of declining suburbs in the West, but they were widely spread throughout the area, with only somewhat of a concentration to the southeast near Long Beach. A quarter of San Diego's 24 suburban places declined, but again, these were widely spread throughout the metropolitan area.

The maps included in this survey are illustrative of different patterns of growth and decline in the Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Cincinnati metropolitan areas. Suburbs included in this study are shaded on each map. Suburbs lacking 2,500 residents in 1980 and new post-1980 suburbs are shown on each metropolitan map with an outline and no shading. The maps show that in these

select metropolitan areas, suburban population decline was more common in the inner rings than in intermediate or outer locations. But a diverse array of patterns was found.

The location of suburban decline in the Cleveland and Chicago metropolitan areas illustrate these differences. In the Cleveland metropolitan area (Map 1), inner suburban decline is clearly prevalent. Nearly every suburb alongside Cleveland experienced some kind of population loss, as did the city itself. In the Cleveland metropolitan area, many intermediate suburbs and outer suburbs also declined, including the suburbs of Elyria and Lorain.⁵ In the Chicago metropolitan area (Map 2), suburban decline is not as spatially evident due to the overall health of the region and the large number (213) of total jurisdictions. Some inner suburbs did lose population — but most grew. Suburban decline was

far as the tenth suburb out from the city and in most, but not all, of those closer to the city. Some close-in suburbs on the New Jersey side increased their population, but beyond these, declining suburbs were dispersed 10 and 20 miles from Philadelphia to the north, south, east, and west. Interspersed among these decliners were many growing suburbs.

Declining suburbs were common on Cincinnati's boundary (Map 4), but growing suburbs touched the central city on each side. Across the Ohio River in Kentucky, growth close to the central city was clearly the dominant trend. Fingers of growth touched the city on its other sides, both in suburbs in our sample and in newer suburbs. Several declining suburbs located as far as several miles from the city were located to the west, north, northeast, and southeast. As with Philadelphia and Cleveland, Cincinnati's center city declined as well.

These examples reveal diverse patterns of suburban population decline. They demonstrate that suburban population loss is not limited to inner suburbs and reinforces the fact that, even in Northeastern and Midwestern metropolitan areas, many inner suburbs grew. These examples also show that suburban population decline cannot be explained as merely the contagion of central city population decline spreading to associated suburbs.

D. Small suburbs are not buffered against the forces of decline.

Some observers argue that small suburban jurisdictions are preferable to larger ones, because public service and tax preferences of constituents may be relatively homogeneous, enabling local governments to be more responsive to existing or changing needs. On the other hand, small size and homogeneity make greater distinctions among jurisdictions more likely, as well as distinctions in race and income more apparent. Indeed, some of this can be observed on the aforementioned maps. Small jurisdictions are also subject to rapid change from residential mobility, which has averaged 50 percent of metropolitan residents moving every five years.⁶ Substantial change also can occur from suburban residents aging (and dying) in place, with fewer families with children being present as the years pass. Because of these implications of small size, the survey also examined population size in analyzing suburban decline.

Table 5 separates suburbs into five population categories, according to size. Nearly one-third of the 1,223 small suburbs of less than 10,000 people lost population during the 1990s. While it is true that due to their small size any population change will be more apparent than in larger suburbs, what is clear is that small suburbs were not buffered against forces of decline. What is more important is the fact that smaller suburbs are far more likely to be located in the Midwest and Northeast, which we know to be declining most rapidly. The Northeast and Midwest had more suburbs per metropolitan area (175.6 in the Northeast⁷, and 78.0 in the Midwest) than the South (48.2) and West (44.6). The Northeast and Midwest also had the largest number of small suburbs with less than 10,000 people (506 and 385, respectively). The West has, by far, the largest number of very large suburbs

with more than 50,000 people.

More than 41 percent of the suburbs smaller than 10,000 people declined in population, or remained stagnant. By contrast, 29.5 percent of large suburbs of more than 25,000 people declined or remained stagnant. While these differences are not overwhelming, they do indicate that in terms of suburban growth and decline, small population size provides little inherent advantage.

E. Population growth in the 1990s was faster in unincorporated areas and in new suburbs than in existing suburbs.

One definition of sprawling development patterns results from metropolitan areas that are increasing their amount of land consumed on the fringe, but losing population in inner suburbs and central cities. In other words, although places like the Buffalo

IV. Conclusion

This report documents suburban population change based on data from the U.S. Census. It is clear that while growth and decline are uneven across the nation's metropolitan areas, some interesting relationships are apparent. Suburban growth and decline do bear some relationship to that of the individual central cities as well as the rates of metropolitan growth. It is also clear that suburban decline is predominantly a Northeast and Midwestern phenomenon — both in terms of overall number and percentages of suburbs declining.

Also interesting are the elements that are not necessarily key factors in suburban growth and decline. While the size of suburbs does make some difference in terms of population change and small suburbs are more likely to decline than larger ones, this is not overwhelming. Likewise, while population decline is frequent in inner ring suburbs close to the central city, the distribution does not conform to uniform patterns within, nor is it consistent among, metropolitan areas.

Several questions still persist: the most difficult of which is probably “what difference does suburban growth and decline make?” Many observers are not convinced that growth in itself conveys social benefits since it clearly involves certain environmental stresses. On the other hand, population decline intuitively appears to be undesirable. But if growth is not necessarily good, is decline necessarily bad? Suburban growth and decline in themselves do not identify whether a suburb or central city is getting richer or poorer, either in terms of residents' income and other resources or in terms of the tax base that can be accessed by public agencies.

Therefore, while this survey shows what has occurred and where it has taken place, it says little about the “how” or “why” of the occurrence or about corresponding consequence. The “how” question is linked to components of population change, such as the number and size of individual households and the presence of children and the elderly. The question of “why” some places have declined while others have grown is a bit more complicated and, like the question of consequence, will require a deeper investigation into demographic, social, economic, and housing characteristics. Subsequent Brookings Urban Center surveys will address these questions.

Endnotes

- 1 William H. Lucy and David L. Phillips are faculty members in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning of the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia.
- 2 This refers to cities with 1990 populations greater than 100,000. See: Glaeser, Edward, “City Growth and the 2000 Census: Which Places Grew and Why,” The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, May 2001.
- 3 The Buffalo metropolitan area is included because in previous decades, it ranked among the top metropolitan areas in terms of population. By 2000, Buffalo had slipped to 43rd.
- 4 Lang, Robert E. and Patrick A. Simmons, “Boomburbs: The Emergence of Large, Fast-Growing Suburban Cities in the United States,” Fannie Mae Foundation Census Note 06, June 2001.
- 5 Many large metropolitan areas have grown to encompass formerly independent cities, like Elyria and Lorain, and other small municipalities. These developments are different than those developments that have emerged entirely since World War II as bedroom suburbs. Classifying suburbs by development types and analyzing their potentially diverse decline propensities may yield additional perspective.
- 6 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population 1990 (1980, 1970). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- 7 Although the figure for the Northeast is clearly driven by the 515 suburbs in the New York metropolitan area, when New York is removed from the calculation the Northeast still averages 90.8 suburbs per metropolitan area.
- 8 Fulton, William, Rolf Pendall, Mai Nguyen, and Alicia Harrison, “Who Sprawls Most? How Growth Patterns Differ Across the U.S.” The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, July 2001.
- 9 That is, those with a population of 2,500 or more in 1980 and consistent presence in U.S. censuses since 1980.

Maps prepared for the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy by David L. Phillips and William H. Lucy, University of Virginia.

Data Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, Census of Population and Housing 1990 and 2000.

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