

Urban Dilemma: Contributing Factors

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The author presents trends and factors involved in creating today's urban crises that must be dealt with to solve what's too often regarded as "cities' problems." He discusses the significance of each, pointing out interrelationships between rural and urban areas and the need for comprehensive planning and balanced growth. What's the situation in your state or community for each of the main areas of concern and what do you see as implications for Extension's programming?

Urban deterioration, rural depopulation, and poverty have afflicted our nation in recent decades and still threaten to tear our society apart. The congressional hearings preceding the Urban Growth and New Community Development Act of 1970 describe these trends and outline a federal policy that encourages well-planned, diversified, and economically sound communities. Recent discussion for establishment of a federal Department of Community Development emphasizes the desirability of balanced growth that links together problems and solutions of cities, suburbs, and rural areas.

Again and again, in presidential and congressional messages, the statement is made not unlike these words of the then Housing and Urban Development Secretary George Romney:

... [We must] move beyond fragmented federal program administration . . . toward a community-oriented approach to problems . . . to respond in a coordinated manner to local comprehensive community improvement programs . . . to help state and local governments, private organizations, and the citizens themselves to participate . . . in articulating goals, setting priorities, and devising the best ways and means of improving not only the physical but also the economical and social environment of all our communities.¹

In this same vein, Wisconsin Governor Patrick Lucey's Budget Review Message of January, 1972, reemphasized the general theme brought out the year before and being repeated by many governors: the need for a blueprint for growth of the

state. His ideas were paraphrased by Wisconsin's major newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal*:

How should Wisconsin grow?
No question vexing Governor Lucey is bigger or tougher. It triggers many others: Must urban areas continue to grow aimlessly in population and sprawl chaotically across the landscape, fouling air and water in the process? Must rural areas and small towns keep declining, losing their young and their vigor? Can people—through an often cumbersome, sputtering political system—assert more control, bringing better balance, a sense of design and even a touch of grace to state growth?²

Most governors' budget statements deal specifically with such subjects as environment, local and regional planning, housing, education, transportation, economic development. But they also stress the need for program and budgetary review that can better gear programs and spending to rapid social, technological, and economic changes.

At times the assumptions behind old programs must be challenged if institutional obsolescence and irrelevance are to be avoided. Yet, budgetary decisions are being made today for programs that begin three years from now. And apart from actual financing, a major new direction in any program will, as Governor Lucey put it, "normally involve a year of planning, developing and staffing, and several years of sustained operation before it can have a substantial impact."³ Thus, right now decisions

are being made that we'll live with well into the 70s.

If we project a little into the future, what are a few of the obvious things we see?

Rapid Metropolitan Area Growth

In 1940, 4 of every 10 Americans lived in 10 metropolitan areas with more than a million population, according to a recent report by the Federal Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. In the year 2000, it's conservatively projected that more than 8 of every 10 will live in some 28 "urban regions" that will each have more than a million people.⁴

Take for example, the State of Wisconsin, a historically agricultural state that today also reflects the national trend. In 1950, according to 1970 census results, its 5 Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA) accounted for 42 percent of state population. This rose to 46 percent by 1960. By 1970, the number of SMSA's had increased to 7 (they now constitute 13 of Wisconsin's 72 counties), and they contained 58 percent of the state population.⁵ Three of the SMSA's are in the 7 urbanizing counties of southeast Wisconsin, which in 1970 had 40 percent of the state population and accounted for 39 percent of the last 10-year increase for the whole state. Wisconsin's 7 SMSA's had 75 percent of the state's growth between 1960 and 1970.

To the degree this trend continues nationally as in Wisconsin,

there'll be more people in the metropolitan areas, more people concentrated in rapidly growing urban pockets, such as in Wisconsin's southeastern region, and more problems that accompany increased population density.

Decline of Central City Population and Rise of Suburbs

The spectacular growth in the nation's metropolitan areas has been on the fringes of the established central cities—the suburbs and exurbs. This is seen in Table 1.

Many cities themselves have declined in population. For example, the 20 largest cities of the north had 11 percent of the country's population (22,835,000) in 1970 compared to 13 percent in 1960 (23,272,000).

Again take Wisconsin as an illustration of similar trends. In the last decade, the central cities of Wisconsin's SMSA's grew by only 6.5 percent while the suburban and rural urban fringe areas of the SMSA's increased by 28 percent. The state's biggest city, Milwaukee, lost population, from 741,000 to 717,000, and

the "first-ring suburbs" around Milwaukee also lost small percentages. But the newer outlying suburban areas increased by 40 percent and more.⁷

There's surprisingly little data on conditions in suburbia, but new sets of problems have mounted in this rapid growth area. Of special interest is the fact that the country's population is roughly divided among central cities, suburbs, and nonmetropolitan areas, suggesting opportunities for a strategy of balanced growth.

Spreading Pattern of Urban Deterioration and Suburban Sprawl

While the metropolitan population increases, the quality of life for many of these people continues to deteriorate. A recent congressional Housing and Urban Environment study noted that in most metropolitan areas:

- air, water and noise pollution present daily health hazards to millions of citizens.
- widespread physical decay and social alienation cast a pall of

Table 1. Population shifts in the United States, 1960-1970.⁶

Area	Population (millions)		Share of total U.S. population	
	1960	1970	1960	1970
Suburbs	59.5	76.3	33%	38%
Central cities	60.6	63.8	34	31
Metropolitan areas	59.2	63.0	33	31

ugliness and despair on the spirits of the people.

- crime and the fear of crime heighten already exacerbated community tensions.
- excessive reliance on the automobile chokes city streets and rapid mass transit is neither rapid nor attractive.
- public facilities and services of all types are increasingly obsolete, and open space and recreation—all opportunities within reach of our people—are rapidly disappearing.⁸

Inner-city areas are hit hardest. The unemployment rate in the poverty neighborhoods of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas, for example, has remained around 9 percent, compared to 5.9 for the country as a whole. An additional 17 percent of the employed work only part time.⁹ One of the most significant indicators of inner-city deterioration is housing abandonment that takes place, according to a recent national survey of this phenomenon, through six major steps:

1. Decline in neighborhood socioeconomic status (as middle-class whites leave).
2. Racial or ethnic change.
3. Property speculation and exploitation.
4. Weakened market conditions that bring "crisis ghetto" conditions.
5. Disinvestment by those with property in the area.
6. Abandonment.¹⁰

At the same time, suburban sprawl is rapidly overrunning woods

and farmlands in much of the nation

In short, the trend is for exodus from the central city of both wealthy and skilled and professional human resources required for urban problem solving, which in turn accentuates the poverty of the city, and widens the gap between needs and the wherewithal to confront them

This process, moreover, leaves its effect on the whole regional environment as unplanned suburban penetration rapidly encroaches on the surrounding countryside. Decisions lacking comprehensive planning or foresight are being made all the time by countless individual families, private entrepreneurs, and fragmented units of local government, which we must either undo or live with for years to come.

Increasing Racial Polarization

Occasionally we're still reminded of the warning by the 1968 President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders that "our nation is moving toward two societies—one black, one white, separate and unequal." The Kerner Commission reported that between 1960 and 1966, 78 percent of white population growth occurred in suburban areas, while in that same period white population in central cities declined by 1.3 million. The residential segregation index in 1960 was 86.2 in 207 of our largest cities.

In other words, to create an unsegregated population distribution, an average of over 86 percent of all blacks would have had to change

their place of residence within the metropolitan area.¹¹

These trends appear to be confirmed by the 1970 census. The black population increased in the central cities between 1960 and 1970 from 9,900,000 to 13,100,000, while the white central-city population went down slightly.¹²

Wisconsin, again, offers an interesting example. Although the state is 96 percent white, its relative increase of black and other races during the last 10 years was one of the highest in the nation, amounting to 66,000 or an increase of 71 percent. Most of this was confined to the central cities of the SMSA's, particularly Milwaukee. The Census Bureau reported that of 106,033 blacks in Milwaukee County in 1970, 105,088 lived in the City of Milwaukee.

Black-white statistics are also meaningful in terms of the public school population. The exodus of the white student population from the city's public schools is at a quickening pace. In 1970, the population of Milwaukee was 14.7 percent black, but the public school population was 25.96 percent black. The following year, it increased to 28.02 percent.¹³ The inner-city public schools have become almost completely segregated.

This polarizing process in residence and public education is especially ominous because of its relationship to poverty. In 1969, 9.5 percent of all white families in the nation were below "poverty level," but the percentage of black and other races totaled 31.1. This figure for the

"black and other races" had already dropped significantly from 56.2 percent in 1959,¹⁴ but the difference remains striking.

When the pattern of exodus from the central cities to suburbs and divorce of resources from city needs is correlated to race, the explosiveness of the "urban crisis" becomes starkly clear.

Accelerating Rural Depopulation and Chronic Poverty

While the discussion thus far has concerned urban and suburban, the truth of the recent words of the chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture appears increasingly obvious: "We cannot separate the problem between rural and urban America—there is no dividing line."¹⁵ President Nixon's recent message to the Congress on rural America emphasized that "the problems which many rural areas are now experiencing are directly linked to those of our cities and suburbs."¹⁶

Rapid metropolitan growth has coincided with rural depopulation—in each of the three decades since 1940 half of the nation's counties (although not always the same ones) lost population. In truth, central cities as well as rural communities have been losing population—the strong growth is in the fringes of the metropolitan areas. As one observer put it, there's the escape land of suburbia between the space-starved inner cities and the job-starved countryside.¹⁷

Yet figures on metropolitan growth shouldn't deceive us into as-

suming that the largest metropolitan areas are the fastest growing. On the contrary, during the last 20 years, it's the urban areas of 10,000 up to 250,000 that are gaining most rapidly, as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Urban growth trends, 1950-1970.¹⁸

Size of place	Percentage of total U.S. population		
	1950	1960	1970
1,000,000 or more	11.5%	9.8%	9.2%
500,000-1,000,000	6.1	6.2	6.4
250,000-500,000	5.5	6.0	5.1
100,000-250,000	6.3	6.5	7.0
50,000-100,000	5.9	7.7	8.2
25,000-50,000	5.8	8.3	8.8
10,000-25,000	7.9	9.8	10.5

Table 3. Growth trends of rural places, 1950-1970.¹⁹

Size of place	1950	1960	1970
1,000-2,500 (but not in urbanized areas)	4.3%	3.6%	3.3%
Under 1,000	2.7	2.2	1.9
Other rural	29.0	24.3	21.3

We have previously mentioned urban poverty, but poverty in the nonmetropolitan areas of the nation is considerably more acute. It's also worse than in the central cities—some 17 percent in nonmetropolitan areas compared to 13.4 percent in the central cities, and 9.5 percent in metropolitan America generally.²⁰

A significant point to keep in mind is that while rural depopulation and metropolitan increase are going hand-in-hand, these trends oversimplify what's actually happening. The places of real growth are the non-central city sections of the metropolitan areas and the cities in the 10,000 to 250,000 population categories.

Table 4. Incidence of poverty in United States.²¹

Areas	Population (millions)	Percentage below poverty level
Total U.S.	24.3	12.2%
Metropolitan areas	12.3	9.5
Central cities	7.8	13.4
Suburban	4.6	6.3
Nonmetropolitan areas	12.0	17.1

As the large city and the often chronically poor rural areas lose their attractiveness, a new "middle frontier" of expanding suburban-exurban and small to middle size growth centers is moving to the forefront. This may offer creative opportunities for new kinds of interrelationships between urban and rural, and in the process provide certain possibilities for regeneration of the central city and the old rural areas.

Undoubtedly there's no one pattern of action for dealing constructively with these trends. But increasingly, as we noted at the outset, voices are being heard that call for comprehensive planning, for balanced growth. If we're to begin to think of central-city, suburbia, and surrounding rural areas as one interrelated complex system, the variables of the system must be identified and adequately described as a prerequisite to formulation of effective policy, and the salient demographic and social trends summarized here must be taken into account.

Footnotes

1. George Romney (statement before the Legislation and Military Operations Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations in hearings on Bill to Establish a Department of Community Development, Washington, D.C., November 3, 1971, p. 7).
2. "Needed: Blueprint for Growth of State," *Milwaukee Journal* [Wisconsin], February 7, 1971, p. 1.
3. Patrick J. Lucey, "Wisconsin Budget Message," *Senate Journal* (February, 1971), pp. 392-93.
4. Jerome Pickard, "Regional Rule Called Vital As Urbanization Spreads," *New York Times*, February 6, 1972, p. 1.
5. "SMSA Population Concentration Continues," *Southeast Wisconsin Regional Commission Newsletter*, XI (July-August, 1971), 12-13.
6. "Coming Shake-Up in Congress: Redistricting Signals Big Changes," *U.S. News & World Report*, LXXI (November 29, 1971), 79.
7. "SMSA Population Concentration Continues," p. 13.
8. U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Banking and Currency, "Housing and the Urban Environment," Report and Recommendations of Three Study Panels of the Subcommittee on Housing, June, 1971, p. 39.
9. U.S., Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDL 71-207, *U.S. Department of Labor News* (April 15, 1971), p. 1.
10. *The National Survey of Housing Abandonment* (New York, New York: National Urban League, 1971), p. 12.
11. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 12-13.
12. "Coming Shake-Up in Congress," p. 79.
13. "Blacks Now 28% of Student Population," *Milwaukee Journal* [Wisconsin], January 30, 1972, p. 1.
14. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1971* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 322.

15. W. R. Poage (statement made to the House Committee on Agriculture Release, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1972).
16. Richard M. Nixon (White House message to the U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1972).
17. Ruth Baumann, "To Live Is To Live Somewhere" (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Extension, October, 1971), p. 6.
18. *Statistical Abstract, 1971*, p. 17.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Statistical Abstract, 1971*, p. 324.
21. *Ibid.*