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METROPOLITAN GROWTH: MORE OF THE SAME 2000-2003 U.S. CENSUS ESTIMATES

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Driving around American urban cores, it is obvious that there is an urban renaissance. But it is not what it's made out to be. Often the media and planners who imagine greenfields within walking distance of Parisian rail lines imagine that the calculus of urban growth has changed. It hasn't, at least not much.

After years of urban decline, the population in some core cities is up. But there is no point imagining that they will ever return to former levels. Copenhagen would need to add a quarter of a million residents to its depleted 500,000. London would need to add a Philadelphia. And some European core cities, especially Barcelona and Milan continue to bleed population profusely.

But things are much better in America than they were before. Before it closed in on losing 1,000,000 residents, Chicago turned around and gained 100,000 in the 1990s. But the loss has resumed. San Francisco reached its all time peak in the 2000 census, but has fallen back. Boston was up, though is down again.

Among the 53 metropolitan areas in the nation with more than 1,000,000 people, 92 percent of population growth occurred in the suburbs. And, much of the growth that occurred in core cities was in greenfield areas in those cities that are indistinguishable from suburban areas.

According to data released by the US Census Bureau, former population losers Miami, Atlanta, Seattle and Providence gained population between 2000 and 2003. Miami's increase is nearly percent. Even so, it is small compared to the gain outside the city, at only five percent. For some time the Atlanta media has been touting that city's comeback. And, while there is no question that there is progress and that the Atlanta of today is better than before, the growth is minimal. From 2000 to 2003, the city gained 6,500 residents, an increase of 1.5 percent. During the same time, the suburbs, who some would have us believe are giving up their residents to the core, gained 375,000, representing more than 98 percent of metropolitan growth. Seattle did better. There the suburbs represented only 96 percent of the growth. Like Atlanta, Seattle has impressive central city development and gains are being made in the core. But, on balance, the gains are small.

There were substantially different stories in the most recent data (Table).

- Both New York and Los Angeles continued to experience strong central city growth, though in each case more than 80 percent of the growth was in the suburbs. There are two reasons for the strong core growth. The first is that both of these core cities are strong magnets for immigration, which tends to densify areas. The other, less obvious reason, however, is that both cities still have considerable greenfield land available for development. In New York, it is the New Jerseyesque borough of Richmond (Staten Island) and in Los Angeles it is the north San Fernando Valley. The nation's two largest metropolitan areas now house nearly 40,000,000 people. Overall, they added 1,294,000 people, for a gain of 3.4 percent. Approximately 203,000 were in the core cities.
- 33 metropolitan areas have core cities that had virtually no greenfield land for development. Miami, also a strong immigration city, is included in this category. These metropolitan areas added 2,578,000 people for a gain of 2.8 percent. But their core cities lost 236,000 people.
- 18 metropolitan areas have core cities that have considerable greenfield space (excluding New York and Los Angeles). These areas gained 2,843,000, for an increase of 6.9 percent. The core cities, which encompass substantial suburban areas, gained 583,000 people. Overall, 21 percent of metropolitan growth was in these core cities.

Metropolitan Area	Greenfield & Immigration: (New York & Los Angeles)	Core Cities with Greenfield Space	Core Cities Without Greenfield Space	Total
Population: 2000	37,735,442	40,975,728	92,083,587	170,794,757
Population: 2003	39,029,461	43,819,224	94,661,403	177,510,088
Change	1,294,019	2,843,496	2,577,816	6,715,331
Change	3.4%	6.9%	2.8%	3.9%
Change in Core Cities	202,595	582,832	(236,002)	549,425
Share of Change in Core Cities	15.7%	20.5%	-9.2%	8.2%
Cases	2	18	33	53

There are notable individual developments, as well:

- St. Louis continued its quest to be the first post-Carthage city to lose 65 percent of its population, dropping to 332,000 from its 1950 peak of 857,000. St. Louis is on track to fall below 300,000 before the 2010 census.
- Detroit joined the small group of cities that have lost 50 percent of their population (along with a least St. Louis and Pittsburgh). Detroit is on track to become only the second city in the world to lose more than 1,000,000 people (after London) by the 2010 census.
- Buffalo has also joined the list of 50 percent losers.
- Philadelphia dropped below 1,500,000, down nearly 700,000 from its 1950 peak.

- At current rates of growth and decline, Phoenix could pass Philadelphia by 2010, to become the nation's fifth largest city.
- Houston became the fifth city in US history to achieve a population of 2,000,000, now trailing New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Of course, Philadelphia is retreating from having been above 2,000,000 as late as 1960.
- During the late 1990s, the Census Bureau declared San Antonio to have passed Dallas. The 2000 census, however, indicated that Dallas was still larger. Now, again, the Census Bureau says that San Antonio has passed Dallas. It is, however, in San Antonio where local officials are in the most need of an urban geography class. They persist in characterizing San Antonio as one of the nation's 10 largest cities. And they are right with respect to municipalities. But the metropolitan area, which is the "city" to many people, ranks only 30th. Grand Rapids would be among the top 10 and larger than San Antonio if only it could consolidate with its suburbs.

So, metropolitan growth continues not too differently than before. Thanks to Mayor Giuliani and others who recognize the importance of controlling crime, the cities are much nicer places to live than they used to be. Unfortunately, they have not become materially nicer places to learn, which is why whoever has kids avoids them unless the family budget permits a private education. But in the best of worlds, the core cities would have difficulties, not the least of which is that as people become more affluent they seem inclined to spend their new found wealth. On cars, larger houses, for instance. And, in a world where most of us seek a better rather than worse life, this is as it should be.

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