

BROOKINGS

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 3, 2008

Finding Exurbia: America's Fast-Growing Communities at the Metropolitan Fringe

Cities, Sprawl, Demographics

Alan Berube, Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program

Audrey Singer, Senior Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program

Jill H. Wilson

William H. Frey, Senior Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program

The Brookings Institution

OCTOBER 2006 — Findings

This study details a new effort to locate and describe the exurbs of large metropolitan areas in the United States. It defines exurbs as communities located on the urban fringe that have at least 20 percent of their workers commuting to jobs in an urbanized area, exhibit low housing density, and have relatively high population growth. Using demographic and economic data from 1990 to 2005, this study reveals that:

- As of 2000, approximately 10.8 million people live in the exurbs of large metropolitan areas. This represents roughly 6 percent of the population of these large metro areas.** These exurban areas grew more than twice as fast as their respective metropolitan areas overall, by 31 percent in the 1990s alone. The typical exurban census tract has 14 acres of land per home, compared to 0.8 acres per home in the typical tract nationwide.
- The South and Midwest are more exurbanized than the West and Northeast.** Five million people live in exurban areas of the South, representing 47 percent of total exurban population nationwide. Midwestern exurbs contain 2.6 million people, about one-fourth of all exurbanites. South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Maryland have the largest proportions of their residents living in exurbs, while Texas, California, and Ohio have the largest absolute numbers of exurbanites.
- Seven metropolitan areas have at least one in five residents living in an exurb.** These metro areas include Little Rock (AR), Grand Rapids (MI), and Greenville (SC), as well as areas like Poughkeepsie (NY) that serve as "satellites" to nearby larger metro areas. Both fast-growing and slow-growing metropolitan areas have developed exurbs.
- Nationwide, 245 counties have at least one-fifth of their residents living in exurban areas.** The Louisville metro area has the highest number of exurban counties (13), followed by Atlanta, Richmond, and Washington, D.C., which each have 11. These exurban counties grew by 12 percent overall between 2000 and 2005, faster than population growth in urban, inner suburban, or outer suburban counties (like Loudoun County, VA). However, outer suburban counties


RELATED CONTENT

RESEARCH AND COMMENTARY

 [Finding Exurbia](#)


Alan Berube, North American Regional Science Council, November 17, 2006

RESEARCH AND COMMENTARY

 [Living on the Edge: Decentralization Within Cities in the 1990s](#)

Alan Berube and Benjamin Forman, The Brookings Institution, October 2002

RESEARCH AND COMMENTARY

 [Where are the Jobs?: Cities, Suburbs and the Competition for Employment](#)

John Brennan and Edward W. Hill, The Brookings Institution, November 1999

[More Related Content »](#)

added 4.5 million people in the last five years, exceeding the 1.8 million-person gain in exurban counties.

- **Residents of the "average" exurb are disproportionately white, middle-income, homeowners, and commuters.**

Yet exurbanites do not conform to all popular stereotypes. For instance, they do not appear to telecommute, work in the real estate industry, or inhabit super-sized homes at higher rates than residents of other metropolitan county types. Middle-income families' "drive to qualify" for more affordable new homes that are in limited supply elsewhere fuels growth in many metropolitan exurbs.

Despite their popularization by political analysts, media, and local growth activists, the "exurbs" do not abound nor fit a single, neat stereotype. Just 6 percent of large metro area residents live in an exurb, and these exurbs vary from affordable housing havens for middle-class families, to "favored quarters" for high-income residents, to the path of least resistance for new development. While they may continue to capture interest among political observers, the real test for exurbia lies in how our nation accommodates future growth. Will exurbs remain exurbs or become the suburbs of tomorrow?