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Blog post

The Creation of a "Drive to Qualify" World

The cost of intown housing makes suburbia fiscally tempting- but this is in part the result of deliberate policy choices by government.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | December 31, 2013, 9am PST

Recently, I was meditating about the relationship between affordable housing and sprawl. It could be argued that auto-oriented sprawl, by opening up cheap suburban land for development, increases the housing supply and thus reduces housing costs. Under current conditions, this theory seems to correspond to reality for even for some [people who value](#) city life: a \$200,000 house in Central Islip, Long Island (where I work) or even a \$400,000 house in Mineola (a more desirable Long Island neighborhood) is certainly cheaper than a million-dollar condo in Manhattan, even if you have to buy a car to live in Central Islip.*

But it seems to me that the connection between suburbia and cheaper housing is not a law of nature: to the extent that it is true, it is true because of public policies. Throughout America, on both the Left and the Right, it is an unstated assumption that of course, energy and transportation should be cheap, while housing should be more expensive every year.

The most obvious public subsidy to transportation is the use of general tax revenue to support new [roads](#) and public transit systems that extend into suburbia. In addition, government tries to keep energy cheap- not just by failing to tax externalities of energy use such as pollution, but also by encouraging energy production. Liberals tend to favor subsidies for renewable energy, while conservatives are more interested in encouraging oil and gas production- but both groups tend to favor keeping energy (and thus transportation) cheap for the average consumer. Even though gasoline costs have increased over the past few years, they are still cheap enough to make automobile-dependent suburbs affordable for many (especially for people who work in suburbia and thus may not have a particularly stressful commute to suburban jobs).

By contrast, zoning law is designed to ensure ever-rising housing prices, by restricting the supply of housing. A developer must typically get government permission to build a lot of houses- and to build houses in any non-rural neighborhood, the developer must

fight or compromise with neighborhood activists in order to get that permission. The neighbors are unlikely to support the new housing, since they can usually sell their housing for more if the supply is restricted. In addition, to the extent that there are noneconomic effects of new housing (such as increased traffic) the neighbors bear the burden of the new traffic, but don't get any obvious short-term benefits.

To the extent that local governments have any independent interests, they will favor new housing only if it is expensive, since expensive housing yields more property tax revenue. Thus, local governments are unlikely to favor large amounts of new housing only in certain unusual situations, such as where the housing is expensive enough to increase the local tax base.

It seems to me that just as cheap energy is noncontroversial, zoning laws that restrict housing are generally pretty noncontroversial; zoning is opposed on the Right only by hard-core libertarians, and on the Left only to the extent necessary to keep the poor housed.

It seems to me that zoning tends to increase urban property prices more than rural property prices. The most heavily settled areas tend to have the most neighbors who are likely to fight new housing. In addition, urban areas tend to be more fiscally stressed and thus to have governments worried about their tax base (either because they are big cities with lots of poor people who don't contribute very much to the tax base, or because they are suburbs worrying about attracting those poor people). Thus, urban and inner-suburban governments are less likely to permit new housing than thinly settled semirural areas. As a result, prosperous urban areas tend to allow less new housing, and urban areas will have cheap housing only where sprawl has reduced the demand for urban living.

Government's biases are not inevitable. In theory, government could be heavily biased in favor of environmental protection and preventing homelessness, instead of being biased in favor of protecting homeowners' interests in selling their homes for high prices or avoiding externalities from new development. In such an alternate universe, transportation prices would be high (because government forces up energy prices to encourage conservation) so moving to energy-consuming suburbs would be expensive. On the other hand, housing in my alternate universe could be like groceries— a little more expensive in Manhattan perhaps, but still so cheap that it would not make much sense to move to one neighborhood to another for cheaper housing. In such a universe, it would make no sense to encourage migration to suburbia in order to reduce housing costs.

In sum, the cost advantage of suburbia, where it exists, is not a result solely of the free market. Like suburbia itself, this cost advantage is a result of public policy.

*Of course, this is only true in metros where cities are more expensive than suburbs- which is not true everywhere. To find counterexamples, [examine](#) the Center for Neighborhood Technology's analysis of housing and transportation costs.

Blog post

Even Controlling For Poverty, Urban Places Are Thinner Than Suburbs

Poor neighborhoods tend to be fatter than rich ones, whether they are urban or suburban. However, poor urban areas tend to be thinner than poor suburban areas, and rich urban areas tend to be thinner than rich suburban areas.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | December 22, 2013, 9am PST

A recent study purporting to [debunk](#) the link between sprawl and ill health has gotten much publicity recently. Some commentators have trotted out the old argument that plenty of city-dwellers, especially in poor areas, are fat, so therefore sprawl really just doesn't matter.

I am perfectly willing to concede for the sake of argument that poorer people tend to be fatter (though a CDC report suggests that this correlation is more [modest](#) than some believe). But this doesn't mean that sprawl doesn't matter, any more than the strong link between smoking and lung cancer disproves the existence of other causes of lung cancer such as air pollution.

If sprawl was truly irrelevant to obesity, rich urbanites would be no thinner than rich suburbanites, and poor urbanites would be no thinner than poor suburbanites. But county-level data (available [here](#)) suggests otherwise.

I began by looking at New York, because in that region even the central city itself is divided into different counties; thus, we can distinguish between areas of varying density in a way we cannot in regions where both the city and suburbs are in the same county.

In the least car-oriented county, New York County (also known as Manhattan) the obesity rate is only 15.1%. By contrast, suburban counties have lower poverty rates, yet have higher obesity rates. Nassau County has only a 5.2% poverty rate (less than one-third that of Manhattan), but a 21.3% obesity rate- a 16 point gap. Exurban Suffolk County had an even bigger gap, with a poverty rate comparable to that of Nassau (5.7%) but a higher obesity rate (25.6%). Exurban Putnam County had a 5.4% poverty rate and a obesity rate of 28.7%.

What if you compare these suburbs to New York's poorer urban boroughs? Even those counties' obesity rates are comparable to those of the rich suburbs. Both Brooklyn and the Bronx have poverty rates over 20%- yet Brooklyn's obesity rate is 24.5%, and the Bronx's obesity rate is 28.4%- only slightly higher than that of Suffolk County, and lower than that of Putnam County.

In other words, not only are New York's low-poverty suburbs fatter than New York's most affluent urban county (Manhattan), but they are fatter than Brooklyn, and almost as fat as the poorer-still Bronx. So in places where most people don't own cars, the positive effects of urban life may cancel out the harmful impacts of poverty, at least regarding obesity.

But how do we measure the obesity/poverty relationship in places where urban counties are not so walkable and transit-oriented as Manhattan? The measure I chose was to compare the gap between a county's obesity rate and its poverty rate. If, as in New York City's counties, a place's obesity rate is as low as its poverty rate, its people are relatively thin controlling for poverty. But if, as in New York's suburbs, the obesity rate is far higher than the poverty rate, the people are fatter than their paychecks.

In particular, I focused on three regions where the city is its own county, so that I could distinguish city from suburb. I started with St. Louis, which has an exceptionally poor central city. In St. Louis, the poverty rate is 26% while the obesity rate is 33.9% - a 7.9% gap. In next-door St. Louis County, the poverty rate is much lower (9.7%) while the obesity rate is almost as high as in the city (29%)- a 19.3% gap. And in well-off exurban St. Charles County, the poverty rate is even lower (4.9%) while the obesity rate is comparable to St. Louis County (29.7%)- almost a 25 point gap. In other words, as you move out from the urban core the poverty rate nosedives while the obesity rate declines only slightly- evidence, it seems to me, that if St. Louis city was richer it would probably be thinner than its suburbs, or if St. Louis County had as many poor people as St. Louis its' residents auto-dependent lifestyle would make them fatter still.

Then I looked at Philadelphia, which had a somewhat similar pattern; the city's obesity rate is higher than that of its suburbs (31.5% for the city, 21-27% for Montgomery, Chester, Delaware, and Bucks Counties). But the poverty/obesity gap is much smaller for the city. In Philadelphia, the poverty rate is 25.6% and the obesity rate is 31.5%- a 5.9% gap. By contrast, in the suburban counties the poverty rate ranged from 5.1% (Chester) to 9.5% (Delaware), yielding gaps of about 14-20%. For example, exurban Chester County had a obesity rate of 21.2% and a poverty rate of only 6.7%, a 14.5% gap.

What about where the central city is a bit more affluent? San Francisco is also its own county, and has only a slightly higher poverty rate than most suburban counties. (The city's poverty rate is 12.3 percent; Marin and San Mateo Counties have poverty rates around 7%, and Contra Costa County's poverty rate is around 10%). Of these three suburban counties, two (San Mateo and Contra Costa) have obesity rates higher than San Francisco, despite having less poverty. Marin has less obesity than San Francisco, but even here the poverty/obesity gap is lower in the city. San Francisco has 12.3% poverty and 17.1% obesity (a 4.8% gap) and Marin has 7.2% poverty and 15.3% obesity (an 8.1% gap).

In sum, it seems to me that when one controls for poverty, obesity is concentrated in suburbia. One might argue that this correlation is not related to causation: that people who live in suburbs are the sort of people who prefer poor diets and lack of exercise. I do not know how one would prove or disprove this proposition; however, I did find a [map](#) listing fruit and vegetable consumption by county. If urbanites generally preferred healthier lifestyles, they might consume more fruits and vegetables than suburbanites.

But in some regions, city residents consumed even fewer fruits and vegetables than suburbanites; for example, in St. Louis, 79 percent of people did not eat enough, as opposed to 74 percent of St. Louis County residents. Even in places where city-dwellers were thinner than suburbanites, fruit and vegetable consumption was similar in city and suburb. For example, 74 percent of Manhattanites did not eat enough, about the same as in Nassau County (73) and Suffolk (74).

Thus, it does not appear that suburbanites are otherwise more or less health-conscious than city-dwellers- a fact that reinforces the link between suburban automobile-dependency and obesity.

Blog post

Is Washington A Childless City?

Some media commentary suggests that fast-gentrifying cities such as Washington are unable to attract families. In Washington, the reality is more complex; the city's high-income neighborhoods actually gained children over the past decade.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | December 11, 2013, 2pm PST

One response to urban gentrification are the claim that even prosperous cities are [childless](#) cities, able to retain twenty-somethings but not to retain families. A recent [study](#) of Washington by the Urban Institute allowed me to analyze this theory on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis, rather than merely relying on citywide data.

In particular, I examined the Institute's division of the city into [neighborhood clusters](#): groups of two or three similar areas. I found that some types of neighborhoods were indeed losing children, but that other parts of the District actually became more attractive to families over the past decade.

The city's traditionally low-income areas east of the Anacostia River did indeed lose children; every single neighborhood cluster east of the river had fewer children in 2010 than in 2000. In Ward 8 (the city's far southeastern corner) the number of children decreased by 16 percent during the 2000s. Other poor areas in eastern Washington sustained similar losses.

In newly gentrifying areas just east of Rock Creek Park, the number of children declined even more rapidly. For example, in the Mt. Pleasant/Columbia Heights neighborhood cluster (where the non-Hispanic white population nearly tripled between 1990 and 2010) the number of children decreased by 32 percent over the past decade. In this area, it appears that working-class families left and middle-class singles and couples took their place.

But in the city's always-affluent areas west of Rock Creek Park, the number of children increased in six out of seven neighborhood clusters. For example, in Georgetown/Burleith, the child population increased by 46 percent.

So it appears that (at least in Washington) long-established affluent neighborhoods are able to retain families.

Blog post

In Every Age....

At least one Hanukah song is easily adaptable by urbanists.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 29, 2013, 10am PST

My favorite Chanukah song is [Mi'Y Malel](#) (Who Can Retell)? (English lyrics [here](#)).

The song asks us:

"Who can retell the things that befell us, who can count them? In every age a hero or sage came to our aid."

The next stanza cites a specific example: "At this time of year in days of yore, Maccabees the Temple did restore", and so on.

I love this song because it is so easily altered for other contexts. For example, those of us who are new urbanists could write something like this:

Who can retell the things that befell us, who can count them?

In every age a hero or sage came to our aid.

In New York in days of yore, the city wanted to make the Village into one big road;

Jane Jacobs stopped his plans and taught us all, that the city was no longer just for cars.

Who can retell... [repeated]

Feel free to improve this- or better yet add additional stanzas!

Blog post

Who Is Migrating To Cities?

Millennials really are migrating to cities in large numbers- but older age groups are merely leaving less rapidly than in the past.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 18, 2013, 9am PST

I just discovered an interesting new website, [Net Migration Patterns for US](#). This site contains migration data by age group for every county in the nation, and for every decade between the 1950s and the 2000s. The issue I was most interested was: are millennials really returning to walkable urban cores? And are baby boomers doing the same? My answers: yes and (sort of) no.

I focused on the counties containing five of the six most transit-friendly urban cores in the U.S.: Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco (all of which comprise their own counties), Manhattan, and Suffolk County, Mass. (which is dominated by the city of Boston).^{*} By contrast, I was less interested in counties that contained a mix of urban places and suburban sprawl (such as Buffalo's Erie County or Chicago's Cook).

In all five cities, I saw the same pattern: net migration was positive for twentysomethings- that is, more people moved in than out. For age groups over 35 (and in some cities, over 30), net migration was generally negative- that is, more people moved out than in. However, even for older age groups, net outmigration was lower than in prior decades.

For example, in Manhattan, the net migration of 20-24 year olds into Manhattan was huge during the 2000s: 108 per 100 people. By contrast, in the disastrous 1970s, net migration of this group was still positive, but much less so: only 33 per 100. By contrast, older baby boomers (60-64 year olds) actually moved out more than they moved in: outmigrants exceeded immigrants by 7 percent during the 2000s, down from 17 percent during the 1970s. (I note that this pattern was not unique to 60-64 year olds; the pattern among other over-35 age groups was roughly similar). In other words, older people still left Manhattan- but in smaller numbers than in past decades.

Other cities experienced similar patterns. For example:

*In San Francisco, net migration of 20-24 year olds was 101 per 100 (up from 42 in the 1970s). Net outmigration of 60-64 year olds was only 5 per 100 (down from 12 in the 1970s).

*In Philadelphia, net immigration of 20-24 year olds was 33 per 100 in the 2000s; by contrast, outmigration exceeded immigration in the 1970s, even among this age group. 60-64 year olds left more often than they moved in- but again, by a much narrower margin than in the past (4 per 100 in the 2000s, 15 per 100 in the 1970s).

*In Washington, DC, net immigration of 20-24 year olds was 119 per 100 in the 2000s, as opposed to only 6 per 100 in the 1970s. Outmigration among 60-64 year olds was 8 per 100, as opposed to 18 in the 1970s.

*In mostly-urban Suffolk County (i.e. Boston) net migration of 20-24 year olds was 150 per 100, perhaps because of the city's colleges. But even in Boston, there was a big difference between the 2000s and the 1970s, when net immigration among this group was only 51 per 100. 60-64 year olds moved out at a rate of 5 per 100 in the 2000s, down from 17 per 100 per 2000.

In sum, compared to the 1970s:

*cities are doing a better job at appealing to their base of young adults. In all five cities, more twentysomethings moved in than moved out; moreover, immigration was substantially higher in the past decade than in the 1970s.

*cities still aren't attracting baby boomers in large numbers (at least not numbers large enough to offset outmigrants)- but they are doing a better job of doing so than they did a few decades ago. Although outmigrants exceeded in-movers in all five cities discussed above, they did so by a narrower margin in the 2000s than in the 1970s. Based on my reading of the charts discussed above, this also seems to be true for other over-35 age groups.

The story of urban revitalization in the popular press consists of multiple stories: a story of millennials [rediscovering](#) cities and a story of empty-nesters [moving back](#). The first story is quite consistent with statistical reality, the second story somewhat less so.

*Chicago is also as transit-oriented as the abovementioned cities; however, Cook County is about evenly split between Chicago and its suburbs, and thus not comparable to the other cities discussed.

Blog post

Buttons of Death

"Push buttons" designed to protect pedestrians often don't.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 8, 2013, 1pm PST

A common sight, especially in suburbia, is the "push button" at an intersection. I come to an intersection and see a big button telling me to push it in order to cross the street. I push the button, and nothing happens. I push the button again and again. Eventually, the light turns red at the intersection and I cross, never knowing whether the button did any good.

I recently learned that the purpose of the button is not to make the light change more rapidly, but to give pedestrians more time to cross when the light does change. At one eight-lane street in Jacksonville, pedestrians have 49 seconds to cross if they push the button, and only [11 seconds](#) otherwise. Needless to say, the combination of high-speed streets and short crossing times breeds pedestrian injuries: most recently, a woman was killed by a speeding vehicle while crossing the street on the way to Yom Kippur services.

It seems to me that these "push buttons" are not an ineffective way to improve pedestrian safety. As noted above, a push button often will not tell pedestrians what it does; thus, the pedestrian will not even know that the button gives the pedestrian more time. I do not see why the pedestrian should have to be an expert on traffic policy to have a decent amount of time to cross.

Instead, every pedestrian should have a decent amount of time to cross- at least 49 seconds, or better yet, 60 (as I saw at one Washington, D.C. intersection last month) seconds. Since cars routinely wait far more than 60 seconds to cross some intersections, it seems to me that 60 seconds should be a normal traffic-light time, button or no button.

Another improvement (recently enacted at Jacksonville's intersection of death) is to create a countdown clock, so that the pedestrian knows how much time he has to cross. Whether the pedestrian has 11 seconds or 60, he should at least know how risky his trip is.

But even with long crossing times, a pedestrian still risks her life when crossing the street for another reason: just because the pedestrian has the light on her side does not mean there are no cars coming at her. Here in New York, when I see a "Walk" sign at a north-south avenue sign I only know that I need not fear a car coming southbound or northbound- but I am still fair game for cars making left and right turns. For these cars, the light is still green. One solution to this problem is to have "four-way" stops where (at least for a few seconds) the light is red for motorists making turns as well as those who are driving straight through an intersection.

Blog post

(Somewhat) Complete Streets

"Complete Streets" policies are a good start, but only a start.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 19, 2013, 9pm PDT

One pro-pedestrian, pro-bicyclist trend is the rise of "Complete Streets" policies. Even car-dependent [Houston](#) plans to adopt such a policy. That city's mayor has drafted an [executive order](#) that defines "Complete Streets" as roads that "take into account all users." including pedestrians and bicyclists as well as drivers. The order further states that the city shall develop a transportation plan to direct street improvements, apparently with the goal of making streets more complete. However, the order does not dictate the contents of such a plan in any detail. The order also directs city planning officials to prepare an annual report to the mayor detailing data related to street improvements. The order does not tell officials exactly what data to collect, but mentions new sidewalks and bicycle facilities as the sort of improvements that might belong in the report.

It seems to me that this order doesn't do very much. First of all, it doesn't even mandate that the city's list of improvements includes new sidewalks, bike lanes, street trees etc. Second, even if the order had required the city to list new sidewalks or bicycle facilities, it would not require the construction of such facilities- just require that the city publish a list of what it was doing. In sum, Houston's ordinance seems to be more about procedure and full disclosure than about substantive policy.

Other ordinances are a bit more aggressive. For example, Indianapolis' [ordinance](#) states that the city's facilities *shall* be built so that "users of all ages and abilities shall travel safely and independently"- thus implying that people too young to drive should be able to travel independently. In addition, the law directs the city to "approach every transportation improvement ... as an opportunity to create safer, more accessible streets for all users."

But the law does not tell the city how to do this, other than by telling the city to "use the best and latest design standards available", incorporate unspecified "Complete Streets principles" in manuals, regulations and several other listed forms of rules, train staffers on nonmotorized transportation issues, and disclose the city's progress to the public in various ways. All of these provisions seem perfectly reasonable but quite general; the complete streets policy does not specify exactly how any of the city's streets should be reformed.

Moreover, the Indianapolis ordinance contains a joker in the deck: even if the Director of Public Works decided that a given change was mandated by the complete streets policy, he could ignore complete streets criteria if, in his or her judgment, "the application of Complete Streets principles is unnecessary, unduly cost prohibitive, or inappropriate because it would be contrary to public safety." Concepts such as "unnecessary" and "unduly cost prohibitive" seem to me to be a blank check for public officials.

Indianapolis' policy is the [best](#) in the nation according to a national complete streets organization. Yet even the Indianapolis policy does not tell decisionmakers exactly what the city's streets should look like or how to reform existing streets, and gives the city enormous discretion to ignore this already-vague policy. And perhaps this is as it should be, given the possible impracticality of retrofitting every single street in the city.

Complete streets policies are certainly better than nothing; by suggesting that decisionmakers should be biased in favor of complete streets, they might increase the number of pro-pedestrian, pro-bicyclist road improvements. But such broad policies are no substitute for the detail work of finding funding to widen sidewalks, install bike lanes, and otherwise make streets less dangerous for nondrivers.

Blog post

Gentrification, Shmentrification

Despite media commentary about urban gentrification and the decline of suburbia, suburbs still have far less than a proportionate share of regional poverty.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 1, 2013, 8pm PDT

One story I've read over and over again is as follows: cities are getting richer—so much so that suburbs are turning into slums, and poor people are being driven into suburbia by exploding rents. The story comes from urbanists [celebrating](#) the rebirth of cities, and from egalitarians who worry about [gentrification](#). And this "story" has some basis in reality: **some** urban neighborhoods are indeed growing wealthier, and some cities (including my own New York) suffer from out-of-control housing costs. And it is also true that some suburbs are becoming quite poor.

But is it really true that our cities are suffering from a shortage of poverty? If it was, we would find that cities have lower poverty rates than suburbs.

To examine the question, I looked at 2007 and 2012 American Community Survey figures for several major cities and their suburbs.^(FN1) In particular, I focused on the six cities where a quarter or more of the population used public transit, because these are the cities where municipal boundaries are most likely to coincide with pre-sprawl development (as opposed to cities such as Jacksonville which include large chunks of suburban land). I found that in all six of these cities (Boston, Chicago, New York, Washington, Philadelphia and San Francisco) poverty actually increased during the economic downturn. I also found that in all of these cities, poverty rates were higher in central cities, although the city/suburb gap was usually somewhat smaller than it had been before the economic downturn.

Specifically:

*In Boston, poverty was almost three times as high in the city as in the suburbs before the recession (20.4% city, 7.2% suburb). Today, poverty is "only" 2.3 times higher (20.5% city, 8.9% suburbs). At this rate, the suburbs will be as poor as the city in about 2080.

*In Chicago, poverty was 2.7 times higher in the city before the recession (20.5% city, 7.7% suburbs). Now, poverty is "only" 2.2 times higher (23.9% city, 11% suburbs).

*In New York, poverty was 2.7 times higher in the city before the recession (18.5% city, 6.8% suburbs). Today, poverty is "only" 2.3 times higher (21.2% city, 9.3% suburb).

*In Philadelphia, poverty was over three times as high in the city before the recession (23.8% city, 7.4% suburb). This is still the case (26.9% city, 8.7% suburb).

*In supposedly hyper-gentrified San Francisco, the city/suburb gap actually widened during the recession. In 2007, city poverty was 10.5%, only 1.3 times higher than in the suburbs (8.2%). In 2012, the city poverty rate zoomed to 15%, 1.5 times the suburban poverty rate (10.1%).

*In Washington, D.C., the 2007 city poverty rate was three times that of suburbia (16.4% city, 5.5% suburbs). Today, Washington's urban poverty rate is "only" 2.5 times higher (18.2% city, 7.1% suburbs).

Some cities do have lower city/suburb gaps than these older cities. For example, Seattle's poverty rate is only 1.3 times that of suburbia (13.6% city, 10.8% suburb), and Portland is close on its heels (17.7% city, 12.5% suburb). But these cities include dozens of square miles of suburban sprawl, and thus might not be comparable to cities that were "built out" in 1950.

In sum, cities might be losing their middle class. But they don't seem to have any problem keeping the poor.

FN1: Data for suburbs is available in [this](#) Brookings Institution report, at the data appendix. Data for cities is available at the American Community Survey (temporarily unavailable due to the government shutdown).

Blog post

Is Turnabout Fair Play?

If American politicians and bureaucrats had favored public transit or pedestrians as aggressively as they favored cars in the 20th century, public policy would be very different indeed.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | September 8, 2013, 1am PDT

After reading yet more blather about the "war on cars" or "density-pushing planners" I recently had a thought: what if government really did favor transit and compact development as aggressively as they had favored sprawl in the 20th century? How different would planning and transportation rules be?

For example, in the first half of the 20th century, government at all levels spent public money on roads for automobiles, while giving limited or no support to streetcars (which at first were private). As transit providers began to lose money, government took them over, and the federal government started to support public transit in the 1960s. Today, the federal government spends about [four times](#) as much on highways as on public transit. As a result of these policies, many cities have weak public transit systems, while many people and jobs have moved to suburbs served by highways.

So if government completely reversed course in the 21st century, it would reverse funding ratios: that is, spend half a century spending several times as much on public transit as on highways, and then spend another half century completely defunding highways (much as it ignored transit in the early and mid-20th century).

In the 1950s, government heavily subsidized suburbia, through Federal Housing Administration (FHA) lending criteria that [favored](#) suburbs. For example, FHA refused to subsidize mortgages in racially diverse urban neighborhoods, and favored new single-family homes (which tended to be in suburbs) over renovating existing homes- a policy that encouraged middle-class homeowners to move to suburbs. So to completely reverse course, the FHA would have to spend a couple of decades refusing to insure mortgages in any neighborhood built after the New Deal, while subsidizing mortgages in older neighborhoods.

These education and housing policies affected where we grow- that is, why people moved from cities to suburbs. But a somewhat different set of policies affect how we grow- that is, why suburban (and in some cities, urban) development is oriented almost exclusively towards cars.

Since the [1920s](#), most American zoning codes have mandated that huge swaths of land be limited to low-density residential use, ensuring that many Americans do not live within walking distance of public transit. To truly reverse this policy, government would have to spend the 21st century mandating that new development be at densities sufficient to support transit, and would require a mix of residential and commercial uses to the extent possible.

Since the [1950s](#), most zoning codes have also required that commercial landowners and multifamily dwellings provide visitors with parking lots and garages, thus effectively subsidizing driving by making parking more abundant. And because zoning codes also required buildings to be set back from the street, these parking lots were usually in front of buildings, thus ensuring that pedestrians must waste time walking through ugly parking lots in order to reach their destinations. To reverse this policy over the next 60 years, government would have to establish maximum parking requirements (as a few cities have in fact done) and require buildings to be in front of sidewalks so pedestrians could reach them more easily.

I do not favor all of the policies suggested above; some seem a bit too intrusive and paternalistic. However, these ideas are worth thinking about as an intellectual exercise - that is, to see how much change would have to occur for government to favor nondrivers as aggressively as it favored drivers in the 20th century.

Blog post

Obstacles to a "Metropolitan Revolution"

In theory, cities might be able to revitalize their economies and infrastructure. But in reality, state governments can create all kinds of obstacles to city policy.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | August 23, 2013, 9am PDT

I just finished reading a new book by Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley, [The Metropolitan Revolution](#). This book discusses a wide variety of municipal policies designed to spur economic innovation (as well as economic development initiatives by private foundations and other nonprofits).

Katz and Bradley seem to have done their homework, and their book may be valuable to planners and philanthropists looking for ideas. Having said that, their book strikes me as slightly too optimistic. The book's web page states that cities "are reshaping our economy and fixing our broken political system." And where governors and state legislators get out of the way, this description might turn out to be accurate.* But in fact, there is a lot that states can do to sabotage this "revolution."

Because states are in control of state highways and transportation departments, they can limit cities' potential by following the sprawl-oriented policies of in the 1950s. For example, Texas is building Houston's third beltway in order to [spur](#) development 25 miles from downtown Houston, and Indiana and Kentucky have agreed to build two [new bridges](#) through downtown Louisville, thus making it easier to commute from Indiana to Louisville. The highways of the 1950s opened suburbia for development, thus redistributing people from city to suburb and reducing urban tax bases. I see no reason why similar policies will be any more beneficial in this century. Unfortunately, state politicians have a strong incentive to smash roads through downtowns, because road-builders(unlike transit authorities) give money to campaigns.

States can more directly wage war against municipal tax bases by dictating which taxes a municipality can impose. One particularly common tactic is to cap municipal property taxes; such "reforms" are popular not only among conservatives, but also among Democrats such as New York's Gov. Cuomo (who persuaded the New York legislature to enact a property [tax cap](#)). Such tax caps limit municipal flexibility to improve public

services or adjust to economic change. So why are they popular? Because if a governor limits municipal taxes, he or she may get the best of both worlds politically: credit for cutting taxes, without blame for cutting services. If services are cut, voters will blame the city councilors who voted for the cuts rather than the governor who foreclosed alternatives to the cuts.

Where the state and major cities are controlled by different political parties, governments may limit cities' options for political reasons: for example, in North Carolina, the State Senate voted to take control of Charlotte's [airport](#) away from the city of Charlotte, in order to give Republican-leaning suburban counties more power.

And of course, states may also impose costly liabilities upon cities. New York's Taylor Law forces municipalities to [arbitrate](#) differences with some municipal unions, thus increasing labor costs. Even without state interference, city governments might be too broke to innovate very much, because many cities decided to raise city workers' pensions in the past, leading to huge pension liabilities now that the population is aging and the retiree population is increasing.

In sum, municipal governments may be planning on a "revolution"- but without state cooperation, they will be lucky to avoid bankruptcy.

*Assuming that the policies discussed in the book are (1) worth pursuing and (2) important enough to make a significant difference in their cities' economic future. I leave this issue for another day.

Blog post

Who's Returning To The City

Are children, millennials and baby boomers returning to cities? The best answer: sometimes, sometimes, and maybe not.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | August 17, 2013, 11pm PDT

Recently, there's been a lot of Internet chatter about who likes cities and who likes suburbs: posts and articles about children [abandoning](#) cities, children [not](#) abandoning cities, [millennials](#) returning to urban centers and [baby boomers](#) doing the same. Which of these stories is supported by data?

First of all, I note that no trend applies everywhere. Places that are growing rapidly are growing in all age groups, while declining cities like Cleveland are declining in a wide variety of age groups.

So I'm going to focus not on the extremes of growth and decline, but on a few large, walkable cities that have shown modest growth and decline: Manhattan and the five cities outside New York with the highest transit ridership (Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington).*

The trend among children is complex. On the one hand, the number of children over 5 declined in most cities between the 2000 and 2010 Censuses. On the other hand, in most places the number of children age 0-5 increased in each of the cities studied except population-losing Chicago. Is this the beginning of a long-term trend? Or are parents just waiting a few extra years to move to the suburbs? I can't say.

Millennials may indeed be moving back to cities- but not to all cities. In four of my six cities, the population of millennials (persons aged 20-34) increased between 2000 and 2010: most notably in Washington (where this group increased by 23%) but also in Manhattan, Philadelphia, and Boston. (In the latter two cities, the population increased by over 10%, more rapidly than the national population of this age group). As you might expect from Chicago's overall population decline, the millennial population decreased (although no more rapidly than the overall population). Most puzzling was San Francisco, where the millennial population decreased very slightly (by about 3 percent) while the overall population went up, as did the population of young millennials (persons aged 20-24).**

By contrast, 55-64 year olds (baby boomers old enough to be "empty nesters") increased everywhere, by margins ranging from 21% in Chicago to 46% in San Francisco). Does this mean baby boomers are returning to cities? Not quite. Nationally, the number of 55-64 year olds increased by about 50 percent between 2000 and 2010, so these cities' growing baby-boomer population reflects the aging of an extremely large age group rather than migration.

So what does it all mean? My only takeaway is that the "millennials like cities" story is probably more true in more places than the "baby boomers like cities" story.

*For a summary of my data, go to my [personal](#) blog; for raw data go to the [Census](#) web page.

**However, San Francisco gained population through a slight increase in 45-54 year olds and 65+ year olds- groups that declined in some other cities.

Blog post

Progressives and Urbanists- A Difficult Relationship

Although conservatives don't always support urbanism, neither do progressives.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | July 28, 2013, 11am PDT

Much has been written about the difficult relationship between conservatives and urbanism. However, leftist progressives (that is, Americans who perceive themselves as more “progressive” or leftist than the average national Democrat)* also come into conflict with the smart growth movement (that is, people who wish to limit sprawl and make it easier for people to live in pedestrian and transit-friendly environments).

To be sure, progressives generally are not hostile to cities in principle, nor do they consistently oppose public transit or pedestrians. Nevertheless, left-wing values are sometimes in tension with those of smart growth supporters.

Leftists value equality, diversity, and (more broadly) preventing oppression in all its forms- especially oppression of the poor and of ethnic minorities. In addition, leftists tend to be suspicious of all large-scale private enterprise, because they worry that such businesses are likely to oppress laborers, consumers or the environment. By contrast, conservatives and libertarians may share these values to some extent, but are generally more interested in protecting individuals and corporations from government coercion and in the protection of social order.

In addition, leftists are more likely to see the world as a zero-sum game: that is, they worry that policies that help large businesses or the well-off may harm the poor. By contrast, conservatives and libertarians believe that policies that help the middle and upper classes are often likely to help society as a whole (including the poor).

As a result of these values, leftists place a high value on cities being accessible to the poor. Smart growth supporters, by contrast, believe that the late 20th-century policy of turning cities into holding pens for the poor has been disastrous, and wish to make cities places where most Americans can live- not just the poor, but also the middle and upper classes.

These values come into conflict in a variety of settings. If sprawl is ever to be reversed, cities must have many more housing units and many more jobs. But progressives tend to worry about gentrification- that is, they tend to worry that if the middle class and upper classes are allowed to return to cities, the poor will somehow be squeezed out.

** Although progressives claim to support racial and class integration, they worry that short-term integration will ultimately lead to a new kind of segregation, in which the poor are merely shifted from urban ghettos to suburban ghettos.

More moderate urbanists can sometimes reach common ground with progressives by supporting government-imposed safeguards to prevent displacement, such as requiring a percentage of new housing units to be affordable to poorer renters. Such safeguards, however, may increase the cost of doing business in cities, thus reducing affordability for everyone but the direct beneficiaries of such safeguards.

Progressive concerns about corporate power may also get in the way of infill development. For example, leftists are, I suspect,*** more likely to oppose allowing large developers to build new high-rise office buildings, or to oppose allowing new retail chains in urban locations (especially if, like Wal-Mart, those chains are really large and/or have a history of poor relationships with left-leaning labor unions). By contrast, more conservative, market-oriented urbanists tend to be more supportive of private development, and to believe that any infill is good infill, at least if it is built in a reasonably pedestrian-friendly manner.

Although leftists worry that too much integration will lead to gentrification, they also oppose segregation. This too creates tension with smart growth supporters in some contexts. For example, leftists believe that it is *really, really* important for every school to contain a fairly even mix of races and classes. In the alternative universe where suburban and urban schools were equally subject to this principle, more moderate smart growth supporters would generally agree.

But in the non-alternative-universe United States, many suburban public school districts tend to have very few poor people, and thus to have non-diverse public schools. As a result, these schools have become much more popular with middle- class parents than urban schools. Leftists are more likely to believe that urban classrooms must nevertheless be “diverse” (i.e. reflect a city’s class and/or racial balance) as possible, while more moderate urbanists are willing to relax the left-wing insistence on diversity in order to attract middle- and upper-class parents.

For example, in the 1970s, federal judges required every urban school to be equally diverse (and thus unattractive to middle-class parents), while a more moderate Supreme

Court prevented the expansion of such "school busing"**** to the suburbs. Leftists nevertheless continued to favor busing, while moderate urbanists did not. Today, a moderate or conservative urbanist would be more likely to favor public support of selective urban schools that, because of their selectivity, might be attractive to parents seeking to place their children in academically demanding environments. By contrast, leftists are more likely to worry that such schools would reduce diversity and drain resources from more diverse schools.

In sum, neither left-wing nor right-wing priorities consistently line up with those of the smart growth movement. It follows that smart growth supporters have neither consistent friends nor consistent enemies- only consistent interests.

*As opposed to moderates and moderate liberals, whose views tend to be a not-so-coherent mix of conservative and leftist sentiments. If you think of yourself as ideologically closer to Dennis Kucinich than to President Obama or the Clintons, you are probably a progressive leftist. If you are closer to the latter than to either Kucinich or to Republicans you are a moderate or moderate liberal.

**Although I am generally skeptical of this view, its merits are best left for another post.

***My suspicion is based on this: when I see attacks on high-rises and large-scale retail, they are often accompanied by anti-business rhetoric about "greedy developers", etc. Having said that, I can't prove my suspicion with more concrete data.

****So named because to facilitate racial balance, school systems bused students from black parts of town to white parts of town and vice versa.

Blog post

The Side Effects of Property Taxes

American reliance on property taxes leads to NIMBYism and periodic tax revolts, thus impeding both development and basic public services.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | July 4, 2013, 1pm PDT

A recent [article](#) in the Economist suggests that property taxes are more pro-growth than other taxes, because property taxes are more stable than other sources of revenue. Even assuming this is the case, property taxes have a variety of negative side effects that the article fails to consider.

Property taxes promote NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) resistance to new housing. If a housing development is unusually affordable, the housing will produce less property tax revenue than the rest of the housing stock. Thus, the housing will (compared to more expensive housing) reduce the municipal tax base- which means higher taxes or fewer services for existing taxpayers. In such a situation, the municipality's residents have an excellent reason to oppose the development..

But what if a proposed housing development is more expensive than nearby housing? The new development may make all of the city or neighborhood's housing more valuable, thus causing the municipality to force everyone to pay more taxes. Such a revaluation may be good news for neighbors who wish to sell out- but bad news for other neighbors who will have to pay higher taxes to stay in their homes. Thus, neighbors may rationally oppose the expensive housing as well, fearing that the new housing will cause them to be forced out of their homes by higher property taxes.

It follows that municipal reliance on property taxes leads to high levels of NIMBYism, which means less housing would get built than would otherwise be the case, which in turn leads to out-of-control housing prices.

In addition, property taxes tend to be extremely unpopular because they are often assessed in a lump sum (as the Economist article admits). So a city dependent on property taxes is likely to have its revenues periodically reduced by tax revolts. State-level politicians in particular have an incentive to buy votes by promising to reduce local property taxes, because if a city is forced to reduce services as a result, mayors rather than governors will suffer at the polls. Is this a good thing? I think not, because when one level of government makes decisions that another level can be blamed for, the public accountability that democracy rests upon is eroded. Moreover, the public services provided by municipalities include the most obviously "basic" such as fire and police- so when state government tampers with municipal services, it tampers with public order.

Blog post

How to Encourage Terrorism

Shutting down cities as a response to terrorism makes such violence more rewarding and thus more tempting.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | June 3, 2013, 5pm PDT

In April, Gov. Duval Patrick decided to [shut down Boston](#) in response to a terrorist bombing that killed three people, shutting down public transportation and encouraging people to stay home behind locked doors. This is the dialogue that I wish that occurred between the press and Gov. Patrick.

PRESS: Why did you shut down all economic activity in Boston?

PATRICK: To fight terrorism. There was a dangerous man out there on the loose.

PRESS: You mean the teenage bomber, Mr. Tsarnaev, correct?

PATRICK: Yes.

PRESS: What's done is done. Will you do the same thing the next time there's a bombing?

PATRICK: Well, I hope there won't be, but, um, maybe yes.

PRESS: So let's suppose that there is another terrorist out there who blows up a few more people. If you follow the same policy next time, what results has he accomplished?

PATRICK: Killed a few people and ...um....

PRESS: shuts down the economy too, right?

PATRICK: I admit it, but listen, lives are at stake.

PRESS: Indeed they are. But let's suppose that you had reacted the way President Bush reacted after Sept. 11, telling people to go about their business rather than being intimidated. What would the terrorist have accomplished then?

PATRICK: Killed people.

PRESS: But not shut down the economy, right?

PATRICK: Agreed.

PRESS: So with your policies, the terrorist kills people AND shuts down the economy, at least for a few days. But with the Bush policies, he kills people but DOESN'T shut down the economy. Which is the bigger impact?

PATRICK: I guess, killing people AND shutting down the economy.

PRESS: So let's put ourselves in the shoes of a potential terrorist. Is he more likely to commit the act if he has a smaller impact, or if he has a bigger impact affecting more people?

PATRICK: I guess the latter, because then the benefit of his act (from his point of view) outweighs the harm caused by his death or imprisonment.

PRESS: So we've already established that the bigger the impact from a terrorist act, the more likely it is that a would-be terrorist will decide to go out and blow up people, and that if a terrorist causes you to shut down the city, he has created an economic and social impact that might not exist otherwise. Correct?

PATRICK: Yes.

PRESS: So doesn't it follow that by shutting down the city, you make terrorism more appealing, and you are encouraging future would-be terrorists to start blowing up people?

PATRICK: You got me there.

Blog post

Planning is Not Necessary

Municipal comprehensive plans are neither necessary nor sufficient for smart growth.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 19, 2013, 9am PDT

A few months ago, I [argued](#) in a blog post that comprehensive planning (which I define narrowly as municipal comprehensive plans that override zoning codes)* is not sufficient to limit sprawl, because some cities' comprehensive plan provisions in fact **promote** automobile-dependent sprawl. In my post, I cited comprehensive plan provisions that promote single-use zoning, low density, and streets that are too wide to be safe for pedestrians.

It could be argued, however, that even if comprehensive planning is not sufficient to limit sprawl, it is in fact **necessary** to limit sprawl. But I doubt that this is the case, because many smart growth policies can be implemented either through local zoning codes or through statewide legislation.

The policies discussed in my earlier post provide excellent examples. Single-use zoning might make it harder for people to live within walking distance of shops and jobs. It is certainly possible that a local comprehensive plan could turn single-use zones into mixed-use zones- but a form-based code, or even a local zoning code amendment, could do the same thing. Similarly, statewide legislation could limit municipalities' power to engage in single-use zoning.**

Low-density zoning makes single-use zoning more oppressive, by ensuring that only a few people can live within walking distance of public transit or commercial streets. A city can reform such zoning without making comprehensive plans binding, or even without writing a comprehensive plan. For example, a city could in theory amend its zoning code to eliminate density regulation altogether. A city committed to more moderate reform can raise the maximum density in its lower-density zones to levels high enough to support regular bus service, and can raise the maximum density in its higher-density zones to levels high enough to support regular rail service. Similarly, statewide legislation could limit municipal power to regulate density.

My sense from reading a few codes is that cities typically address street design in subdivision regulations. These regulations can also be reformed even in the absence of

a comprehensive plan; just as current subdivision regulations might favor six-and eight-lane streets, a smart growth subdivision regulation might limit commercial streets to three or four lanes.

In sum, comprehensive plans are just a procedural tool for regulating land use. Thus, many substantive goals that a city can achieve through plans can also be achieved through direct reform of zoning codes or through statewide legislation that limits municipal discretion.

Now, of course, one might argue that it is politically impossible to reform zoning codes or statewide zoning enabling laws. But if that's true, won't it be equally impossible to reform comprehensive plans?

*On the other hand one could define comprehensive planning more broadly as **any** set of broad rules designed to govern specific land use decisions. I concede that by under this broader definition, planning is indeed necessary to achieve any policy goal.

**On the other hand, statewide legislation may be less easy to amend, and thus less flexible, than local laws. The desirability of such statewide action is best left for another post.

Blog post

A Minor Setback for Pedestrians

Municipal setback requirements inconvenience pedestrians for no good reason.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 29, 2013, 12pm PDT

Municipal zoning codes and comprehensive plans often require buildings to be set back far from the street. As a result, the metropolitan landscape sometimes looks like one giant strip mall; every building is separated from the street either by a parking lot or by some form of greenspace.

These rules inconvenience pedestrians in a variety of ways. First, setbacks artificially reduce density by reducing the amount of land available for housing and jobs. Since

good transit service requires a minimal level of density (at least [five](#) units per acre for hourly bus service, and [more](#) for higher-quality bus service or rail), lower density means less transit service. Second, setbacks also force pedestrians to spend more time walking between buildings and sidewalks, thus making their commutes longer and more inconvenient. Third, setbacks make pedestrians feel less enclosed, making walking a less pleasant experience.

So why do cities still have these rules? Seattle's comprehensive plan makes a variety of arguments for mandatory setbacks. First, the plan claims that setbacks "ensure access to light and air." But all human beings breathe air no matter where buildings are placed, so "air" is irrelevant. Access to "light" also exists no matter where buildings are placed (with the possible exception of very tall buildings* that might cast shadows).

The plan also claims that setbacks create a "sense of privacy." This argument is so subjective that it is immune to verification. Having said that, I have lived in buildings that are near the sidewalk and those that are not, and I don't feel like I have any less privacy in the first situation.

Finally, the city claims that setbacks "provide adequate transition between zones of different intensities." This argument would justify setbacks for buildings at the border of two zones, but not for other buildings.

In sum, all of the city's arguments for setbacks appear to me to be unpersuasive.

*Living in midtown Manhattan, I notice that even streets occupied by very tall buildings (like Avenue of the Americas) sometimes have ample sunlight, depending on the time of the day and the side of the street at issue. So even in the "worst case scenario" of a skyscraper-dominated street, it is not true that buildings that front the sidewalk reduce sunlight.

Blog post

Which cities are (perceived as) safest?

A Gallup poll asked residents of each Congressional district whether they felt safe walking alone at night in their city or area. Although city residents feared crime more than suburbs, there were some surprises.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 16, 2013, 3pm PDT

In 2010, a Gallup poll asked 1000 Americans each day, "Do you feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where you live?" After a year or so of polling, the Gallup organization sorted the results by congressional district. The full results are [here](#). A few patterns I noticed:

*North vs. South. By and large, northerners felt less afraid than southerners. For example, in Florida, there was no congressional district where more than 73% of people felt safe walking alone at night. Similarly, in Georgia only one of the state's 12 congressional districts had a higher safety score. By contrast, in Wisconsin all but one of the state's eight districts yielded a safety score over 73%.

*Cities vs. suburbs. There seemed to be a moderately consistent pattern of suburbs scoring ahead of cities. For example, in Wisconsin, only 60% of the city of Milwaukee's residents felt it was safe to walk at night, as opposed to 84 percent in a neighboring suburban district. Milwaukee's "safety score" seemed to be about average for urban congressional districts. Generally, districts containing all of a city scored in the 50s and 60s- for example, the District of Columbia (62%), the First District of Colorado (Denver, 61%), the 7th of Indiana (Indianapolis, 58%), the 3rd of Kentucky (Louisville, 66%), the 7th of Maryland (Baltimore, 55%), and the 8th of Mass. (Boston, 64%).

*Outliers in both directions. Some cities achieved almost-suburban levels of perceived safety. Generally, these were cities that in fact did have lower murder rates than other major cities. For example, Seattle's safety score (72%) was almost equal to that of a neighboring suburban district (78%). Similarly, Portland was perceived as safe by 69 percent of residents, just slightly below the levels of nearby suburban districts. This perception reflects reality: in 2011, both cities had only 3 murders per 100,000 people (lower than the national rate). Nancy Pelosi's district, which includes most of the city of San Francisco clocked in at 71%- not quite as high as suburbia, but pretty close.

At the other end of the spectrum, the nation's murder capitals were indeed perceived as unsafe by their residents. In the congressional district containing New Orleans (the nation's [murder capital](#)) only 48% of residents felt comfortable walking at night, one of the lowest scores in the nation. (In fact, the district containing suburban Metairie had a safety score of only 67%, well below most northern suburbs). Similarly, the two districts containing most of the city of Detroit (the 13th and 14th districts) had safety scores of 51 and 49 percent- not surprising given that in Detroit there were 48 murders per 100,000 people in 2011, eight times as many as New York and about three times as many as Milwaukee).

*Ritzy intown neighborhoods were as safe as suburbs. In the New York city congressional districts including the Upper East and Upper West Sides, 80% of residents believed that their areas were safe to walk in- a level as high as that of Long Island's four congressional districts (whose safety scores ranged from 75 to 85 percent). New York also has an unusually low murder rate (6 per 100,000) and this fact was also reflected in the city's outer borough districts, nearly all of which beat Milwaukee's 60% score (except for a few districts in northern Manhattan and the Bronx).

On the other hand, some cities are large enough to have congressional districts dominated by troubled neighborhoods- and in those cities, the gap between the "best" and "worst" neighborhoods was reflected in safety scores. In Chicago, the "worst" district in the city's south side had a 47% score, the best urban district had a 70% score, and the 9th District (which contains both large chunks of the city and of its inner northern suburbs) had a 76% score.

*Aging inner suburbs were sometimes perceived as no more safe than cities. In Georgia, districts dominated by the city of Atlanta and demographically comparable DeKalb County had virtually identical safety scores (56-57%) far below that of outer suburban districts.

*On the other hand, well-off inner suburbs were perceived as comparable to outer suburbs. In Virginia, the 8th district (containing transit-oriented Arlington and Alexandria) scored as well as the 10th and 11th districts (containing sprawling Fairfax and Loudoun Counties) - all in the mid-seventies.

You may be wondering: how well does these statistics correlate with Gallup's [regionwide data](#) about people's willingness to go out at night? It is hard to say, because in most of the smaller metros listed in Gallup's "best" and "worst" list, the central cities are so small as to comprise only half a congressional district or so. The average congressional district includes 700,000 people, bigger than all six of the central cities in Gallup's

"safest" metro areas. In only three of the metro areas (Denver, Austin, and Boston) was the central city big enough to dominate a congressional district, and in one of them (Austin) the central city was [carved up](#) among numerous districts.

On the other hand, the regions perceived as worst have bad reputations in their urban cores. In the region that tops Gallup's "worst" list, Memphis, the central city is mostly in one district (the 9th of Tennessee). And in that district, only 45 percent of people report a willingness to go out at night- perhaps the worst score in the United States. And in the second worst region (New Orleans) the most urban congressional district has a similarly low score, as discussed above.

Blog post

The "Vertical Sprawl" Myth

Opponents of high- and mid-rise development often use the term "vertical sprawl." But in fact there is little similarity between high-rise infill and suburban sprawl: the major arguments against one do not apply to the other.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 4, 2013, 12pm PDT

In the ongoing controversy over height limits of various types, one phrase commonly bandied about is "vertical sprawl." Some argue that tall infill development is itself "sprawl" – presumably because just as regular sprawl extends horizontally into the countryside, taller buildings extend vertically into the airspace.

But in fact, there is no similarity between taller buildings (even high-rises) and horizontal sprawl, because the major concerns about sprawl are unrelated to height, and vice versa. To examine why this is so, let's ask ourselves: why should we care about traditional sprawl?

The most commonly voiced concerns, as far as I can see, fall into two categories:

*Environmental. Environmentalists worry that sprawl leads to more driving, and thus to more air pollution and climate change. By contrast, infill development (whether the development is two stories high or thirty) in transit-friendly areas actually reduces driving by increasing the number of people with access to public transit.

*Social equity and quality of life. Sprawl means that jobs and other social amenities move to places without public transit, thus making it impossible for persons without cars to reach jobs. Residential infill development (whether the development is two stories high or thirty) means that more people can live in areas with public transit, and commercial infill increases the number of people whose jobs are reachable by transit.

Admittedly, it could be argued that infill development leads to gentrification, which in turn leads to displacement of the poor. Even if this argument had some validity (a subject best addressed in a separate post) it is irrelevant to height. Even if it was true that infill development increased real estate prices to the extent that poor people were driven into car-dependent suburbia, this would be the case whether the development consisted of two-story walkups or twenty-story towers.

It seems to me that the most common concerns about high- and mid-rise infill have nothing to do with sprawl. Some people have aesthetic concerns about taller buildings- but even if both types of structures are both unattractive, a high-rise tower is not physically similar to a strip mall any more than a morally unattractive gossiping neighbor is similar to a morally unattractive dictator 4000 miles away.

NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) attacks on infill development often center on traffic and parking. But these arguments are often a defense of existing sprawl rather than an honest attempt to compare horizontal sprawl and high-rises: if you really believe that compact development creates traffic congestion, you must therefore believe that sprawl eliminates congestion, and that sprawl is a good thing. And if you believe that land's highest and best use is for cars rather than people, you should think that sprawl is perfectly fine. In any event these arguments are really attacks on infill and density generally, not attacks on high-rises specifically.

Blog post

Are Tall Buildings Bad For Downtown?

Do skyscrapers cause 9-to-5 business districts?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 17, 2013, 4pm PDT

In the ongoing debate over height limits (especially in Washington, D.C., where even a 20-story office building is too tall to be allowed) one of the many sub-arguments is over whether height limits are good or bad for downtown.

Supporters of height limits argue that if tall buildings are allowed, commercial activity will be concentrated in a small "skyscraper zone" and low-height blocks will become dead zones. By contrast, they claim that if buildings are limited to 10 or 15 stories, businesses will keep looking for downtown office space, and the mid-rise downtown will keep expanding as businesses priced out of one downtown district move a few blocks away. Height limit supporters note that Washington's low-rise downtown is fairly prosperous, while some Sun Belt cities have taller buildings and dead downtowns.

By contrast, skyscraper supporters argue that a business that cannot get what it wants in a tall downtown building is just as likely to move to suburbia as to move a few blocks away. They point out that Washington's low-rise downtown is by no means the only prosperous downtown in the United States, and that Washington has until recently been far less successful in competing with its suburbs than some high-rise cities. For example, New York has been gaining population since the 1980s, while Washington steadily lost population until the 2000s.

In an ideal world, one could run a controlled experiment between Washington with height limits and Washington without height limits. Obviously, this is not possible.

However, one can examine the cities [with the tallest buildings](#) in the United States. Do they tend to have healthy downtowns or weak downtowns? I begin by proposing a measure of downtown health: how many people walk to work? In [10 of the nation's 50 largest cities](#), over 5 percent of city residents walk to work (Boston, Washington, San Francisco, New York, Philadelphia, Honolulu, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago and Baltimore). This group includes cities with lots of tall buildings (New York, Chicago), low-rise Washington, and numerous cities in between those extremes.

Of the 50 tallest buildings in the United States, 29 are in either New York or Chicago. 8 more are scattered with cities with strong downtowns (four in Philadelphia, one each in Minneapolis, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle). 13 are in cities with not-so-strong downtowns (3 in Atlanta, one or two each in Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Charlotte, Oklahoma City, Pittsburgh, and Indianapolis). So it appears that there is a modest but positive correlation between a vibrant downtown and tall buildings.

To be fair, my strong-downtown cities tend to be bigger than the weak-downtown cities; thus, it could be argued that their larger number of skyscrapers reflects their larger size. But if you compare the number of skyscrapers with the amount of office space, some of the strong-downtown cities still have more skyscrapers. In particular, Chicago has about one skyscraper per 15 million feet of office space (15 buildings in the top 50, 235 million feet of office space)* New York has one per 30 million (14 buildings, almost 430 million SF). Philadelphia has one per 34 million (4 buildings, 137 million SF).

Of the weak-downtown cities with more than one "top 50 building", only Atlanta comes close to Philadelphia (with 3 buildings and 140 million SF, for a ratio of one skyscraper per 46 million SF). Los Angeles has two skyscrapers and over 180 million SF, for a ratio of one per 90 million SF. Dallas and Houston have a similarly low skyscraper/office space ratio. On the other hand, so do walkable Boston and San Francisco. To put it another way: cities with lots of skyscrapers tend to have strong downtowns, but not all cities with strong downtowns have lots of skyscrapers.

Thus, skyscrapers are not absolutely necessary for a downtown with lots of people walking to work. But given that the most height-oriented downtowns are pretty healthy, it at least seems clear that tall buildings do not prevent such a result.

*Office space statistics are [here](#).

Blog post

The case against mixed-use: not proven

A recent study suggesting that mixed-use zoning increases crime is not as persuasive as it might seem at first glance.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 26, 2013, 7am PST

A recent study published in the [University of Pennsylvania Law Review](#) analyzes the crime rates of numerous blocks in Los Angeles, and concludes that single-use residential areas have the lowest crime rates. (The article also suggests that mixed-use places have less crime than commercial blocks). According to the authors' logic, the isolation of commerce from housing protects us all from crime- at least if we don't bother to visit commercial places. (By this logic, the only safe place to shop is online!)

It seems to me that the article's attempt to compare mixed-use and single-use places is inherently flawed. Suppose that mixed-use block A has 100 residents and 20 crimes per year, while single-use residential block B has 200 people and 10 crimes per year. At first glance, block A has far more crime: it has 20 crimes per 100 residents while block B has only 5.

But this logic overlooks something. Block B will almost never have more than 200 people on any given day (except for occasional visitors); thus, it makes sense to evaluate Block B's crime rates by dividing the number of crimes by the number of residents. But mixed-use Block A's real universe of potential victims is not just the 100 residents of that block: it is the 100 residents PLUS the people who come to Block A to shop and work. So if Block A has 400 commercial visitors per day, its real population is 500 (the residents plus the visitors). Thus, a better way to calculate Block A's crime rate is to divide its 20 crimes by 500 residents. Under this method, Block A has only 4 crimes per 100 people- fewer than Block B!

Blog post

Form-Based Codes Lite

There may be a way to supply some of the benefits of form-based codes without heavy-handed aesthetic regulation. In theory, a form-based code could be limited to verifiable characteristics such as setbacks, yard types, building height, frontage size and lot coverage.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 12, 2013, 12pm PST

In a [forthcoming article](#), Nicole Garnett of Notre Dame Law School critiques form-based codes, on the reasonable ground that these codes often include meticulous aesthetic regulations that may be difficult and expensive to comply with.

However, there may be a way to supply some of the benefits of form-based codes without heavy-handed aesthetic regulation. In theory, a form-based code could be limited to verifiable characteristics such as setbacks, yard types, building height, frontage size and lot coverage.

On the positive side, a form-based code focusing on the sort of objective indicators traditionally regulated by zoning would allow a developer to build buildings that were at least somewhat compatible with the rest of a neighborhood (or with the city's vision of what a neighborhood should look like), without having to pay the costs of aesthetic regulation. For example, a city could mandate that all buildings in a neighborhood be small enough to create a dense, low-rise neighborhood, without telling the developer what the windows, facades or other architectural details should look like.

On the other hand, there may be a trade-off between flexibility and beauty: a zoning code that only addressed objective indicia of community character such as building height and width would allow the creation of buildings that on paper are compatible with a city's plan, and yet are poorly built and/or do not look particularly good.

But even such a permissive form-based code could be used to create neighborhoods that are no uglier than existing sprawl and are far more pedestrian-friendly. So for a city concerned about housing costs and burdening developers, a form-based code that does not regulate aesthetics might be an adequate compromise between a more rigorous form-based code and status quo zoning.

Blog post

Yes You Can (Get Groceries Without A Car)

Shopping for bulky items can be one of the challenges of living car free. Here are three of the best ways I've found for dealing with the problem.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 30, 2013, 9pm PST

I have spent about half my working life without a car- not just in New York where I now live, but in more auto-oriented cities such as Buffalo, Cleveland, Atlanta (for my first year or so there) and Jacksonville, Florida (for my first few months there). In those days, I would occasionally be asked: "But how do you deal with groceries"? In fact, I just read a newspaper column that seemed to [lampoon](#) concerns about walkability by raising the "how can you walk from the grocery store" trump card.

Admittedly, you can't carry as much in your hands as in a car- even if you save some strain on your hands by riding transit for part of the distance. But I personally have developed three ways of dealing with this problem. First, I sometimes just shop more often, and buy less food at a time. This worked best in Toronto, where there were lots and lots of grocery stores within walking distance of either my apartment or public transit. Similarly, in Queens I often employ this strategy because I live only a block and a half from a grocery store, and a few blocks from others.

Second, I have brought a suitcase or rolling cart to stuff groceries in (or alternatively, a really large trash bag). This strategy might look awkward, but seems more appropriate for longer trips when I want to buy more stuff (for example, if I am going to an unusual grocery store in another neighborhood, like [Pomegranate](#) in Brooklyn).

Third, I sometimes just buy a ton of groceries and take a taxicab home. This strategy works best in more auto-oriented cities like Jacksonville and Atlanta, where the nearest grocery is close enough for a cab ride to be relatively cheap, but far enough away that I wouldn't want to walk home with more than two or three grocery bags.*

*And to those of you who bicycle (which I don't): feel free to add your own thoughts.

Blog post

Density Reduces Driving (Even At Pretty High Densities)

Research supports the argument that increased densities reduce vehicle miles traveled, even in areas with minimal transit service.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 7, 2013, 7pm PST

A few weeks ago, I read a startling claim in an email discussion group. Someone wrote that at densities above 20 households per acre (roughly that of a streetcar suburb),* increased density had little effect on driving. If this was the case, the environmental argument for allowing higher densities would obviously be weaker.

After searching for data relevant to this claim, I found a 1994 study by John Holtzclaw (available [here](#)). Based on data from numerous California cities, Holtzclaw created a model designed to quantify the relationship between density and automobile vehicle miles traveled (VMT).**

Holtzclaw concluded that even in areas with minimal transit service, density affected VMT. For example, in an area with only two buses per hour, a census tract with 20 households per acre drove about 40 percent less per household than one with two units per acre (15,374 per year as opposed to 27,339). But VMT did not stop dropping at the 20 households per acre level. An area with 100 households per acre drove 1/3 fewer miles than the 20-per-acre neighborhood (10,028 VMT per household) and one with 500 households per acre drove 40 percent less than the area with 100 households per acre (5781).

A similar density/VMT relationship existed in areas with generous public transit. Holtzclaw calculated that in a place with 100 buses/trains per hour within a quarter mile, a census tract with 2 units per acre produced 20,308 VMT per household per year, and a tract with 20 households per acre produced about 45 percent fewer miles (11,420). Under these circumstances, an area with 100 households per acre drove about 1/3 fewer miles than the 20-units-per-acre census tract (7637), and an area with 500 households per acre drove about 40 percent less than the area with 100 per acre (4295).

VMT statistics in actual neighborhoods supported Holtzclaw's model. For example, in the city of San Francisco, VMT per household averaged 11,256 miles. By contrast, in the Nob Hill/North Beach area (which had 100 households per acre, as opposed to 48 for the city as a whole) VMT per household was less than half that (5519). In sum, it appears (at least based on Holtzclaw's model) that even at densities of 100 households per acre or more, higher density means less driving.

Moreover, Holtzclaw's model may slightly understate the influence of density on driving. Why? Because higher density, by allowing more people to live near bus or train stops, makes improved transit service possible- which itself seems to reduce driving.***

Why does any of this matter? Because if the most compact neighborhoods drive less than 20 household-per-acre streetcar suburbs, it follows that additional infill in already-compact neighborhoods, by increasing density, will reduce VMT. If this is the case, then additional infill is justified on environmental grounds, even in neighborhoods that are already far more compact than the average American suburb.

*Because there are 640 acres in a square mile, this corresponds to 12,800 households per square mile in a heavily residential area. San Francisco's Sunset District has roughly this density, as do the more compact parts of Upper Northwest Washington, DC.

**The numbers produced by Holtzclaw's model are at Table 7 of the paper.

***Though perhaps not as much as higher density. For example, in the super-dense neighborhood with 500 units per acre, the difference between 2 buses per hour and 100 per hour produced a change from 5781 VMT/household/year to 4295- a change much smaller than the difference between either neighborhood and the lower-density areas.

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