

Some Realities about Sprawl and Urban Decline

Anthony Downs
The Brookings Institution

Abstract

Many urban analysts believe suburban sprawl has become an important issue because it helps generate two types of problems: growth-related difficulties like rising traffic congestion, and high concentrations of poor minority households in core-area neighborhoods. However, a careful regression analysis of measures of both sprawl and urban decline shows no statistically significant relation between these two conditions.

The basic nature of the American urban development process would cause core-area poverty concentrations even if sprawl were replaced by more compact growth forms. But sprawl does aggravate growth-related problems. Those problems could be attacked through either alternative overall growth strategies—such as high-density, tightly bounded growth—or specific anti-sprawl tactics, such as regional tax-base sharing and regional coordination of land uses. But no feasible policies are likely either to alleviate traffic congestion much or cause most American regions to abandon sprawl.

Keywords: Discrimination; Land use/zoning; Urban planning

Introduction

Suburban sprawl has become a hot topic across the United States and is affecting even such federal policies as Vice President Gore's open spaces initiative. I examined this topic about five years ago in *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (1994), and I am now working with several other analysts on a comprehensive federally funded study called *The Costs of Sprawl—Revisited* (Burchell 1998).¹ This article presents my overall perspective on this topic, which is much more complex than most commentators recognize.

Differences between sprawl and the basic U.S. urban growth process

At the outset, suburban sprawl must be clearly defined. Sprawl is not *any* form of suburban growth, but *a particular* form. In *The*

¹ This first volume is a review and analysis of the existing literature.

Costs of Sprawl—Revisited, we did not create the definition deductively from some internally coherent concept of “sprawlness” (Burchell 1998). Rather, we looked inductively at all the criticisms of sprawl in the literature and derived traits that would cause them. There are 10: (1) unlimited outward extension of development, (2) low-density residential and commercial settlements, (3) leapfrog development, (4) fragmentation of powers over land use among many small localities, (5) dominance of transportation by private automotive vehicles, (6) lack of centralized planning or control of land uses, (7) widespread strip commercial development, (8) great fiscal disparities among localities, (9) segregation of types of land use in different zones, and (10) reliance mainly on the trickle-down or filtering process to provide housing to low-income households. These traits have dominated American metropolitan growth for 50 years. Most analyses of sprawl focus on only one or a few of them, thereby oversimplifying the problem.

In theory, the U.S. metropolitan growth and development process is not identical to sprawl, which is a particular form of that process. However, sprawl has been so dominant in U.S. metropolitan areas that most people think that the growth process and sprawl are the same thing. This analysis will attempt to distinguish between them.

Key problems allegedly caused or aggravated by sprawl

Why should we be concerned about continued suburban sprawl? The answer is that sprawl causes, or contributes to, two sets of serious economic and social problems.

The first occurs mainly in fast-growing areas, but it spreads to others as well. It includes traffic congestion, air pollution, large-scale absorption of open space, extensive use of energy for movement, inability to provide adequate infrastructure, inability to locate region-serving facilities that produce negative local impacts (such as airports), shortages of affordable housing near where new jobs are being created, and suburban labor shortages. These problems mainly harm people who benefit from other aspects of sprawl.

The second set of problems occurs mainly in big cities, inner-ring suburbs, and a few outer-ring suburbs. These problems arise because our development process, not sprawl per se, concentrates poor households—especially poor minority households—in certain high-poverty neighborhoods that become sites for high crime rates, poor-quality public schools, dysfunctional big-city bureaucracies, and lack of fiscal resources. These poverty-related problems soon spread to inner-ring suburbs. Also, many outer-ring suburbs with low commercial tax bases but much moderate-cost housing do not have

enough taxable resources to pay for decent schools and other services.

The first set of problems has received the most attention during the current national discussion of sprawl because it directly affects the wealthiest and most influential of metropolitan residents. The second set has received much less attention, even though I believe it is far more important to the nation's long-term well-being. It is less well publicized because it directly affects a much smaller group of people, who are also among the poorest and least influential residents of our society. Yet the degree to which concentrated poverty reduces the ability of these citizens to acquire the skills and income needed to live well in, and contribute fruitfully to, a high-technology society will have an immense impact on the social, political, and economic well-being of the nation as a whole.

Some axioms about metropolitan growth patterns and problems

A basic but rarely mentioned component of the thinking of the most ardent critics of sprawl, such as the Sierra Club, is the desire to halt further population growth altogether in many regions of the United States—if not the whole nation. These opponents of sprawl rightly recognize that rapid population growth at least initially almost inevitably brings certain undesirable conditions wherever it occurs. (Growth also brings important benefits, but antigrowth advocates deemphasize these.²) These disadvantages include increases in traffic congestion, in school enrollments and sometimes in overcrowding, in needs for public spending on infrastructure of all types, and in pressures to develop open space. Antigrowth advocates hope that slowing or stopping future population growth will minimize these negative effects.

However, a fundamental reality about life in America is that the current residents of a metropolitan area cannot effectively control the total amount of future population growth their region will experience, no matter what policies they adopt. Total population growth is determined by the basic traits of a particular region: climate, topography, position on the continent, demographic composition, current industrial and institutional base, and general economic conditions. True, individual local governments can stop growth within

² Such benefits include a larger and more diverse labor force; greater demands for nearly all types of goods and services, including more urban development; economies of scale in certain types of activities; a larger tax base; and more young workers to help support the elderly when they retire (since most immigrants from abroad are relatively young).

their own boundaries by limiting new development there, but they cannot affect their region's overall growth. Even if all the local governments within a metropolitan area simultaneously adopted stringent zero-growth limits (which has never happened), that would not prevent new babies from being born there or new immigrants from entering the area from abroad or from the rest of the United States. It is unconstitutional for any region to prohibit entry to newcomers. Even laws halting housing construction would not necessarily stop immigration, because many poor immigrants are willing to live illegally by doubling and tripling up in dwellings meant for a single household. So the hope that growth at the regional level might be completely stopped by public policies inhibiting it is a delusion, although at the local level it may be possible under some circumstances.

This fundamental fact has two crucial corollaries. First, each locality's success in reducing future growth within its own boundaries (usually by decreasing allowable development densities) merely shifts that growth to some other part of the region. In other words, if growth is considered "bad," then local growth-limiting policies are essentially a "beggar-thy-neighbor" strategy, shifting the badness somewhere else without regard to its consequences there.

A second corollary is that the more localities within a region adopting policies that reduce their own future population growth, the more likely that growth will shift outward toward the edge of the region and, thus, the greater the degree of future sprawl there. This corollary assumes that the region has no stringent urban growth boundary prohibiting growth at its outer edges—a condition common to over 99 percent of U.S. metropolitan areas. Therefore, local antisprawl policies are likely to aggravate sprawl at the regional level.

Another fundamental reality is that nearly all major problems directly related to growth are regional, not local, in nature. This is most obvious for air pollution and traffic congestion. Both involve conditions that arise throughout a region and flow freely from one part to many others. The same conclusion applies to all of the other growth-related problems described above. So policies adopted by individual localities cannot effectively cope with these problems unless they are coordinated in some way.

Nevertheless, most elected officials at all levels want to place control over growth-related public policies in the hands of individual local governments, acting independently. Politicians adopt this attitude because it is highly popular with both local officials and most suburban residents, all of whom want to retain maximum control over who lives in their communities. In a democracy, politicians are

motivated to adopt policies popular with voters, regardless of whether those policies have any chance of actually achieving their stated goals. Therefore, in most U.S. metropolitan areas, nearly all growth management powers are entirely controlled by local officials, even though this means that resulting policies cannot effectively solve most growth-related problems, which are regional in nature.

U.S. growth and development and concentrated core-area poverty

It is obvious how sprawl generates the first set of growth-related problems. But the U.S. development process also inherently undermines the fiscal strength of many large cities and inner-ring suburbs in what I believe is a socially unjust and undesirable manner.

Some form of peripheral growth around metropolitan areas has been and still is inevitable, because they have grown greatly in population and will grow more. Purely vertical growth would have been inconsistent with the rising real incomes and transport innovations that have occurred since 1950. Both of those strong trends have caused households to want to live in lower densities with more land area and internal space per unit.

But the particular form our peripheral growth has taken has resulted in an intensive concentration of very poor households, especially minorities, in the older, more central portions of our metropolitan areas. This concentration is not an inevitable result of outward expansion, but rather is caused by several specific policies that have not been adopted in most of the rest of the world.

The first such policy has two parts: One requires all new housing to meet very high standards—standards too costly for most poor households to afford. Therefore, most poor households can afford to live in new housing only if it is somehow subsidized. (Such subsidies need not involve public funds, as is discussed later.) The other is that the United States has chosen not to subsidize housing for many poor people in suburban areas. Since at any given moment, new housing is naturally concentrated on the outer edge of each metropolitan area, this means that very poor people are concentrated in older areas closer to the historic center.

The second policy that generates core-area poverty zones combines fragmented control over land uses in many small outlying municipalities with their adoption of exclusionary zoning and other policies designed to raise local housing costs and keep poor people

out. So suburban behavior is partly responsible for the core-area concentration of the poor.

The third policy is tying the fiscal support of local governments to the wealth of their own residents, as expressed in property values and sales taxes. When the residents move out, so do many of the resources the government can tap. This means that many high- and middle-income suburbs have a much greater tax base per household than low-income suburbs and most large cities, so the former can provide higher-quality public services such as education than the latter. This policy also creates strong incentives for many localities to minimize the amount of low-cost and multifamily housing within their boundaries. The local government spending generated by such housing is greater than the tax revenues it produces, so most localities have a fiscal motive for being exclusionary, in addition to the social motive.

The fourth cause of inner-core concentration of poverty is racial segregation in housing markets. Racial discrimination by owners, real estate agents, and lenders is still widespread. And the unwillingness of most whites to move into neighborhoods where more than about 25 to 33 percent of households are African American is a key factor. Reducing residential racial segregation is hard, because even if both whites and African Americans desire integrated living, the different ways they define it cause almost total segregation to emerge from free choices (Downs 1981; Massey and Denton 1993; Schelling 1978).

The concentration of poverty resulting from these policies contributes to adverse neighborhood traits in many core areas. These include high crime rates and high rates of drug abuse, broken families, unemployment, gang violence, and nonsupportive attitudes toward education. Those negative conditions push many middle- and upper-income households of all races—mainly those with children—and many businesses out of the central cities into the suburbs (Jargowsky 1996). When these middle- and upper-income households and viable business firms leave core areas because of such conditions, they take their fiscal resources with them. Consequently, because of the concentration of poverty, many core areas are left with a disproportionate burden of providing costly services to poor households. This creates a self-aggravating downward fiscal spiral that weakens the ability of core-area governments to provide quality public services and results in grossly unequal environments in which children are reared.

In theory, sprawl's specific traits help produce core-area concentrations of poverty. For example, unlimited extension of new development into peripheral space makes new jobs inaccessible to inner-

core residents, and fragmented controls over land uses permit exclusionary policies.

Links between urban decline and sprawl

I have attempted to test statistically whether urban decline is related to the specific traits we have defined as comprising suburban sprawl by using 1980 and 1990 data on the 162 urbanized areas with over 150,000 residents in 1990 (Downs 1998).³

To measure sprawl, I defined nine different specific sprawl-related variables, such as the overall geographic size of the urbanized area, the gross population density in the urbanized fringe, and the ratio of central city density to outlying fringe density. To measure urban decline, I used both the percentage population change in the central city from 1980 to 1990 and an index of urban decline based on nine variables such as poverty rates, crime rates, per capita income, percentage of older housing, and so on. Using various combinations of over 150 independent variables, I ran hundreds of regressions relating these two measures of urban decline to both the individual measures of sprawl and a sprawl index constructed by combining those measures.

I came to the conclusion that there is no meaningful and significant statistical relationship between any of the specific traits of sprawl, or a sprawl index, and either measure of urban decline. This was very surprising to me and went against my belief that sprawl had contributed to concentrated poverty and therefore to urban decline.

This outcome forced me to reexamine the likely causes of concentrated poverty. I now believe that they lie in the four basic traits of the general growth process, which would produce concentrated minority-group poverty in many large cities even if sprawl did not exist (this could happen only if some more compact form of urban development were prevalent). And from concentrated minority poverty come the inner-core problems that I believe are the most serious of all long-term threats to our political stability and economic prosperity. So it is the basic traits of our growth and development process themselves that produce our most serious urban problems, not sprawl. Even compact growth would produce the same problems.

³ This article summarizes my research findings (Downs 1998). Those interested in the full report should contact me.

Ways to cope with the problems associated with sprawl

However, sprawl probably does contribute to many of the growth-related problems associated with it, such as traffic congestion and large-scale absorption of open space. But most of these problems produce costs borne mainly by the people who also benefit from sprawl, which does have many significant benefits. They include more private open space, cheaper housing on peripheral land, shorter commuting times for people both working and living in the suburbs, easier access to open space, creation of high-quality suburban school districts free from concentrated poverty, and a broad choice of combinations of local services and local tax rates. These benefits are clearly valued highly by millions of U.S. households, or sprawl would not have become so dominant.

Many urban economists see these growth-related problems as caused mainly by market failures, that is, failing to charge people who benefit from sprawl the true costs of the decisions they make that contribute to it. This underprices those decisions and thereby encourages overexpansion into low-density settlements. Three examples are (1) failing to charge enough for land for new low-density peripheral subdivisions to compensate for the real costs of adding the infrastructure required to service them, (2) failing to charge commuters a money toll for driving during peak hours to offset the time-loss burdens they impose on others in the form of congestion, and (3) failing to charge residents of low-density suburbs the full social costs of removing land from open space and agricultural uses (Brueckner, no date).

The remedies proposed by these economists all involve charging households specific additional prices to discourage such behavior: (1) impact fees on all new developments, (2) peak-hour road tolls on major commuting arteries, and (3) a development tax on land converted from agricultural to urban use. In theory, if people had to pay higher fees to live in distant new subdivisions, fewer would be willing to do so, and future sprawl would be reduced.

There is much truth in this analysis, but there are several practical reasons why I doubt that the remedies it proposes would greatly inhibit future sprawl. High impact fees per new housing unit have long been used throughout California, but they have not stopped huge regional population growth there. In the 1990s, most of California's growth was caused by natural increase and by the immigration of poor people from abroad who are not deterred by high housing prices, since they are willing to live in overcrowded slums. Peak-hour road tolls are both very difficult to implement on a metropolitan scale (they have never even been tried) and politically impossible to pass. Most Americans regard them as just another tax

and believe they would benefit only other households wealthy enough to pay daily. No one knows what the social value of open space is, so it would be hard to determine what an open-land development tax ought to be. Thus, these suggested remedies have severe practical difficulties or might not work well if adopted, or both, though they might be worth trying in at least some regions.

Moreover, the belief that sprawl is caused primarily by market failures is based on the false assumption that there is a freely operating land use market in U.S. metropolitan areas. No metropolitan area has anything remotely approaching a free land use market because of local regulations adopted for parochial political, social, and fiscal purposes. Most suburban land use markets are dominated by local zoning and other regulations that are aimed at excluding low-income households and that distort what would occur in a truly free market (Advisory Commission on Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing 1990). A universal example in U.S. urban areas is prohibiting the construction of new low-quality housing, including shacks, in new-growth suburbs, even though such units are all many poor households can afford. In most of the world, such low-quality new construction is the main source of urban housing for the poor. This prohibition contributes to concentration of poverty in older, closer-in neighborhoods where deteriorated or overcrowded and therefore low-cost, older units can be found. It also encourages sprawl by limiting residential densities in many individual suburbs, thus pushing regional growth, which is beyond the control of individual localities, farther outward. This analysis does not imply that new shoddy construction should be legalized, but simply that poverty will remain concentrated in inner-core areas until housing subsidies for suburban communities are widely available to poor households.⁴

Thus, as noted earlier, it is mainly the basic political and legal structure of U.S. land use markets, in addition to racial discrimination, that causes concentration of poverty, not market failures.

Excess costs of growing through sprawl

Robert Burchell, one of the principal authors of *The Costs of Sprawl—Revisited*, has conducted extensive studies of the relative costs of continuing future growth through sprawl versus adopting

⁴ Housing subsidies for affordable units need not be financed by public funds. A community or county can require developers of new subdivisions to include some percentage of affordable units—say 15 to 20 percent—in return for which the community permits higher densities than were originally zoned for the entire project. The developer finances the affordable units at below-market prices by being able to build more units. This policy has worked well in Montgomery County, MD, and in many New Jersey communities.

more compact growth patterns. His studies cover New Jersey, South Carolina, parts of Kentucky and Michigan, and several other communities (Burchell 1992, 1999). He has consistently estimated that continuing to grow via sprawl, as opposed to more compact forms of growth, will cost about 20 percent more for roads and land, and lesser additional percentages for schools, housing, and public services. The main reason for these differences is that more compact growth puts higher percentages of future population on in-fill sites in existing built-up areas, thereby using less open land and saving on the construction of new roads, sewer and water systems, schools, and other public facilities. Over long periods, the resulting savings in just one state can amount to many billions of dollars. Achieving these savings in public outlays creates a potentially strong incentive to substitute more compact growth for future sprawl. In fact, state and local officials confronted with the estimated cost of the infrastructure required to continue sprawl-type growth just to accommodate the future populations they are now projecting are appalled by the amounts involved. They do not believe they can raise the money required without drastic undermaintenance of existing street and highway systems in older areas for decades to come—if then.⁵

Nevertheless, Burchell's studies do not quantify any of the benefits that millions of Americans believe they receive from sprawl—and for which many may be willing to pay notable additional costs. At present, households receiving such benefits are probably not paying the full social costs of doing so, but they might very well be willing to pay some or all of the higher costs that Burchell has estimated are associated with continued sprawl just to keep receiving these benefits. Thus, even if Burchell's cost estimates are correct, they do not necessarily imply that more compact forms of growth should be substituted for sprawl in the future. Rather, they might imply that different means of charging for the benefits of sprawl should be employed. That implication resembles arguments by urban economists that markets should be adjusted to make households pay more of the marginal social costs their decisions create.

Moreover, adopting more compact forms of growth throughout a metropolitan area would almost surely require new regional land

⁵ However, the total additional cost of sprawl development for the entire nation, instead of more compact development, (preliminarily estimated by Burchell [1999]) is about \$250 billion over the next 25 years, or \$10 billion per year. The gross domestic product of the United States in 1998 was \$8.5 trillion. Thus, the extra costs of sprawl development amounted to only 0.12 percent of the gross domestic product as of 1998 and would be only 0.06 percent at the end of 25 years if the gross domestic product expanded 2.5 percent per year, on the average. In relation to national wealth or incomes, these are relatively small amounts that U.S. beneficiaries of sprawl might be quite willing to pay to continue enjoying its benefits.

use—planning and decision-making agencies with considerable authority, as in Portland, OR, or the Twin Cities. This raises the issue of what alternatives to sprawl might be adopted.

Alternatives to continuing sprawl

If suburban sprawl generates or aggravates some or all the problems I have mentioned, what alternatives might avoid such problems? These alternatives can be stated in two ways: One consists of major alternative development strategies involving quite different overall development patterns. The other way sets forth specific tactics to overcome sprawl's deficiencies. In this analysis, sprawl can be considered as spatially unlimited low-density development.

Alternative overall development strategies

There are three main alternative development strategies (Downs 1994). The first is tightly bounded higher-density development, as in many Western European areas. It features close-in urban growth boundaries, prohibition of almost all urban development outside of them, relatively high-density residential growth within the boundaries (though high-rise dwellings are not required), great stress on public transit, centralized coordination of land use plans, and widely scattered subsidized new housing (or housing vouchers) for low-income households. I do not believe this alternative will be given serious consideration in many (if any) U.S. metropolitan areas. It departs too far from our long-established development patterns, greatly restricts local government sovereignty, means radical changes in cherished means of movement, and requires large-scale housing subsidies to the poor (though not necessarily involving public funds).

The second overall strategy is loosely bounded moderate-density development, which lies between sprawl and tightly bounded higher-density development. It has a more loosely drawn growth boundary, permits some development outside of it, raises densities somewhat above sprawl levels, involves some increase in public transit and car pooling, has centralized coordination of local land use planning, and provides some new subsidized low-income housing in growth areas. This is similar to what has been done in Portland, OR. So far, very few other areas show much inclination to adopt this approach, but more might in the future.

The third strategy is new outlying communities and green spaces. It has a tightly drawn urban growth boundary and can incorporate the other features of either of the two preceding strategies, but per-

mits substantial growth outside the boundary only within designated new communities centered on existing outlying towns. This is similar to what has been established in the Lexington, KY, region. When this was suggested for the Portland region, residents of the outlying towns around which new communities would be built strongly objected, since this strategy would greatly alter the present rural character of those towns.

Will any of these strategies become widespread in the United States? On the one hand, it is clear that continuing sprawl will surely not solve the problems I described earlier. Yet it is not even theoretically obvious, nor has it been proven in practice, that *any* of these strategies will largely solve these problems either. Thus, the advantages of these strategies have not been demonstrated well enough to the American people to persuade most of them to give up the benefits they perceive in sprawl. Until such demonstrations are made, these alternative strategies are not likely to be adopted in many metropolitan areas unless conditions there get bad enough to constitute what is widely perceived as a “crisis,” as discussed in later sections.

Specific antisprawl tactics

Therefore, another way to attack those problems is with specific tactics aimed at them. However, some of these tactics are aimed at the basic growth process, not just at sprawl.

The first tactic is an antisprawl policy, that is, *some* type of urban growth boundary to limit the outward draining of resources from core areas. It need not be airtight to produce benefits. But it should be linked to public provision of key infrastructure, which should not be publicly provided outside the boundary. But no boundary will have a big impact unless strong controls limit growth outside of it. Moreover, an urban growth boundary that is the accidental sum of many separate boundaries adopted by individual communities is not likely to work.

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. This is a policy aimed at the basic metropolitan growth process, not just at sprawl. All local government officials resist this tactic. They want to retain control over growth management efforts and policies that affect them. Experience suggests that individual communities will nearly always adopt growth-management plans that lock in low density, rather than trying to raise densities to achieve more compact development in the region as a whole. Each locality will seek to shift multifamily

housing elsewhere and will adopt exclusionary policies aimed at protecting home values and keeping poorer people out. This will force growth either to more outlying areas or into inner-city areas through illegal overcrowding of older dwelling units. As a result, purely localized growth management will cause sprawl to increase.

The third tactic is some form of regional tax-base sharing (Orfield 1997). This is also aimed at the basic growth process, not at sprawl itself. Some percentage of all additions to commercial and industrial tax bases would be shared among all communities in the region, not just captured by the places where those developments are built. This would reduce fiscal disparities and provide more equal opportunities, as it has in the Twin Cities region, the only large area to adopt this approach.

The fourth tactic is regional development of subsidized housing for low-income households. This is also aimed at the basic growth process, not mainly at sprawl. It would be designed to reduce the concentration of poor minority households in inner-core areas through their voluntary movement into suburban communities. This could be done through regional vouchers or regional new subsidies, or by requiring all residential developers to build a share of affordable housing in each new project, as has been done in Montgomery County, MD. Requiring developers to provide affordable housing as a certain percentage (say 10 to 20 percent) of all the new units they build creates subsidies for the occupants of such housing without the use of direct public funding. This tactic is controversial, but it is vital to begin deconcentrating poverty in some way.

David Rusk has shown that focusing on improving core-area poverty neighborhoods themselves through community development has almost universally failed to prevent them from falling farther and farther behind the region (Rusk 1999). Therefore, in the long run, some type of voluntary deconcentration is probably necessary to improve those communities.

A fifth tactic is regional operation of public transit systems and highways, including new facility construction, and another is vigorous regional enforcement of racial discrimination laws. This entails a reform of the growth process.

It is likely that effectively adopting all these tactics, or even most of them, would require a strong regional body. Very few U.S. metropolitan areas have been willing to consider this, especially where rugged individualism is dominant. Most of the few that have adopted such bodies have done so in response to some condition perceived as a crisis by state leaders, such as the threat to develop the Willamette River Valley in Oregon, threats to develop the Everglades in

Florida, the threat that federal highway funds would be withdrawn because of air pollution in Atlanta, and the threat of state court-ordered suspension of zoning in New Jersey to encourage more suburban low-cost housing. Unless leaders in other areas also perceive such crises, they are not likely to adopt regional authorities strong enough to implement most of these tactics. Up to now, traffic congestion in itself has not been considered a serious enough crisis to generate support for strong regional planning, nor would such planning cure congestion.

In some metropolitan areas where large counties act as the main local governing bodies (as in parts of the South, such as the Washington, DC, area), it might be possible for voluntary cooperation among these bodies to create effective regional land use planning.⁶ For example, each of the counties surrounding a central city could adopt a rural preservation zone on its outer perimeters where growth was very limited and create strong incentives for developers to concentrate new projects in closer-in portions where financing for public infrastructure was provided. (Montgomery County, MD, has done this.) The boundaries of these separate rural preservation zones taken together might form an effective urban growth boundary for the entire region, without any formal adoption of a regional boundary. But this approach will not work well where a central city is surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of small localities, each controlling its own land use, even if each adopts a local urban growth boundary of its own. It is unlikely that so many separate, parochially adopted boundaries would together form a regional pattern that would lead to rational land use development across the entire region.

Even if all the tactics described above were adopted, it is not certain that they would overcome the ill effects of core-area concentration of poverty, nor is it certain that they would overcome growth-related problems. But unlike continued sprawl, they at least have a chance of doing so if they are carried out at a large enough scale over a long period.

Traffic congestion

The single most aggravating problem associated with sprawl is rising traffic congestion—particularly in suburban communities. Citizens across the land are strongly fighting additional population growth and development in their communities in the belief that doing so will limit future traffic congestion there, or at least stop it

⁶ I am indebted to Bruce Katz of The Brookings Institution for suggesting this possibility.

from getting worse. Unfortunately, this belief is based on failure to understand the nature and true causes of traffic congestion (Downs 1992).

True, future growth will cause more congestion. From 2000 to 2020, the nation will add 47 million more people. From 1980 to 1995, 1.29 more automobiles were added to the vehicle population for each 1.0 person added to the human population. That means millions more vehicles will be with us over the next two decades. As explained earlier, local governments cannot stop this from happening. Each may limit growth within its own boundaries but cannot notably affect the overall future growth of an entire region.

Adopting more compact forms of growth will not help much either. About 85 percent of the total urban development that will exist in 2020 is already here. So even if future growth occurs in very dense forms (which is not likely), we will still have a very spread-out nation in 2020, and transportation will still be greatly dominated by private automotive vehicles.

The most important thing to understand about peak-hour traffic congestion is that once it has appeared in a region, it cannot be eliminated or even substantially reduced. There is no effective remedy for traffic congestion because it is essentially a balancing mechanism that enables firms and people to pursue key objectives other than minimizing commuting time. Business firms have two such objectives: One is having most people work during the same hours so they can interact efficiently. That means they have to travel to and from work at about the same time each day. The second is locating firms on relatively low-density sites spread out through each region for easier movement, more space, and better access to suburban workers and markets.

Most households have five key objectives: First, they want a wide range of choices of where to live and work in different types of communities, especially if they have more than one worker in the household. Second, to be efficient, they want to be able to combine different purposes on each individual trip. Third, most want to live in relatively low-density communities. Fourth, most want to travel by private car because it is faster, more comfortable, more flexible and convenient and often cheaper than public transit. Fifth, most households want to separate their own family dwellings—and particularly public schools—spatially from other households with much lower incomes and social status, and often from people of different racial groups.

It is not possible to pursue all of these objectives effectively without generating a lot of traffic congestion, especially during peak hours.

In reality, waiting in traffic jams is the balancing force we use to ration road space as we pursue all of these objectives, because most Americans are unwilling to use price rationing for that purpose. Yet Americans do not want to give up any of these objectives enough to change their behavior. They prefer to endure a certain amount of traffic congestion, even as they complain about it. If congestion becomes unacceptable, they can move closer to where they work or change jobs, which many people in fact do. But this means that there is no such thing as an easy solution to the traffic congestion problem. It not a disease that can be completely cured. Rather, it is a condition inherent in the quality of modern metropolitan life based on our pursuit of those cherished objectives. Congestion is not confined to the United States; in fact, it is worse in most of the rest of the world and will become even more so. Consequently, neither sprawl nor any of its alternatives will alleviate traffic congestion much in the future.

This analysis does *not* mean that no reductions in future traffic congestion will ever be possible. Under many conditions, it is quite sensible to build additional roads or widen existing ones, and creating high-density settlement nodes around transit stops may also be worthwhile. But these tactics will not fully offset future increases in vehicle use rooted both in the behavior of the existing population and in additions to that population.⁷ Once significant peak-hour traffic congestion has arisen in a metropolitan region, it is there to stay.

Some practical conclusions

In the long run, the most important social problems now connected with sprawl arise from the concentration of the poor, especially poor minorities, in older core areas. Educating children in schools with such high concentrations of poor students is the most serious difficulty. But resolving those problems probably requires some signifi-

⁷ Widening existing roads congested during peak hours may produce initial reductions in congestion. But as soon as the community perceives that movement on those improved roads has speeded up, people will start shifting onto those faster roads from other routes, from the earlier or later times they have been using to avoid congestion, and even from buses or rail transit. This triple convergence will soon cause the improved roads to be just as congested during peak hours as before. True, the peak hours on those roads may be shorter, and more vehicles may move on them during peak periods, but an automatic process of commuter adjustments producing traffic equilibrium in the entire region will prevent any complete removal of peak-hour congestion once it has arisen. This equilibrium process will also act in the same way to prevent other additions to peak-hour capacity from ending congestion, including more transit facilities, light rail systems, staggered work hours, telecommuting, and even new expressways. For a detailed discussion of this equilibrium process, see Downs 1992, 27–31.

cant deconcentration of poor people out of those areas into subsidized suburban housing—preferably in ways that do not cause suburban resegregation, either economic or racial. Such deconcentration is highly controversial and is opposed by most central-city politicians and by nearly all suburban residents and politicians.

Their negative attitudes are strongly influenced by the fact that high percentages of the poor people who might be so deconcentrated are minorities, especially African Americans. Many suburban whites oppose having these people enter their neighborhoods, and central city minority politicians oppose the resulting loss of their political support. An example of such deconcentration is the Department of Housing and Urban Development's suggested policy of "moving to opportunity" just a few poor residents from the central city into the suburbs. This policy has worked well in the Chicago area under the court-ordered Gautreaux program, though on a relatively small scale (Rosenbaum 1991), but it has been bitterly opposed by elected officials everywhere else it has been suggested. So there is little chance of solving these problems directly, even though it is strongly in the national interest.

Moreover, these inner-core problems are not really caused by the specific traits of sprawl, but by the underlying nature of the growth process. Hence policies specifically aimed at sprawl, such as setting aside a lot of open space bought with federal money, will not affect inner-core problems at all. But setting aside open space can raise land prices in low-income communities near the center of the region, which in turn can spark gentrification and produce mixed-income communities, thus breaking up concentrations of poverty.

The most politically powerful problems connected with sprawl arise from increasing traffic congestion and other largely suburban ailments that affect middle- and upper-income households with political influence. I believe these problems are not as important to the long-term well-being of the nation as concentrated poverty, but the former have a much better chance of having major resources allocated to them. Those resources are most likely to be applied to tactics that do not attack the concentration of the poor, however. Nor are those tactics likely to remedy the growth-related problems associated with sprawl, especially traffic congestion.

A challenge facing those interested in solving our most important urban problems is how to take advantage of current suburban rage against sprawl to shift more resources into redeveloping core areas and into opening up more opportunities for affordable housing in exclusionary suburbs. It is impossible and undesirable to halt all further outward expansion, because metropolitan populations are going to keep growing. But peripheral densities could be raised, and

the outward extension slowed down, by deflecting more growth into in-fill development and generating higher average densities in built-up areas. This would not require really high densities anywhere, but it would probably require much stronger regional authorities to influence land use patterns. If more growth were shifted into in-fill and inner-core areas, land and housing prices there would rise. Demands for housing in closer-in neighborhoods would also rise, helping invigorate those areas.

But the resulting gentrification would compel many low-income households now living there (and future poor immigrants) to live elsewhere. If no provisions were made to create subsidized housing for them in the suburbs, they would start overcrowding existing units in older areas or older suburbs and generate large-scale slums there. This is already happening in California because housing costs are so high and many immigrants from abroad are very poor. Both the advocates and opponents of suburban sprawl are unwilling to face this huge need for low-cost housing, which has traditionally been met in part by inner-core slums.

A strong economic and moral argument for changing sprawl is that many households moving into distant subdivisions are not being required to pay the full social cost of gaining the benefits of living there, including infrastructure trunk lines and increased social costs in inner-city areas. Charging them more fully for the costs they generate might encourage more of them to locate in closer-in areas. The most persuasive part of this cost-based argument is that merely continuing current sprawl densities for future growth will require massive additional spending on infrastructure that is not consistent with adequately maintaining existing roads, sewer and water systems, and other infrastructure.

Altogether, there are no simple remedies or solutions to the problems associated with sprawl because they are generated by the fundamental legal, political, and social structure and growth processes of U.S. metropolitan areas. Moreover, that structure and those processes provide most metropolitan-area residents with what they perceive as major benefits. They do not want to attack these problems in ways that would work effectively because doing so might jeopardize their continued receipt of such benefits. Hence they probably will not do so, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. There will be numerous studies of sprawl and a lot of thrashing around about sprawl-related policies, but when all is said and done, vastly more will be said passionately than will be done effectively.

This does not mean that those who want to reduce the ill effects of concentrated poverty should give up. Fundamental social change occurs through persistent, steady efforts over long periods, but it of-

ten does occur, sometimes to a surprising degree. So we should continue, but base our persistence on a realistic understanding of the basic forces involved.

Author

Anthony Downs is Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. The views in this article are solely those of the author and not necessarily those of The Brookings Institution, its trustees, or its other staff members.

References

- Advisory Commission on Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing. 1990. *Not in My Back Yard*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Bru Eckner, Jan K. n.d. *Urban Sprawl: Diagnosis and Remedies*. Unpublished paper. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Burchell, Robert W. 1992. *Impact Assessment of the New Jersey Interim State Development and Redevelopment Plan B Report II: Research Findings*. New Brunswick, NJ: New Jersey Office of State Planning.
- Burchell, Robert. 1998. *The Costs of Sprawl—Revisited*. Transportation Cooperative Research Program Report 39. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Burchell, Robert W. 1999. The Impacts of Continued Sprawl: Growing Another Way and Its National Cost Savings. Speech delivered at the Colorado Forum, August 4. Available from Rutgers University, Center for Urban Policy Research.
- Downs, Anthony. 1981. *Neighborhoods and Urban Development*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Downs, Anthony. 1992. *Stuck in Traffic*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- Downs, Anthony. 1994. *New Visions for Metropolitan America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- Downs, Anthony. April 1, 1998. Relating Suburban Sprawl to Urban Decline. Unpublished manuscript.
- Jargowsky, Paul. 1996. *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy A. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Orfield, Myron. 1997. *Metropolitics*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Rosenbaum, James E. 1991. Black Pioneers—Do Their Moves to the Suburbs Increase Economic Opportunity for Mothers and Children? *Housing Policy Debate* 2(4):1179–1213.

Rusk, David. 1999. *Inside Game, Outside Game*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Schelling, Thomas C. 1978. *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. New York: Norton.