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Blog post

What's the Matter With the Upper East Side?

In a free market, the richest neighborhoods would ordinarily be the most popular. But some well-off urban neighborhoods are actually losing population. Why?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | June 9, 2017, 5am PDT

When I reviewed New York City population data for a [recent blog post](#), I discovered something surprising: two of Manhattan's wealthiest areas, the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side, have [lost](#) [pdf] population since 2000.

Why doesn't this make sense? In a free market, affluent areas would normally be the most desirable, and as a result would attract new development and thus gain population. But the Upper East and West Sides have attracted little new housing. In fact, the Upper East Side has [fewer](#) housing units than it did in 2005; the Upper West Side's housing inventory has increased during this period, but by only 3 percent (from just over 115,000 units to just over 119,000)—a fairly astounding figure given the intensity of demand for Manhattan's more affluent neighborhoods.

This pattern is not unique to New York City. For example, Chicago's Lincoln Park, one of the city's more affluent old neighborhoods, [lost](#) housing units during the 2000s. In the richest zip code in San Francisco's Pacific Heights (94123), the number of housing units increased between 2000 and 2016, but by less than 3 percent (from 14,851 to 15,217). In Washington's 20008 zip code (which includes most of the well-off areas surrounding upper Connecticut Avenue), the number of housing units increased by less than 1 percent (from 16,890 to 16,994).

Why would the richest areas lose population when other intown neighborhoods are becoming more populous? One likely culprit is zoning: the richest areas are the most politically powerful, and thus the most likely to resist new development. In New York, upper-class white areas are the most likely to be [downzoned](#) [pdf], while lower-class areas tend to be upzoned.

It could be argued that the real culprit for upper-class underpopulation is high vacancy rates caused by rich people using Manhattan apartments as second homes or investment vehicles. There is a tiny grain of truth to this argument: it is true that the

Upper East Side and Upper West Side have more unoccupied homes than the rest of New York City. But in the four Upper East Side codes for which I was available to find data (10021, 10028, 10049, 10128), the number of unoccupied residences used for seasonal/occasional use (as opposed to being for sale or rent) actually decreased between 2000 and 2010. Moreover, that theory doesn't explain the loss of housing units in other cities: in Lincoln Park and the other non-New York zip codes discussed above, the unoccupied unit rate is about 8-9 percent, comparable to or even below citywide averages.

What happens when the richest areas don't allow new housing? First of all, housing prices go up a little everywhere as citywide supply is reduced. Second, people priced out of those areas move to cheaper areas and gentrify them—so people worried about gentrification and displacement should be especially worried about restrictive zoning in upper-class areas. Or to put it another way: if you don't want the upper class invading working-class areas, build more housing in the upper-class areas.*

*I note, however, that my point cuts both ways: it could be argued that by freezing people out of high-end areas, zoning [prevents urban decline](#) by encouraging gentrification of poorer areas. Whether you find the latter argument persuasive depends on whether you worry more about rising rents or about neighborhood decay; the best answer may be different in different cities.

Blog post

Progressives Against Housing

In Zoned Out!, Tom Angotti, of City University New York (CUNY) tries to make the case against upzoning New York's neighborhoods (or at least its poorer ones).

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 29, 2017, 1pm PDT

Generally, economists and smart growth advocates tend to favor allowing new urban housing, while homeowners believe that new housing should always be located in someone else's neighborhood—thus earning the epithet "NIMBY" (for "Not In My Back Yard"). Historically, leftists have tended to agree with the experts and to oppose

exclusionary zoning—but in left-wing, high-cost cities this is not always the case. In fact, "progressive NIMBYism" has some support among planning academics. In the new book [*Zoned Out! Race, Displacement, and City Planning in New York City*](#), CUNY's Tom Angotti criticizes upzoning; he favors lots of new public housing for poor people, but it is not clear to me whether he favors any market-rate housing anywhere.

Angotti argues that new housing actually increases rents; he reasons that upzoning "increases the future value of land." (p. 29) and that as a result "new development drives up land values and rents in surrounding blocks and tenants in the buildings on those blocks can't afford to pay higher rents and are forced out." (p. 37). I critiqued this argument in a *Planetizen* [blog post](#) a couple of months ago. (If you don't feel like clicking on the link, here's my one-sentence summary: cities that have downzoned don't seem to be very successful in keeping rents down.)

Moreover, Angotti makes concessions that damage his argument. If upzoning is always bad, it logically follows that anti-density exclusionary zoning should lower housing prices and should be welcomed. But Angotti seems to oppose exclusionary zoning in the city's suburbs and outer boroughs. After discussing a wide variety of common zoning policies such as minimum lot size requirements, he notes correctly that "Zoning can be used ... to make it impossible to build housing affordable to low-income people" (p. 51). He also adds that such exclusionary zoning is not limited to the suburbs: New York's outer boroughs still have "predominantly white enclaves [that] continue to be protected by zoning" (p. 52). For example, Angotti complains that in Hasidic Boro Park, "[i]nstead of contemplating a rezoning that would encourage new higher density residential development—and possible racial change," (Id.) the city zoned to protect the status quo. Similarly, he notes that in affluent Park Slope anti-density zoning "protected... the relatively affluent white portion of the neighborhood" (Id.) And in Staten Island, a plan that "would have brought higher-density development to the low-density white borough ... was rejected [due to racial fears]" (p. 55). So it seems to me that Angotti believes that 1) in middle-and upper-class white areas, restrictive zoning keeps property values high and blacks and Hispanics out while and 2) in racially diverse areas, restrictive zoning is necessary to keep property values low. I am not sure how both these propositions can be true.

Having said that, Angotti's arguments are tethered to factual reality in one important respect: it is true that in some rapidly gentrifying areas, upzonings were followed by rent increases far exceeding those of citywide levels. (Angotti focuses on Williamsburg, Harlem and Chinatown.) So based on this data set, he concludes that upzoning leads to rent increases which leads to displacement. These cases certainly present a challenge for

[market urbanists](#)—but it seems to me that there is more than one possible explanation for this phenomenon.

For one thing, New York's 2000s upzonings were accompanied by downzonings—sometimes even in the same neighborhood as the upzonings. For example, much of Williamsburg was upzoned in 2005—but in 2008, the city downzoned higher-income blocks (p. 91). So the overall effect of rezonings on housing supply is unclear.

Moreover, New York's combination of upzonings and downzonings might have caused localized rent spikes that would not have occurred in a more consistently pro-development city. If a city says (in so many words) "in zone A you can't build anything new, while in zone B you can build new stuff," housing demand from the people excluded from zone A might flood into zone B. So even if supply in zone B increases, so does demand—and, of course, so do land costs, as would-be landlords bid up the price of B's scarce land. So it seems to me that if upzoning in one place causes rent spikes, upzoning everywhere is more likely to contain rents than downzoning everywhere.

Even the correlation between gentrification and displacement is a bit more wobbly than Angotti thinks. He notes that between 2000 and 2013, the black population of one part of Harlem decreased by 5 percent (p. 111). But Harlem has been losing blacks for many decades. In 1950, Central Harlem had about 230,000 blacks; in 1990, Harlem had just under 90,000. (Details can be found [here](#).) Gentrification may displace minorities—but poverty displaces even more, as people flee from declining neighborhoods. (Similarly, declining cities such as Detroit tend to have declining black populations, as all but the poorest flee to suburbia.)

Angotti's ultimate remedy to New York's affordability problems is unclear. The last chapter of his book endorses increased public housing construction and something called "community planning"—that is, increasing neighborhoods' veto power over new development. Since neighborhood activists often oppose new housing near them, I suspect that the latter policy would eliminate new market-rate housing in New York—which Angotti might (given his assumptions about land prices) view as a desirable result.

Blog post

The Gentrification of (Tiny Bits) of Gotham

Reports of New York's gentrification are sometimes exaggerated.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 11, 2017, 12pm PDT

The New York City's Comptroller's Office recently put out a [report](#) with a treasure trove of data about New York City neighborhoods. Some press coverage of the report focused on gentrification. For example, *CityLab* headlines one article, "[The Gentrification of Gotham](#)," and suggests that the decline of black population in some neighborhoods "suggests not everyone shares in a neighborhood's economic success." Obviously, such rhetoric conveys a simple message: gentrification is everywhere and gentrification is bad.

But three of New York's five boroughs actually de-gentrified. If (like the *CityLab* article) you prefer to measure gentrification by race, the Bronx lost 30 percent of its white population between 2000 and 2015, while gaining blacks and Hispanics. Similarly, in Staten Island the number of whites decreased while the number of blacks and Hispanics decreased, and Queens gained Hispanics while losing both whites and blacks.

If you prefer to measure gentrification by income, the results are similar. In the Bronx, the number of people earning less than \$25,000 increased by 30 percent, while the number earning over \$75,000 decreased. In Staten Island, the former number increased by 25 percent while the latter number again decreased. In Queens, the number earning over \$75,000 increased by 12 percent—but the number of persons earning less than \$25,000 increased by a greater amount (19 percent). In sum, three of the five boroughs have become browner and poorer since 2000.

So at most, the *CityLab* article should have been titled "The Gentrification of Manhattan and Brooklyn." And in those boroughs, there are a few neighborhoods that fit the popular stereotype of gentrification: increased white population, decreased black and Hispanic population, increased rich population, reduced poor population. For example, in Greenpoint/Williamsburg, the number of whites increased by 41 percent and the numbers of both blacks and Hispanics decreased. The number of people earning over \$75,000 (adjusted for inflation) increased by 363 percent, while the number of people earning under \$25,000 (again, adjusted for inflation) decreased. In Brooklyn Heights/Fort

Greene, the Lower East Side, Bushwick, and Park Slope, the white population increased while the black/Hispanic population decreased.

But how common was this scenario? Not very. In fact, several Brooklyn neighborhoods (mostly those furthest from Manhattan) experienced the classic "white flight" scenario: fewer whites, more blacks and Hispanics. In East New York/Starrett City, the number of whites decreased by 43 percent between 2000 and 2015, while the black and Hispanic populations increased. Similarly, in Canarsie the white population decreased by 29 percent while the Hispanic and black populations increased by 24 and 40 percent respectively. In Bay Ridge/Dyker Heights, the white population nosedived by 20 percent, while the Hispanic population increased by 53 percent and the black population by 12 percent. In Bensonhurst/Bath Beach, the white population declined by 31 percent while the black and Hispanic populations more than doubled. In Boro Park/Kensington, the white population decreased slightly and the black population increased slightly. In all of these neighborhoods, the low income population increased (and in Boro Park, the high-income population actually decreased).

Moreover, even some affluent parts of Manhattan became more somewhat more diverse. My own Murray Hill/Gramercy and the Upper West Side are still affluent white neighborhoods, but the white population decreased, while the black and/or Hispanic populations increased. And in both places, the number of people earning under \$25,000 increased.

And some neighborhoods don't fit either the "gentrification" narrative or the "white flight" narrative. One common pattern was the "Hispanic growth" pattern, exemplified by Sheepshead Bay. There, the number of both whites and blacks went down, while the Hispanic population increased 111 percent. In Brighton Beach, East Flatbush, Crown Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Midwood, the white population went up and the black population went down—but the Hispanic population increased. In all but one of these areas (East Flatbush) the number of persons earning under \$25,000 increased (although the number of higher income persons increased as well). In Manhattan, Central Harlem experienced both huge white growth and huge Hispanic growth (an increase of over 80 percent).

A few neighborhoods don't fit any of these narratives. In Brownsville, the populations of all racial groups increased. But the number of low-income persons increased more rapidly than the number of persons earning over \$75,000. Similarly, in Sunset Park, East Harlem and Washington Heights, the white population increased while the Hispanic and black populations decreased—but the number of low-income earners increased as well.

Finally, all of the above should be put in perspective: even Manhattan and Brooklyn are far more diverse than most suburbs. Manhattan is 48 percent non-Hispanic white and Brooklyn is 1/3 white, while suburban Suffolk County is 71 percent white.

Blog post

Florida, Florida, Florida

In his new book, Richard Florida worries about segregation and redefines "the creative class."

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 2, 2017, 5am PDT

Richard Florida is famous for writing about the "creative class"—often stereotyped as liberal-minded urban young people. But in his new book *The New Urban Crisis*, Florida goes in a very different direction. He redefines the creative class as the educated upper classes; for example, his maps of various metro areas frequently describe affluent outer suburbs as "creative class" neighborhoods.

What is the "Crisis" Florida writes about? Primarily the exploding cost of living in high-growth "superstar" metro areas, and the highly related growth of income inequality and residential segregation.

Like many other commentators (including this one), Florida emphasizes the negative affects of NIMBYism. He points out that homeowners "have more to gain from increasing the scarcity of usable land than from maximizing its productive and economically beneficial uses." As a result, they support zoning restrictions that artificially limit supply. Florida goes even further, suggesting that these policies harm the economy as a whole. For example, if "everyone who wanted to work in San Francisco could afford to live there, the city would see a 500 percent increase in jobs...On a national basis, [similar results] would add up to an annual wage increase of \$8775 for the average worker, adding 13.5 percent to America's GNP — a total gain of nearly \$2 trillion" (p 27).

But on the very next page, Florida criticizes the idea that "we can make our cities more affordable... simply by getting rid of existing land use restrictions" because "the high

cost of land in superstar neighborhoods makes it very hard if not impossible, for the private market to create affordable housing in their vicinity. Combine the high costs of land with the high costs of high-rise construction and the result is more high-end luxury housing." (p. 28).

On the other hand, land prices are often quite [volatile](#). More importantly, the overwhelming majority of any region's housing is not particularly new; even in high-growth Houston, only 2 percent of housing units were built after 2010. Thus, new market-rate housing is likely to lower rents by affecting the price of older housing, rather than by bringing new cheap units into the market. So even if market-rate housing is expensive, it can still stabilize the costs of older housing. Having said that, I don't think Florida is against less regulation; rather, he seems to be saying that reducing regulation can have a role in stabilizing housing prices, but should be combined with other policies, such as a [land value tax](#).

Florida also writes that "too much density can actually deaden neighborhoods" because "The world's most innovative and creative places are not the high-rise canyons of Asian cities but the walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods in San Francisco, New York and London" (p. 28). Does this mean that places with high-rises cannot be walkable and mixed-use? Or that New York has no "high-rise canyons"? And what evidence is there that Asian cities are less "creative" than American ones?* Since Florida does not explain these point, I am not quite sure what he is thinking.

Florida moves on to discuss inequality; he begins by pointing out that high-cost places are actually a pretty good deal for the average worker, even with high rents. For example, in San Francisco and New York, the average worker has \$40-46,000 left over after paying for housing, while in high-growth, low-cost Virginia Beach, Orlando, and Las Vegas, the average worker has only \$25-29,000 left over after paying for housing. This is especially the case for "Creative Class" workers (defined on p. 217 as workers in a wide variety of listed occupations); the average creative class worker has \$71,141 in (for example) San Francisco as opposed to \$50-55,000 in these low-cost metros. On the other hand, workers in routine service jobs come out only slightly ahead in San Francisco; they get \$16,806 after paying for housing in San Francisco as opposed to \$12-15,000 in the three low-cost cities.

I was surprised to read that workers are better off in a high-cost metro area but have two concerns. First, if Florida used median wages instead of average wages, would workers still be better off in high-cost region—or is the apparent high income of these cities' workers a result of a few high earners inflating regional averages? Second, is the quality of housing comparable in high-growth areas—or is the average San Francisco

worker living with roommates while his or her Virginia Beach counterpart buys a large condo or house?

Florida then devotes a chapter to inequality; he writes that this problem is most acute in "large, dense, knowledge-based metros." However, his data reveals a more complicated picture. One measure of inequality is the [Gini coefficient](#); by this measure the most unequal metros include not only dense New York, San Francisco and Boston but also sprawling Birmingham, Memphis and Houston. At any rate, Florida could explain more clearly why this matters; he writes that "the same factors that drive economic growth also drive inequality" (p. 88) but "A high level of income inequality ...can be, and often is, a drag on economic growth." (p. 90) I am not sure how these two statements fit together.

Florida also worries about segregation; he writes that the creative class is most segregated in "tech hubs and superstar cities" (p 108). But his own charts make it clear that other types of segregation are stronger in not-so-gilded metros. For example, segregation of the poor is highest in Rust Belt metros: Florida lists the five worst large metros in this regard as Milwaukee, Hartford, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Detroit- all areas with slow-growth or declining central cities (p. 101). It is not clear to me why the first type of segregation is more harmful than the second.

Near the end of the book, Florida includes a chapter on the "global urban crisis." He asserts that while economic development has historically "gone hand in hand with urbanization....The connection between urbanization and growth has now become much more tenuous, producing a troubling new pattern of 'urbanization without growth.'"(p. 174). But just a page later, he writes that "even if urbanization isn't a surefire recipe for prosperity, it is still better than the alternative" (p. 175). He writes that third-world cities tend to be far more productive than their rural hinterlands; while the typical large U.S. metro is at most 50 percent more productive than the national average, many Third World metros are two or three or even ten times as productive as their national averages. So what's Florida's point? I think he is trying to say that Third World urbanization on balance makes people better off, but that the status quo could be improved upon.

His final chapter is entitled "Urbanism for All": this is mostly a grab-bag of policies generally favored by liberals (e.g., more public transit, more housing vouchers, some form of a guaranteed basic income for all). However, he is less pro-regulation than the most extreme progressives, suggesting that rent control might discourage renovation of rental properties and that inclusionary zoning is likely to increase housing supply only in the hottest markets. To put it another way, Florida's instincts seem to be moderately but

not extremely liberal; he favors lots of government spending on infrastructure and poverty reduction, but worries about strangling the private sector with overregulation.

*In fairness, Florida does point out elsewhere in his book that the most prosperous American metros get more venture capital investment than Shanghai or Beijing (p. 44)—but this is equally true of not-so-walkable Los Angeles and San Diego, so the notion that low-rise urbanism causes this difference strikes me as highly questionable. Moreover, the fact that the United States is generally a much wealthier country than China might be relevant to this issue.

Blog post

Are Jews Coming Back to the Cities?

The growth of urban Jewish populations is more evidence that educated Americans are less hostile to city life today than they were in the late 20th century.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 21, 2017, 6am PDT

In the past, I have written about the [suburbanization](#) of the American Jewish population: a topic of much personal interest to me, but perhaps of less interest to non-Jewish readers. Even so, Jewish life is a canary in a coal mine: because Jews tend to be disproportionately well-educated and affluent, a city with a significant Jewish population is likely to be a revitalizing city, while cities where nearly all Jews live in suburbia tend to be rapidly declining cities (such as St. Louis and Cleveland).

One question I've been interested in recently: Has there been a "back to the city" movement among American Jews? To analyze this question, I looked at the Jewish Data Bank [website](#), which contains population surveys from all over the nation. Because most communities conduct population studies every decade or two, I only have recent data for a few regions. Even so I found a small pattern of urban growth. To name some examples:

In Boston, there has been significant reurbanization. Thirty-three percent of regional Jews now live in the city of Boston or its two most city-like inner suburbs (Cambridge

and Somerville), up from 22 percent in 2005. Much of this growth is concentrated among younger people: 50 percent of Jews under 34 live in these areas.

In Miami's urban South Beach, the Jewish population increased by 20 percent between 2004 and 2014, after nosediving for years. In Central Miami (that is, the eastern half of the city of Miami) the number of households tripled between 2004 and 2014. Similarly, the number of Jews in Northeast South Dade (mostly the western half of Miami, plus some inner ring suburbs) increased by about 30 percent. On the other hand, outer suburbs have been gaining as well: the Jewish population in Palm Beach County, the northern edge of South Florida, has increased significantly. Population-losing Jewish communities are in in-between suburbs like East Kendall and Broward County: very suburban but not quite as new or as far out as Palm Beach.

In Chicago, the city's Jewish population increased between 2000 and 2010, by 7 percent in the North side and 4 percent in the South Side.

A Baltimore-area survey measured both households and persons, yielding somewhat ambiguous results. The number of Jewish households in Central Baltimore (which includes the parts of Baltimore closest to downtown) increased by 46 percent between 1999 and 2010. On the other hand, the number of Jewish persons increased by only 2 percent. What's going on? Declining household sizes may mean that older families are being replaced by young singles and couples. In Park Heights (which is just barely within the city limits) the Jewish population increased by 25 percent. Jewish population decreased in older suburbs such as Randallstown and Owings Mills.

In 1995, about 2,600 Jews lived in the city of St. Louis; by 2014 the number doubled to a still-puny 5,000 (about 6 percent of the region's Jewish population).

Philadelphia is an outlier; the city's Jewish population actually declined over the past decade. However, Philadelphia's population study did not discuss trends by neighborhood, so I don't know whether the declines were in the urban core or in Northeast Philadelphia, which is essentially suburban.

Even so, the pattern seems clear: Jews are repopulating close-in neighborhoods in more regions than not.

Blog post

Land Prices and New Housing

Some commentators argue that even if cities allow housing supply to expand, more permissive zoning will cause land prices to increase, causing rents to rise rather than fall. This post disagrees.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 28, 2017, 2pm PDT

The law of supply and demand suggests that if zoning becomes less restrictive, the supply of housing will expand, causing housing to become less expensive. Yet some commentators argue that new supply will not be helpful, because new housing leads to [higher land prices](#). They reason as follows: if you can build more houses on parcel X, you can get more income from that parcel. If you can get more income from parcel X, the market value of parcel X will rise. In turn, future developers will pass the higher cost of land on to homebuyers or renters.

I find this argument unpersuasive for a variety of reasons. First, the argument leads to preposterous results. If it is really the case that new housing increases prices, then prohibiting new housing would lower prices. And if prohibiting new housing lowers price, downzoning (or better yet, demolishing the existing housing supply) would lower prices even more—obviously an absurd result. In fact, aggressive downzoning has been tried in Los Angeles. In 1960, the city [was zoned](#) to support 10 million people. By contrast, today the city is zoned for roughly its current population, which means that almost any new construction will require a rezoning. Did housing prices fall? No. In fact, rents, adjusted for inflation, have [risen by 55 percent](#), while median renter income has grown by only 13 percent. Nor did land prices fall. Land values have increased more rapidly than home prices, from just over \$86,229 per house in 1984 to \$483,692 in 2014.*

Second, as a matter of theory, increased land values need not lead to increased rents: if my parcel was worth \$100,000 but now is worth \$200,000, I can build one \$200,000 unit on my land—but I can also build two \$100,000 units, or increase the housing supply by building multiple units costing less than \$100,000. As long as zoning does not limit housing supply, land prices may affect the size and height of housing units rather than the price of those units.

Third, the argument would make more sense if land prices were as stable as rents, because if land prices rose and fell rapidly while rents did not, it would appear that the

land price/rent link is not very strong. In fact, land prices are quite volatile: in metropolitan New York City metro area, the land price (apparently per house) swung from \$99,916 at the end of 1996 to \$418,592 at the end of 2006, down to under \$225,000 in early 2012, and up to \$250,187 in 2014.* Rent was far less volatile, generally increasing over time. Thus, it appears that the link between land prices and rents is modest.

Fourth, if new housing caused rents to increase, the regions that allowed the most new housing would be the regions with the highest rents. But permissive regions such as [Dallas and Houston](#) often have pretty low housing prices. (See [here](#) for a larger dataset.)

Finally, if increased supply caused rents to increase, rents would never go down unless a city aggressively reduced the housing supply. But in fact this has not been the case; over the past year, rents have started to go down even in some [pricey](#) metro areas- even in [New York](#). (By an odd coincidence, construction seems to have [increased](#)).

*All data on land and home prices comes from the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy [database](#).

Blog post

Most Livable Cities Revisited

This "livable cities" ranking considers transit, walkability, and bikeability.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 9, 2017, 1pm PST

In response to the many, many attempts to rank cities, I decided [a decade ago](#) to create my own "livable city rankings." The rankings addressed crime, transit use, and walkability, and concluded (not surprisingly) that New York was the most livable city if housing costs were not a factor. When I considered housing costs, Ann Arbor came in first.

A decade has passed, and it occurred to me to see if anything has changed. But rather than using the same methods, I decided to include a variety of different factors, to reflect some of the responses to my first attempt. I decided to use a simple measure of crime; rather than weighing multiple types of crime, I merely double-weighted murder. I did this for two reasons. First, I suspect that homicide is more likely to be reported to the police than, say, a burglary or purse-snatching. Second, it seems to me that focusing on the most major crime sharpens the distinction between the most troubled cities and the rest of the United States. However, this method does have one negative side effect: it required me to focus on major cities, since most suburbs and small towns have very few murders. By contrast, the old method allowed me to compare suburbs to each other.

I also shifted my transit and walkability measurements. Originally, I used three measurements: transit mode share as a percentage of the poverty rate (to avoid favoring cities where people used transit because they are poor rather than because transit service is excellent), transit mode share, and walking mode share. I kept the first measurement as a method of measuring transit. But the rise of [Walk Score](#) allowed me to change the last two measurements: I substituted citywide [Bike Score](#) and Walk Score measurements for mode share data; Bikescore allows me to consider the interests of cyclists, and Walkscore allows me to weigh walkability in contexts unrelated to commuting. On the other hand, I lost something by using these measurements: smaller cities and suburbs often don't have a Bike Score or Walk Score.

Finally, I decided to weigh cost of living a little differently. In addition to including the ratio between home prices and incomes, I also included data on rents (from [this](#) study comparing Craigslist ads in various cities). Using rent data had one negative side effect: the study only includes the 50 or so largest metros, so smaller cities like Ann Arbor and Little Rock got deleted.

My results are on [this website](#), and were slightly different from a decade ago. Without cost of living, San Francisco beat New York by a razor-thin margin: the former city's superior Bike Score pushed it over the top. Boston was a solid third. Seattle was a surprise fourth-place finisher, combining adequate grades on the "car-free" indicia (transit/walking/biking) with crime rates lower than those of other transit metropolises.

What happened when I gave my two cost of living factors (rent, home costs) equal weight with crime and walkability? Seattle was a surprise first-place finisher, and Minneapolis and Salt Lake City an even more surprising second and third, respectively. These cities were not superlative in any way, but performed adequately in every category while New York and San Francisco were dragged down by housing costs. Last

place was a much easier call. Birmingham, Alabama finished last both with and without cost of living—high crime and poor transit were a deadly combination.

Blog post

Apartments, Cities, and Pollution

Some evidence suggests that apartments lead to more greenhouse gas emissions per capita than houses. Does this mean that suburbs pollute less than cities? Probably not.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 23, 2017, 10am PST

A couple of months ago, I [criticized](#) the notion that suburban sprawl actually improves air quality by reducing density. However, I missed one pro-sprawl argument: the claim, based on an Australian [study](#) [pdf], that apartments (especially high-rise apartments) have higher per-capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions than houses. Does this study mean that sprawl pollutes less than compact development? Probably not, for several reasons.

First, walkable urban development need not require high-rise apartment buildings. In fact, low-rise urban areas can be quite dense. For example, Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood is dominated by rowhouses and other low-rise buildings- so much so that only 15 percent of its housing structure have five or more units. Yet Park Slope has just [over 64,000](#) people per square mile (roughly twice the Brooklyn-wide average), and the overwhelming majority of its residents do not drive to work.

Second, the Australian study may be of limited uses because of its miniscule sample size. It studied only 17 high-rise buildings, 12 mid-rise buildings and 10 low-rise buildings. As a result, the authors wrote that their study's results "are not statistically representative of... multi-unit residential buildings" even in Sydney, Australia where the study was conducted, let alone in the United States.

Third, evidence from Australia may not be tremendously relevant to the United States, because personal vehicles account for only 10 percent of [Australian GHG emissions](#), as opposed to 25 percent of U.S. GHG emissions. As a result, development patterns that

reduce driving are likely to reduce overall per-household emissions to a greater extent in the United States than in Australia.

Fourth, because the study focuses on per-capita emissions its findings are only valid as long as household sizes do not change—that is, as long as apartments are more likely than houses to be dominated by single people. But if development becomes more compact and multifamily dwellings become more popular with families, per-capita emissions for apartments will decline, because each new resident does not significantly increase the overall emissions for a unit. For example, if a two-bedroom apartment is occupied by a family of three instead of by one person, their apartment building is unlikely to need additional elevators or hallway lighting.

Blog post

Vouchers Can Work, But...

School vouchers might expand educational choice and thus make city life more appealing to middle-class families—but the most appealing versions of a voucher system are also the most costly.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 7, 2017, 5am PST

President Trump has proposed [block grants for education vouchers](#)—that is, grants for lower-income children so they can attend private schools. His choice for Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has run into a buzz saw of opposition—partially because of her outspoken support for vouchers. Something like Trump's proposal (that is, vouchers for low-income students) has been [tried](#) in several big cities, including Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and Cleveland. It is [unclear](#) how successful these programs have been at improving educational outcomes.

A more interesting question (to me) is: will private school vouchers* be good for cities? Will they cause families to shun suburban public schools and instead stay in cities?

Existing voucher systems do not seem to have had this effect, because they are targeted** toward lower-income families, some of whom live in cities only because they

cannot afford suburbia. The nation's oldest voucher systems are in Cleveland and Milwaukee: both continue to decline.

But what if vouchers were expanded to middle- and upper-class families? It seems to me that cities would become far more popular with families. In many cities, parents move to suburbs to escape urban schools. If vouchers were expanded to private schools, parents would have little reason to avoid city neighborhoods: they could stay in the city and attend private schools at a low or nonexistent cost.

However, such a system would have some practical difficulties. The best private schools are more expensive than public schools. Public schools spend [around](#) \$11,000 per student—about as much as the [average](#) private school tuition. (Urban public schools tend to spend a little [more](#).) However, the private schools most appealing to well-off parents cost far more. For example, my nieces' private school in Atlanta costs a little over \$20,000, as does the Atlanta private school that my siblings attended many years ago. In fact, the average nonsectarian private school is [equally](#) expensive. So if vouchers were to cover the entire cost of private school tuition, state and local education budgets (and presumably the taxes that fund those budgets) would increase.

On the other hand, if vouchers merely covered the cost of the average public school*** they might cover no more than half of the tuition of the best private schools—arguably not enough to discourage at least a few parents from choosing suburban public schools.

Thus, a state or city that supports vouchers as an anti-sprawl tool for the middle and upper classes (rather than as a tool to improve education for lower-income families) must either spend more money on education generally, or must adopt a stingier system that does less to promote city life.

*For the purpose of this post, I refer to "vouchers" as vouchers for private school attendance. A "public school voucher" program (that is, one limited to public schools but allowing open enrollment in all school districts in a state) has an entirely different set of pros and cons, and is best addressed elsewhere.

**With one major exception: in Indiana, voucher eligibility includes families with incomes [as high as](#) \$90,000. But this expansion is only a few years old, so it is too soon to ascertain how it has affected Indianapolis (the state's largest city).

***Perhaps minus public schools' fixed costs, to reflect the fact that when a public school loses a child, it saves far less than the per-pupil cost, because some of the school's costs are fixed rather than variable.

Blog post

Good Trump, Bad Trump

The Trump Administration is sending out mixed signals on public transit issues. Why?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 26, 2017, 2pm PST

In its first week, the Trump Administration sent mixed signals on transportation issues. Part of the Trump transition team is drafting a budget, and some leaks suggest that this budget will include large spending cuts in a [wide variety of federal programs](#). Apparently, early budget drafts are based on the [Heritage Foundation's](#) budget proposals. Since Heritage wants to wipe out funding for public transit, it is possible that the Trump budget could support similar policies.

On the other hand, the transition team has been working with a [list of infrastructure projects](#) that the incoming Trump Administration might support. [Ed's note: the veracity of this draft list has been disputed, but McClatchy has since [verified the exact origins of the list](#).] Even though the list includes road and air projects, it also includes:

- High-speed rail between Houston and Dallas;
- Commuter rail from Dallas to Fort Worth;
- Expansion of New York City's new Second Avenue subway;
- The Purple Line, a light rail line running through Washington's suburbs;
- Detroit's M-1 streetcar projects; and
- Extensions of Boston's Green Line trains.

What's going on? Since the Trump campaign [speculated](#) about public-private partnerships, it might be the case that the Trump Administration likes transportation as long as it is financed in nontraditional ways. And if we had a conventional President, who expected to win the election and whose transition team had been in place long before the election, this version of reality would seem persuasive to me.

But it seems to me that this administration might be a bit more disorderly than most. I'm not sure that President Trump ever expected to win the election, and transition head Chris Christie was [fired](#) a few days after the election. He was replaced by Vice President Pence, who seems to be a more orthodox, anti-government conservative than President Trump.

Under the circumstances, it might be the case that groups within the transition team aren't really speaking to each other, and so the anti-government types in "Office A" haven't coordinated their proposals with the infrastructure-lobby types in "Office B." Ultimately, President Trump may have to arbitrate disputes between his administration's moderate and conservative wings—and then Congress will have to decide to what extent it should uphold his verdict.

Blog post

Which Cities Are Gentrifying?

Walkable cities with strong downtowns are closing the economic gap with suburbia, while sprawling cities—even those with high population growth—are not doing as well.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 18, 2017, 2pm PST

Pete Saunders, author of the [Corner Side Yard](#) blog, has engaged in an enormous amount of research regarding the economic disparities between cities and suburbs. In particular, one of his [recent articles](#) has shown that in ten of the fourteen largest urbanized areas, the gap between city and suburban median household incomes is narrower than in 2000. For example, in 2000, the median income in Washington, D.C. was 62.8 percent of regional income; by 2015, the city's household income had grown to 79.3 percent of regional income. However, such gentrification was less common in urbanized areas with 1-3 million people; 13 of 27 core cities in this group gained income relative to their suburbs. In all 41 regions with population over 1 million, city income grew from 79.8 percent of regional income to 81.3 percent of regional income. So if gentrification means "cities not being as poor relative to their suburbs as they were fifteen years ago," gentrification is undoubtedly real.

But to me the more interesting question is: which cities closed the income gap with their suburbs, and which were less successful? I looked at a variety of metrics, including:

Population growth.

I divided core cities of these regions* into three categories: those that had consistently lost population in recent decades (such as Detroit and Pittsburgh), those that had

consistently gained population, and a middle group that had lost population during part or all of the late 20th century but had gained population since 2000. Only three of the eight population-losers (Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis) gained income relative to their suburbs, and only seven of the 18 population-gainers did so. By contrast, 12 of the 14 "rebounding cities" (that is, cities that lost population in the 1960s or 1970s but gained population more recently) gained income relative to their suburbs. Saunders points out that coastal cities generally made income gains, but this pattern cut across regional lines. Gentrifying rebound cities included mid-American cities such as Minneapolis and Atlanta as well as coastal cities such as San Francisco.

In other words, there is a strong correlation between gentrification and population growth—but *only* for cities that lost population for at least part of the late 20th century.

Car-centeredness.

I divided my sample into three groups: 17 extremely car-centered cities where under 5 percent of commuters used public transit to get to work, the six "transit metropolises" where over 20 percent of commuters take a train or bus (Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Washington and San Francisco), and 17 "in between" cities where between 5 and 20 percent of commuters use transit.

City income increased relative to suburbia in *all six* of the most transit-oriented cities. By contrast, city income grew relative to suburbia in only five of the 17 "car cities." The "in-between cities" had in-between results: cities gained ground in 11 of the 17.

In other words, gentrification tends to happen in places where people are less likely to drive everywhere. In addition, there seemed to be a pretty strong correlation between density and income growth: of the ten central cities with fewer than 3000 people per square mile, seven declined relative to their suburbs. By contrast, all nine of the cities with over 8,000 people per square mile gained income.

Downtown strength.

The University of Virginia's Demographics Research Group has created a [variety of charts](#) that allow readers to compare downtowns with suburbs. To simplify matters, I focused on one variable: whether per-capita income downtown is higher than in the more prosperous rings of suburbia. I found 16 regions where per capita income in the one-mile ring (that is, income within a mile of the core) was higher than in any suburban ring. In 11 of those cities, citywide income grew relative to suburbia. By contrast, cities gained ground in only ten of the other cities. Interestingly, the only "strong downtown"

cities where the city as a whole became poorer relative to suburbia were cities with very low public transit use: Charlotte, Columbus, Dallas, Houston and Tampa.

So how can I account for these divergences? One possible explanation is that people with money simply like to live in walkable regions with strong downtowns. Another possible explanation is that inner-ring midcentury suburbs are declining everywhere, but that "car cities" tend to be in states that have allowed cities to annex those suburbs, causing more declining areas to be within core city boundaries and causing citywide incomes to stagnate relative to suburbia.

Your thoughts, dear readers?

*I excluded one of the regions (Norfolk/Virginia Beach, Va.) listed in Saunders' article, because the larger of the two core cities (Virginia Beach) is a suburb of the smaller one (Norfolk).

Blog post

Good Jargon and Bad

Some planning jargon actually clarifies rather than confuses.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 10, 2017, 5am PST

Today, I read a fascinating article by Josh Cohen at *Next City*, titled "[What Planning Jargon Do You Wish to See Disappear?](#)". The article describes eight terms as questionable.

For example, Cohen criticizes the common use of the word "livability." He points out that "livability" is an inherently vague term: some people think sprawl is livable, others prefer neighborhoods that are dominated by single-family homes but still more walkable than most suburbs, while others prefer more compact development. In addition, there are substitute terms that are just as effective as "livability" in conveying their meaning: if you think walkable neighborhoods are more livable than sprawl, why not just say you prefer walkable neighborhoods instead?

Admittedly, even "walkability" is somewhat ambiguous—but even so, this term is not as all-encompassing as "livable." For example, a neighborhood with no sidewalks and wide streets dominated by 40 mph traffic might be considered livable by those who revere speedy driving, but it is certainly not walkable.

Cohen also criticizes some terms with a clear meaning that are nevertheless obscure to non-planners. For example, he criticizes the use of the term "cycletrack" as a synonym for "bike lane separated from traffic," because "a cycletrack is likelier to evoke an image of cyclists racing in a velodrome than a bike lane with planters and curbs." I agree; here, a synonymous phrase is less obscure and more widely understood.

But he also criticizes terms merely because they are not widely known. For example, Cohen rejects the use of the term "stroad" to describe streets with fast traffic, because "for most everyone else in the world, roads and streets are synonymous and a portmanteau of them means nothing." In other words, most people don't know what a stroad is. I agree that most Americans don't know what a stroad is—but every non-obscure term was once obscure. The genius of the word "stroad" is that it conveys a one-word mental picture of something that would otherwise require a sentence to describe—a street where cars travel so rapidly as to endanger pedestrians, but which is not a limited-access highway (which means that street lights ensure constant stop-and-go traffic, thus making both pedestrians and drivers unhappy.) I wish every American knew what a stroad was, and I am happy to help lead readers in this direction!

The term "stroad" illustrates why the creation of a new word can sometimes be a good thing: it allows us to take a complex idea and describe it in one vivid word. The best "jargon words" clarify; the worst are so vague that they increase, rather than reduce, reader confusion.

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