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Blog post

Do Environmentalists Feed The Fire of Climate Change Denial?

Despite the extreme weather events of the past year, most Americans are still not persuaded that climate change is primarily the result of human activity. Why not?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | December 9, 2012, 8pm PST

Despite the extreme weather events of the past year, most Americans are still [not persuaded](#) that climate change is primarily the result of human activity. Why not?

In large part, the problem is beyond environmentalists' control, for at least two reasons. First, public concern over the troubled economy has crowded out public interest in more long-run problems (including, but not limited to, climate change). Second, a large fraction of voters get their information from the right-wing media, which distinguishes itself from the competition by attacking President Obama. So if President Obama supports doing something about climate change, Fox News and right-wing AM radio are tempted to deny that climate change even exists.

But after having been on numerous environmentalist mailing lists, listservs, etc. I have come to believe that environmentalist rhetoric is sometimes unhelpful. Just as Tea Party extremism makes Republicans look bad to swing voters, much of what I've read in the environmentalist media might be off-putting outside the environmentalist base.

On one extreme, environmentalists sometimes use overheated rhetoric (pun intended). Environmentalist rhetoric about "saving the Earth" may fire up the already-persuaded, but may sound wacky to the unconvinced - and disconcerting to religious voters whose traditions tell them that God will ultimately supply a Messiah, or at least not wipe out life on Earth (Gen. 8:21). Moreover, I don't think you need to tell people that all of humanity will be destroyed in order to give them reason to worry. For example, climate change could cause a flood of natural disasters (pun intended) which wipes out large stretches of American coastline, eliminates a big chunk of our food supply, and brings the U.S. economy to its knees. Such disasters are perfectly consistent with anyone's religious tradition, yet sufficiently harmful to be worth taking aggressive measures to avoid.

At the other extreme, environmentalists sometimes focus on trivia, going on the warpath against one consumer product or another - sometimes products as trivial as [plastic straws](#), or as important as air [conditioning](#). These "Austerity Green" crusades do give the environmentalist base a way to feel useful, but aren't likely to materially affect climate change. More importantly, Austerity Green tells swing voters: environmentalism means making your life more difficult and uncomfortable, with no obvious payoff. A reader subjected to such views may be converted, but may also deny the existence of any climate change problem at all in order to avoid feeling guilty about not following the Austerity Green agenda. (Of course, I'm assuming that the unconverted actually read this stuff- perhaps a fanciful assumption!)

By contrast, conservatism is successful precisely when its promises of austerity are vague (e.g. unspecified cuts in wasteful spending, which voters are likely to think will affect someone other than themselves).

But you may argue: doing something about climate change is likely to involve some policies that might make something more expensive to someone, whether it be subsidies to clean energy (some of which will inevitably turn out badly), regulations to limit pollution (which may increase energy prices in the short run) or carbon taxes. And so perhaps even the best-sold environmental policies might be a hard sell in today's political climate. Nevertheless I do wonder if environmentalist rhetoric makes these policies an even harder sell than necessary.

Blog post

No, Cars Are NOT Greener than Buses (Even Almost-Empty Ones)

Even in cities without world-class transit systems, transit can reduce car ownership to some extent.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 18, 2012, 6pm PST

The eminent journalist Stephen Dubner recently [suggested](#) that because many buses are under-utilized, the average bus is actually less fuel-efficient than the average car. His

argument seems to be as follows: the typical bus burns more energy than the typical car- so much so that a bus with only ten passengers actually uses more energy per passenger than the average car. Thus, an underutilized bus is less fuel-efficient than a car.

But to the extent this argument is an argument for anti-transit policies, it may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Here's why: suppose that a city, in reliance on this argument, adopts the panoply of anti-transit policies common in the late 20th century- reducing transit service, building highways to places that don't have transit service, using low-density zoning to reduce the number of residences accessible by transit, [etc.](#) By making transit less attractive, these policies reduce bus* ridership. And the fewer riders a bus has, the less fuel-efficient it is, since a bus uses roughly the same amount of energy whether it has five riders or fifty.

Furthermore, even the mostly-empty bus has an indirect positive effect on fuel efficiency that a pure car/bus comparison doesn't catch. Often, transit riders aren't just transit riders; they are pedestrians as well. Unless my bus stops directly in front of my home and goes directly to my job, I am adding a zero-emissions walking trip to my commute- a trip over land that I would otherwise access by car. And if I walk to lunch or to other errands during the workday, I am adding other zero-emissions trips to my day- trips that, if I drove to work, might also be by car. Thus, a proper comparison is not just between an underused bus and a car, but between (underused bus + environmental impact of walking trips taken by bus riders) and the car. I admit, however, that I do not know whether the impact of these walking trips is significant enough to close the efficiency gap between underutilized buses and cars.

And where transit is significant enough to allow people to forego cars entirely, buses create an even more positive impact. For example, when I lived in Buffalo and Cleveland between 1996 and 1999, the transit system was just good enough to enable me to avoid owning a car. In addition to riding (often underutilized) buses and trains, I was also walking much more than I would have done had I owned a car, thus improving fuel efficiency much more than if I had only used buses and cars. By contrast, had these cities had a weaker transit system, I would have owned a car and used it to supplement not only transit trips, but also some of my walking trips.

The example of Buffalo suggests that, even in cities without world-class transit systems, transit can reduce car ownership to some extent. Buffalo has buses running until around 1 am (though often not very frequently at such hours) and a one-line light rail system extending to the city limits. By contrast, Jackson, Ms., has buses running until 7:45 pm and no trains. Even though Jackson is slightly poorer ** (and thus might be

expected to have more people who cannot afford cars), only 11 percent of Jackson households make do without a car, as opposed to 31 percent of Buffalo households. The example of Buffalo shows that even a mediocre public transit system can affect car ownership, and thus reduce pollution.

*Or, for that matter, rail. However, Dubner suggests that rail is actually more fuel-efficient than buses, so in this post I focus on buses.

**Jackson's per capita income is just over \$18,000, while Buffalo's is just over \$20,000.

Blog post

The Not-So-Libertarian Argument For Sprawl

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 25, 2012, 9am PDT

In the 1990s, most public argument about suburban expansion was pretty simple. Environmentalists argued that sprawl increased pollution, while their opponents responded by invoking the free market. Environmentalists and other sprawl critics (including myself) responded that sprawl is the result less of the free market than of [government subsidy and regulation](#).

Recently I have started to notice hints of a not-so-libertarian argument for sprawl: that pro-sprawl government policies such as highway construction open up real estate for development, and thus make housing affordable.

Indeed, some car-oriented, "sprawling" cities are quite affordable. On the other hand, others (such as San Diego) are quite expensive. How come?

Given that housing policies are partially a function of the availability of land, government can make land available through (1) not overregulating land supply and (2) building infrastructure to make development tempting to landowners. Governmental decisions as to where (and how much) to use these techniques determine both land prices and the extent of suburban growth.

For example, a government or set of governments could choose a pro-sprawl infrastructure policy (such as that of Houston, which has two beltways) combined with a relatively lenient (even if [by no means](#) completely libertarian) land use policy. This "cheap sprawl" policy will lead to a high land supply (and thus to low home prices) but lots of driving, thus leading to high transportation costs and greenhouse gas emissions.

A second option is "expensive sprawl": a pro-sprawl infrastructure policy combined with tight anti-density, anti-infill regulation in existing neighborhoods. This policy will lead to higher housing prices than cheap sprawl, because much of the region's land supply would be constricted by regulation. But commutes would be at least as long as in cheap sprawl, as people move to new subdivisions along new expressways in order to avoid the high housing prices in tightly regulated existing neighborhoods. And because government regulation would restrict the density of infill development, even residents of existing neighborhoods might have to do a lot of driving. So from both an environmentalist standpoint and an affordable housing standpoint, "expensive sprawl" creates the worst of both worlds: higher prices than in cheap sprawl, plus mandatory driving.

Third, a region could combine an anti-sprawl infrastructure policy and tight regulation- "expensive smart growth." Presumably, this policy would yield the lowest housing supply and thus the highest housing costs, though it might not be as environmentally toxic as my second option.

Finally, a region could limit new infrastructure to transit, but could deregulate infill development. This policy was what most American cities followed until the 1920s, and would in some ways create truly smart growth: housing prices would not be out of control because housing supply would expand to meet population growth, yet because new development would frequently be in transit-friendly areas, transportation costs would be low too and commuting would not be a significant contributor to pollution.

The possibility of my final option shows that in principle, a city or region could achieve more compact, transit- and pedestrian-friendly development without raising housing prices. On the other hand, what makes sense in principle and what is politically easy are often two different things.

Blog post

Two Cheers for Romney

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 11, 2012, 10pm PDT

The conventional wisdom among Americans who spend lots of time thinking about public transit is that four more years of Obama will be good news, and the election of the Romney-Ryan ticket would be bad. I have to admit that this belief is by no means completely irrational: after all, President Romney will be much less likely than President Obama to veto a transportation bill passed by a Republican Congress, and might propose a mere austere budget than President Obama. Nevertheless, I think there are good reasons to believe otherwise.

First of all, a Republican Congress of 2014 might differ somewhat from a Republican Congress of 2012. Under President Obama, a rational Republican Congressperson is likely to try to distinguish himself/herself from the President in order to avoid a right-wing primary challenge; as a result, President Obama's support for public transit and high-speed rail has probably reduced GOP support for these policies.

But the history of the 2000s suggests that a Republican Congress working with a Republican President may have different incentives. After George W. Bush became President, the Republican Congressional majority was willing to accommodate constituents' support of Amtrak and public transit. Between FY 2001 and FY 2007 (when the Democrats took over Congress) federal aid to public transit increased from \$6.9 billion to \$8.9 billion, a 29 percent increase (By contrast, the consumer price index increased by only 19 percent during that period). Transit ridership also increased during this period, from 9.6 billion to 10.2 billion.

Furthermore, a Republican Congress may unintentionally support local government revenues, and thus local public transit authorities, by supporting expansionary fiscal and monetary policies (as opposed to austerity policies that might reduce economic growth and thus cut into local revenues).^{*} Under President Romney Republicans will need immediate economic growth in order to be reelected, since a stagnant economy would make President Romney unpopular, thus dragging down Congressional Republicans. (By contrast, under President Obama Republicans had little incentive to support short-term growth, since growth would benefit President Obama). Assuming for the sake of argument that Republicans were in fact successful in promoting nationwide economic growth, local tax revenues would recover, thus increasing support for public transit and other local government programs.

Even if Congressional Republicans do **not** move to the center, a Republican Congress might not last for four years under President Romney. When Clinton was reelected in 1996, the Republicans held Congress, and continued to do so until well into the Bush Administration. Similarly, when President Reagan was reelected in 1984, and Vice-President Bush succeeded him in 1988, the Democrats held the U.S. House. In other words, when incumbent Presidents are reelected they do not have long coattails.

This pattern suggests that as long as Obama is President, Congressional Republicans are in a no-lose situation: if people are satisfied, they vote for the incumbents of both parties (so Republicans hold the House), while if they are dissatisfied, they punish the President's party (which means that if Obama is unpopular, the 2014 elections will yield a bigger and perhaps more radicalized House Republican caucus). Thus, the Republicans will not suffer significant Congressional losses until the first midterm election after a Republican President is elected (that is, until 2018 at the earliest).

On the other hand, if Romney is elected and the economy does not grow in 2014, the Democrats will take over Congress. Assuming that Congressional Democrats are more pro-transit than Congressional Republicans, this reason alone may make Romney the better choice for transit advocates. (Of course, President Romney could decide to propose austere budgets- but if Democrats control Congress, his proposals would receive exactly as much deference as President Obama's budget proposals, which is to say none whatsoever).

Of course, all of this is just speculation, and I cannot say for sure that a Romney Presidency would be better for transit advocates than four more years of President Obama and a Tea Party Congress. I do think, however, that this is a reasonable possibility.

*I am assuming that austerity policies do in fact reduce economic growth, and that expansionary policies support growth; I note, however, that many economists of the "Austrian school" reject this view.

Blog post

NIMBY Zoning And the Tragedy Of The Commons

[Michael Lewyn](#) | August 27, 2012, 2pm PDT

Decades ago, ecologist Garrett Hardin wrote about the "tragedy of the commons"- when an action that is rational for one person becomes irrational when widely practiced.

For example, suppose that there are a few dozen cattle ranchers near a pasture open to all. It makes sense for each rancher to let as many cattle graze as possible on the pasture, so that the ranchers can feed their cattle without buying additional land. But if every rancher lets as many cattle as possible graze, sooner or later the land will be overgrazed and the cattle may starve.

Today's NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard")-based system of land use regulation has a similar illogic. Typically, an urban landowner who wishes to build additional housing units will need to request a rezoning, because existing zoning often bars densities higher than the status quo. Because no one other than the landowner and its neighbors care about the rezoning, municipal politicians often approve a rezoning only if neighbors do not object.

For each individual neighborhood, it may make sense to oppose such rezonings. New housing may lead to additional traffic, and may even lead to decreasing real estate values as the housing supply expands.

But what happens if every single neighborhood keeps out new housing? Housing prices may explode, because a reduced supply of any item is likely to raise the price of that item. San Francisco-size housing prices may be good for the NIMBYs, but are not so good for the region's overall quality of life.

And if there are not enough housing units in existing neighborhoods to meet demand, developers will build housing in depopulated (usually rural) areas where there are few neighbors to object. Because public transit usually does not serve the newest suburbs, the residents of these new homes will drive long distances to work, thus increasing vehicle miles traveled, which increases traffic congestion and air pollution for everyone (as well as the unforeseeable consequences of increased greenhouse gas emissions).

And if jobs move to serve the new suburbs' residents, eventually residents of existing urban and suburban neighborhoods will be forced to drive to those jobs to avoid unemployment, suffering from additional transportation costs and perhaps even from the traffic congestion they sought to avoid when they sought to exclude urban housing.

So even though NIMBY exclusion is good for its practitioners in the short run, we all suffer in the long run, making NIMBYism a classic example of the "tragedy of the commons."

Blog post

A Tale of Three Lobbies

[Michael Lewyn](#) | August 7, 2012, 10am PDT

In the early 1990s, transportation politics at both the state and federal levels was often fairly simple: an all-powerful Road Gang (made up of real estate developers and road contractors) typically got whatever it wanted, rolling over a much weaker pro-transit coalition of environmentalists and urban politicians.

But in the past year or so, I have noticed different sets of alignments. At the federal level, road and transit supporters alike rallied (mostly successfully) against a right-wing attempt to cut all transportation spending. And in my hometown of Atlanta, road and transit lobbies both sought a regional tax increase for transportation, which was defeated by a coalition including groups as diverse as Tea Party organizations, the Sierra Club, and the NAACP.

Why are road and transit lobbies working together? And why can't they always win?

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the money for transportation ran out - that is, the recession has reduced state and local revenues, which means transportation lobbies often cannot get increased spending without getting increased taxes. And at the federal level, gas tax revenues are also stagnant. So neither the road nor the transit lobby can get increased spending without raising revenue.

And when transportation lobbies ask for increased taxes, they attract opposition from a third group: the anti-tax/spending coalition that dominates Republican politics (if not American politics generally).

So we now have a three-cornered politics: roads vs. transit vs. antitax/Tea Party. At the federal level, the road and transit lobbies were able to pass a transportation bill, but to do it they had to split the antitax Republican majority by limiting spending increases to more or less the rate of inflation, and by sacrificing a few smaller programs. In Atlanta, the road/transit coalition failed because they were not unified. The antitax coalition was able to split both the road and the transit lobbies; pro-road suburbanites thought too much was going to transit, and pro-transit voters thought too much was going to roads (or to transit in another side of town).

So the lesson of 2012 is: neither the road lobby nor the transit lobby can get very much on its own anymore. They have to work together and even they may have to split the antitax vote. Conversely, the antitax lobby can't always win on its own either, but can win if it splits the other coalitions.

Blog post

Traffic deaths, safety and suburbia, Part 2

[Michael Lewyn](#) | July 15, 2012, 11am PDT

A couple of months ago, I wrote a blog post comparing the safety of inner suburbs and outer suburbs. (See <http://www.planetizen.com/node/56468>)

My post showed that (in least in the metropolitan areas I looked at) inner suburbs were safer than outer suburbs, because violent deaths from murder and traffic combined were lower in the former.

However, I devoted only a couple of lines to core cities (and, as some of the comments suggested, perhaps a few lines too many).(1) It seems to me that comparing core cities to suburbs is not quite ideal, because typically, a regional central city contains a wide variety of neighborhoods- some very safe, some not so safe. In an ideal world, one would resolve this problem by comparing individual neighborhoods or groups of neighborhoods to suburbs. But this technique is not feasible because neighborhood

crime statistics are not easily available for most cities (let alone neighborhood traffic fatality statistics).

An alternative way to compare cities to suburbs is to look at "intown suburbs"- places that, although technically suburbs, are so close to downtown as to effectively be city neighborhoods. For example, in Atlanta, the city limits extend about 10 miles out from downtown in some directions, so Decatur (6 miles out) is an intown suburb. If a region's intown suburbs have a lower "traffic + homicide" death rate than its outer suburbs, one can plausibly argue that (parts of) cities truly are safer than outer suburbs.

I began my research with the following educated guess: low-income intown suburbs are more dangerous than wealthy outer suburbs, high-income intown suburbs less so. Does data bear this out?

I chose Boston as a case study because Boston is one of the few cities with a mix of low-income and high-income intown suburbs. So I focused on Chelsea (low) and Cambridge (higher). Between 2005 and 2009, Chelsea had 4.6 murders per year per 100,000 people, and 4.9 traffic deaths, for a total violent death rate of 9.5 per 100,000. More affluent Cambridge had 1.8 homicides per year and 2.1 traffic deaths, for a total violent death rate of 4 per 100,000. An even richer (though more suburban) intown suburb is Brookline, which begins about four and a half miles from downtown Boston. Between 2005 and 2009, Brookline had 0.4 murders per 100,000 per year, and 1.1 traffic fatalities, for a total violent death rate of 1.5 per 100,000 per year. Thus, the low-income intown suburb (Chelsea) was apparently more dangerous than the high-income ones (Cambridge/Brookline). But how do both compare to real suburbs?

Since William Lucy's research (which led to my work)(2) focuses on the relative desirability of city and suburb, I chose one of the most desirable suburbs as a case study of an outer suburb: Newton (an inner ring suburb about 6 miles from Boston) and Sudbury (18 miles out, the region's fifth wealthiest suburb)(3). Sudbury had 4.5 traffic deaths per year per 100,000 and 1.2 murders, for an overall violent death rate of 5.7- 40 percent more than Cambridge, and far more than Brookline. Sudbury's figures are fairly typical; in 2005-06 Middlesex County (which includes Sudbury and numerous other, mostly outer-ring, suburbs) had about the same level of traffic deaths. (No countywide data were available for 2007-09).

My discussion so far hasn't taken account of the distinction between homicides caused by strangers (and thus arguably more threatening to the public as a whole) and those caused by acquaintances. Unfortunately, digging up statistics on this issue is difficult- not just because individual municipalities' statistics may not be easy to obtain, but

because many homicides are unsolved (which means we don't know whether they were "stranger homicides"). However, nationally we know that about 12 percent of murders were committed by persons who the victim did not know, but that the murderer/victim relationship was unknown as to an additional 44 percent of homicides.⁽⁴⁾ If you assume that only the 12 percent figure matters, the gap between Chelsea and Sudbury narrows quite a bit: Chelsea's violent death rate plummets to 5.5, only about 20 percent higher than Sudbury's. But if you assume that 56 percent of murders involved strangers, then Chelsea's "stranger violent death rate" is 7.5, still about 50 percent higher than Sudbury's.

Another city with both high- and low-income intown suburbs is Detroit. Grosse Pointe, less than 6 miles from downtown Detroit, had zero traffic deaths between 2005-09, and only 3.6 homicides per 100,000 per year, for an overall "violent death rate" of 3.6. By contrast, working-class Hamtramck, surrounded by the city of Detroit, had 7.5 murders per 100,000 and 2.9 traffic fatalities for a total violent death rate of 10.4.

How do these results compare to those of "nice" outer-ring suburbs? One of the wealthiest suburbs in America, Bloomfield Hills, had no murders and 5.2 traffic deaths per 100,000- slightly worse than Grosse Pointe, but perhaps not significantly so since only one death was involved, artificially knocking up the rate for a very small suburb. On the other hand, nearby Birmingham had only 2 traffic deaths per 100,000, even lower than Grosse Pointe. Oakland County as a whole had 6.3 traffic deaths per 100,000 people in 2005-06; however, the county includes inner-ring as well as outer-ring, and middle-class as well as upper-class, suburbs.

So my examples (admittedly the tip of a very large iceberg) back up the theory that lower-income urban places are less safe than suburbs. They also suggest that well-off intown suburbs like Brookline and Grosse Pointe are as safe or safer than outer suburbs. However, the data is unclear as to which adjective ("as safe" or "safer") applies.

Having said that, I wouldn't pretend any of this is any more than a starting point for discussion. A more comprehensive article would create a much larger database of (1) intown suburbs, (2) inner suburbs and (3) outer suburbs, and would discuss a broader demographic range of suburbs.

(1) One of the comments pointed out that I did not distinguish between homicides caused by strangers and those caused by acquaintances – for more on this, see my last paragraph on Boston suburbs.

(2) <http://www.minority.unc.edu/sph/minconf/2004/materials/lucy.et.al.pdf> . Lucy's data is mostly by

county; but county-by-county data does not always distinguish inner from outer suburb, or outer suburb from rural area, because outside the largest metro areas a county can include a very wide range of places. For example, Detroit's Oakland County borders Detroit, but contains a lot of suburbs that are quite far from the city.

(3)The four wealthiest (Weston, Dover, Carlisle and Sherborn) lacked crime and/or traffic data for all five years studied.

(4)<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2010/crime-in-the-u.s.-2010/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/expanded/expandhomicidemain>

Blog post

Nothing really pays for itself (except maybe toll roads)

[Michael Lewyn](#) | June 26, 2012, 9am PDT

Arguments over transportation policy often run as follows:

HIGHWAY SUPPORTER: Highways pay for themselves! Buses/trains don't! So highways good and everything else bad bad bad!

TRANSIT SUPPORTER: But highways create bad externalities like pollution and climate change! So if highways were taxed at their true cost gas would cost a zillion billion cajillion dollars per gallon! (followed by numerous counterarguments and counter-counterarguments that I won't bore you with, except as written below...)

It seems to me that these arguments miss one point: even if the highway system as a whole pays for itself, the system is so chock full of cross-subsidies that each individual road doesn't (except for toll roads).

Instead, one group of motorists is taxed to pay for projects that benefit another group of motorists. For example, the interstate highway system was built from gas taxes paid by drivers on existing, pre-interstate roads.

Were these drivers the beneficiaries of the interstates? In rural areas, probably yes. But in urban areas, only some of the urban drivers were helped by the interstates, while others were not.

Imagine, if you will, the city of Townsville (which could just as easily be Detroit, St. Louis etc). Townsville drivers pay a tax on their gasoline, which is used not to repair Townsville roads but to build an interstate that opens up the suburb of Sprawlville for development. 10 percent of Townsville residents move to Sprawlville; 1 percent of Townsville residents have their home destroyed to build the interstate.

The 10 percent who move to Sprawlville get a windfall; they pay only 10 percent of the gas tax while the interstate is being built, but get most of the benefits (since they get new homes they like). The 1 percent who have their homes destroyed are harmed quite a bit, because they lose their homes and neighborhoods (and usually are not compensated, especially if they are renters).

The other 89 percent (the people who want to stay in Townsville) may on balance have been harmed as well. Since they don't go to Sprawlville they might not benefit very much from the highway. Also, their existing neighborhoods often declined because of the highway(s). When the 10 percent moved to suburbia, the 89 percent suddenly had vacant housing in their neighborhoods, housing that was usually filled by poorer people, often causing declining property values, worse schools, and increased crime. And if Sprawlville was a separate city, Townsville's tax base started to decline, causing higher taxes, making Townville less desirable. So eventually many of the other 89 percent was forced out of Townsville by the highway, just as surely as if they had lost their homes to eminent domain.

In other words, users of new roads benefit from taxes paid by users of existing roads (who are not always the same people). The only way to avoid this problem is to make new roads toll roads and to close them down if they don't break even.

Blog post

Transit and seniors

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 17, 2012, 9pm PDT

I occasionally have speculated that our aging society would lead to increased transit ridership, as seniors lost the ability to drive. But I recently discovered that seniors are actually less likely to use public transit than the general public. One study by the

American Public Transit Association showed that 6.7% of transit riders are over 65 (as opposed to 12.4% of all Americans).(1) The oldest Americans are even more underrepresented on America's buses and trains: only 1.5% of transit riders are over 80, about half their share of the population (2). The only other age group that is underrepresented on public transit is Americans under 18.

Why might older Americans be more car-dependent than younger Americans? It could be argued that older Americans are "locked into" car-dependent sprawl, having bought houses many years ago. But 55-64 year olds are probably just as "locked in" to their houses, but according to APTA's on-board survey of transit riders are actually slightly more likely to use transit than the general population (though less so than 20- and 30-somethings).(3) So this explanation is unlikely to be the best one.

A more likely reason is that older Americans are less likely to work, giving them less incentive to travel generally. But why aren't retirees who *do* travel abandoning driving for transit in large numbers?

Now that I have a not-very-mobile 89-year-old father, I can suggest one possible explanation: if your body is sufficiently troubled that you can't drive, it is often sufficiently troubled that you can't walk very far (or very safely, given the high level of harm from falls), which in turn keeps you from walking to a bus.

(1)http://www.apta.com/resources/statistics/Documents/transit_passenger_cha... (page 37).

(2) Id. at 38.

(3) Id. at 37. However, the evidence as to this age group is more ambiguous; a national household survey showed that 41-60 year olds were slightly underrepresented on transit, though less so than seniors. Id. at 38.

Blog post

Traffic deaths and safety: who's really the safest?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 29, 2012, 1pm PDT

William Lucy of the University of Virginia has written extensively on the question of whether outer suburbs are safer than cities or inner suburbs; he argues, based on traffic fatality data, that outer suburbs are certainly less safe than inner suburbs, and maybe even less safe than cities. (1)

However, Lucy's analysis is not particularly fine-grained: it analyzes data county-by-county, rather than town-by-town. What's wrong with this? Often, suburban cities within a county are quite diverse: some share the characteristics of inner suburbs (e.g. some public transit) while others look more like exurbs. So I wondered whether there is any significant 'safety gap' between inner and outer suburbs.

Thanks to the City Data website (www.city-data.com) this problem is at least partially soluble. The City Data website has traffic fatality data for some individual communities.

So I decided to give the data a try for one metro area I am somewhat familiar with. Rather than trying to analyze every single suburb of a region, I decided to make a case study of one or two metro areas that I am at least somewhat familiar with, and to focus on suburbs that compete with each other for residents of roughly the same social class.

First, I examined St. Louis and some of its suburbs. In 2009, the city of St. Louis had 10.9 car crash fatalities per 100,000 people, and 40.3 murders,(2) for a total violent death rate of 51.2 per 100,000. How do its suburbs compare?

First I looked at two central-western inner suburbs popular with upper-middle-class professionals: University City and Clayton. Between 2005 and 2009, University City averaged 3.8 murders and 1.1 car crash fatalities per 100,000, for a total violent death rate of 4.9/100,000. During the same period, Clayton averaged 2.4 murders and 1.2 car deaths per 100,000, for a total violent death rate of 3.6 per 100,000. Obviously, these suburbs are far safer than the city of St. Louis, whether measured by car crashes or murders.

How do outer suburbs compare? Rather than focusing on the outermost exurbs, I wanted to look at places that compete with University City and Clayton for residents: central-western outer suburbs where bus routes begin to thin out, but are still developed upper-middle-class suburbs rather than ruralizing exurbs. In particular, I focused on Chesterfield, a booming, job-rich suburb far beyond the region's outer beltway (I-270). During 2005-09, this suburb had 2.6 car crash deaths per 100,000 and 1.3 murders, for a total of 3.9 violent deaths per 100,000- a little safer than University City, a little more dangerous than Clayton. (I note that some nearby suburbs, such as Manchester, had even fewer fatalities).

Then I jumped the St. Louis county Line into St. Charles County, and looked at St. Peters, 25 miles from the city of St. Louis. St. Peters had no murders, but had 6.2 traffic fatalities per 100,000 residents during 2005-09- definitely more than any of the other suburbs listed above. Nearby St. Charles had 1.3 murders and 5 traffic fatalities per 100,000 people per year during this period, for a violent death rate of 6.3 per 100,000.

St. Charles County as a whole (which is less dense and thus less developed than St. Peters) looks much more dangerous than St. Peters. Although no statistics were available for 2007-09, 2005-06 traffic deaths averaged 11.2 per 100,000- a result consistent with Lucy's analysis.

Then I looked at another metro area, Buffalo. Here I varied the analysis by focusing on the middle-class eastern suburbs, as opposed to the most affluent suburbs (which, in Buffalo, are northeast of the city). The city of Buffalo averaged about 20.4 murders and 10 traffic deaths per 100,000/year between 2005 and 2009. Cheektowaga, a large inner suburb, averaged 0.5 murders and 4 traffic deaths per 100,000, for a total of 4.5 violent deaths per 100,000. Because the region's transit system mostly ends at Cheektowaga's eastern boundary (Transit Road) I would guess (if my St. Louis findings were typical) that suburbs further east had higher traffic death rates. In fact this was the case. Lancaster, the suburb immediately to the east of Cheektowaga, averaged 21.2 traffic fatalities per 100,000/year from 2005-09. and Elma (just south of Lancaster) averaged 14.3 traffic deaths. Again, inner suburbs were safer than outer suburbs- though here the gap was much greater than in St. Louis. (But assuming *arguendo* that Elma and Lancaster had zero murders, they were still safer than Buffalo).

A look at the more affluent northern suburbs showed a similar growth of traffic deaths as one moves further out. Kenmore, a tiny, walkable mini-suburb, averaged 1.3 violent deaths per 100,000 (all traffic) from 2005 to 2009. Amherst, which contains some totally car-dependent neighborhoods and a few with adequate bus service, averaged 4.2 violent deaths per 100,000 (1.1 murders, 3.1 traffic). Tonawanda, a similar northern

suburb, also had 4 traffic deaths per 100,000 (and zero murders, giving it a roughly identical violent death rate to Amherst). But exurb-like Clarence averaged 9 traffic deaths per 100,000.

So if St. Louis and Buffalo are any guide, it appears that the impact of traffic deaths (and the overall level of violent death as well) drops dramatically between the city limits and the innermost suburbs, doesn't change much between the first couple of rings of suburbs, and then rises dramatically in the least developed, least transit-friendly, most exurb-like suburbs.

(1) <http://www.minority.unc.edu/sph/minconf/2004/materials/lucy.et.al.pdf>

(2) Lucy emphasizes the number of homicides caused by strangers. However, these statistics are far less easy to access and so I have not used them. Moreover, some homicides are of uncertain origin.

Blog post

The End of Exurbia? Not Yet

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 16, 2012, 8am PDT

After the Census Bureau released population estimates showing that core counties were (at least in some metro areas) growing faster than exurban counties, the media was full of headlines about this alleged trend. An extreme example came from the Washington Post: "An end to America's exurbia?" (1)

But in fact, these estimates prove almost nothing, for two reasons. First, Census mid-decade estimates are only estimates- which means that their reliability is a bit questionable. To show one extreme example, 2009 Census estimates "showed" that the city of Atlanta's population had risen to 540,000 (2) - about a 30 percent jump from its 2000 population. But the 2010 Census showed that the city's population had grown only slightly, to 420,000 (up from 416,000 in 2000). (3)

Second, this Census estimate is just for one year, and thus may be either (a) a statistical fluke or (b) a temporary result of the recession (which, by making houses worth less, discouraged people from selling them and thus impeded residential mobility

generally). It may be the case that later estimates will yield differing results, or that migration to outer suburbs will increase when housing values pick up and people can sell their existing houses for more.

On the other hand, it may be the case that rising energy prices and falling housing prices create a long-term trend- but we won't know for sure until an actual Census is taken eight years from now.

- (1) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/an-end-to-americas-exurbia-for-fi...>
 - (2) http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=kf7tgg1uo9ude_&met_y=populat...
 - (3) <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/1304000.html>
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Blog post

More logical fallacies in planning policy

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 5, 2012, 5pm PDT

A couple of weeks ago, Todd Litman made a blog entry on logical fallacies in planning.* After looking at the list of possible fallacies at the end of his post, I thought I would show some (hopefully not too common) examples of these fallacies:

Ad hominem (arguing against the person rather than the argument) – "Smart growth is in the U.N's Agenda 21 so we have to fight it to stop the U.N's plan to socialize the world." "Concern about urban containment is just another example of Tea Party extremism."

Anageon (relying on inevitability)- "Sprawl is inevitable, so there's nothing we can do about it."

Anecdotal evidence (relying on one example that might not be probative)- "Suburbs are all turning into slums. Just look at Central Islip [the low-income Long Island suburb where I work]." "Density causes crime. Just look at the South Bronx."

Fallacy of composition (assuming that what is true of one part is true of the whole)-
"Since Central Islip is full of foreclosed houses, suburbia must be going downhill." "There are some neighborhoods in St. Louis City that are really scary, so you should live in the suburbs."

Fallacy of division (assuming that what is true of the whole must be true of the parts):
"We live in a car-dependent nation, so we need to have most of downtown occupied by parking lots." "The city of Chicago has been losing population for decades, so hardly anyone wants to live downtown."

False dilemma (assuming that there are only two possible alternatives, when in fact there are more): "Since most people don't want to live in high-rises, suburban sprawl is what they really want." "Because the book of Genesis says God won't destroy humanity completely, global warming must be harmless."

Hasty generalization (making a generalization based on a small sample): "Downtown condos in city X are suffering from the recession, so obviously there's no evidence of an increase in city living."

Historian's fallacy (assuming decisionmakers in the past knew what we knew now)-
"The people who supported the interstate highway program must have known that it would create sprawl."

Judgmental language (using perjorative language to influence a reader's judgment)-
"Obama and his socialist Chicago machine support high-speed rail." "Smart growth means we'll all be crammed in apartments like rats in a cage."

Meaningless statement (too vague to be agreed or disagreed with)- "You can't stop progress."

Nirvana fallacy (comparing actual things with unrealizable alternatives): "You can't un-invent cars or suburbs, so we better keep building highways and putting cars first."

Pathetic fallacy (treating inanimate objects as if they had human emotions): "We need more environmental regulation because the Earth is angry at us."

Politician's fallacy (because something should be done about a problem, a particular remedy is necessary): "We must do something about traffic congestion, so we must widen the roads." "We must do something about climate change, so we should build a new light rail line instead."

Retrospective determinism (because something happened it was bound to happen): "American cities have declined, so sprawl was inevitable no matter what policies we followed."

Straw man (attacking a position that isn't really your opponent's position): "The smart growth lobby wants everyone to live in high-rises, so its goal is impractical."

[*http://www.planetizen.com/node/55540](http://www.planetizen.com/node/55540)

Blog post

Does density raise prices?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 7, 2012, 3pm PST

In *For A New Liberty*, libertarian intellectual Murray Rothbard writes that leftist intellectuals had raised a variety of complaints against capitalism, and that "each of those complaints has been contradictory to one or more of their predecessors." In the 1930s, leftists argued that capitalism was prone to 'eternal stagnation", while in the 1960s, they argued that capitalist economies had "grown too much" causing "excessive affluence" and exhaustion of the world's resources. And so on.

It seems to me that density-phobia involves a similar litany of contradictory complaints. Traditionally, low-density zoning has been based on a desire to exclude so-called "undesirables" and thus keep property values high.

But now that compact neighborhoods are becoming more desirable (and thus more expensive), the argument that density leads to poverty and plummeting property values can no longer be taken seriously.

But Not-In-My-Back-Yard (NIMBY) activists now have a new argument: that far from reducing property values, density increases them too much, by making the neighborhood too desirable. At first glance, this argument makes no sense: if a neighborhood that once had 20 apartment buildings now has 40, the supply of apartments is increased, thus keeping the price down instead of up.

But the NIMBYs notice the housing booms of New York City, Vancouver and some other compact cities, and thus conclude that density must mysteriously raise prices.

Why is this argument flawed? First of all, density and high prices have not always gone together. In 1950, New Yorkers spent about the same amount of money on housing as other Americans (about 25 percent). Thus, it is probably the case that high housing prices in New York are the result of pro-NIMBY zoning policies: according to Edward Glaeser's book *Triumph of the City*, Manhattan allowed 11,000 building permits per year between 1955 and 1964, but only 3120 per year in the 1980s and 90s.

Second, there are plenty of dense places that are more affordable than New York (such as Philadelphia) and not-so-dense places that are as expensive (such as San Diego and Silicon Valley). At the end of 2011, the median sale price in New York City and its suburbs was \$414,000- but the average sale price in Santa Clara/San Jose was \$549,000. (See <http://www.realtor.org/wps/wcm/connect/210258804a1865779a1aff7f116f4bb7/REL11Q4T.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=210258804a1865779a1aff7f116f4bb7>)

Third, the high price of new housing does not cause housing as a whole to become less affordable. If consumers prefer newer housing to older, the newest housing will always be the most expensive- but if the new housing causes an overall increase in housing supply sufficient to surpass demand, the price of older housing may decline (as has occurred in the Rust Belt, where suburban sprawl has led to declining property values in some urban neighborhoods).

Blog post

Is Tel Aviv the future?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 18, 2012, 7pm PST

If you run a google.com search for "The Death of Suburbia" you will find about 24,000 'hits.' Some of the gloating over suburbia's alleged demise is based on the facts that (some) suburbs have been hit hard by the current economic downturn, and that (some) city neighborhoods have become more expensive per square foot than suburbs. (1) But suburbia as a whole continues to gain population.

How do we reconcile these realities? My visit to Tel Aviv last December gave me a hint. Tel Aviv's population nosedived in the third quarter of the 20th century (from 386,000 in the 1961 to 317,000 in 1988)(2) and then rebounded to over 400,000 in the past two decades.(3) But when I went to a small party in Tel Aviv, I learned that many of my fellow guests (mostly thirty- and forty-something singles and couples) were living in outlying suburbs because they were priced out of Tel Aviv – an experience similar to my own in New York (insofar as I was priced out of Manhattan and chose Queens instead).

Over the past couple of decades, some American regions have become like Tel Aviv- places where urban life is more common, but less affordable, than it once was. In the 1970s, city life was often something that well-off people fled from in disgust; today, city life is often a luxury good – something that many well-off people choose, and many slightly less well-off people wish they could afford. Instead of being the thrift store of American metropolitan areas, the most urban parts of (some) cities have become the Neiman-Marcus of America.

Does this mean suburbia is "dead"? Of course not- any more than thrift stores (or dollar stores or Wal-Mart) are dead. Just as more people shop at Wal-Mart than at Neiman Marcus, more people live and shop in suburbs than in cities.

But it does mean that policymakers are faced with a different set of challenges than in, say, 1980. Twenty or thirty years ago, one could more plausibly argue that it was a given that most Americans preferred suburbs to cities, and public debate was about whether to accommodate this alleged preference or to change it.

Today, it seems clear (at least to me) that there is not enough of urban life to go around- that is to say, that more people want it than can afford it. So perhaps the debate should be over how to create more of it, either by allowing more development in cities or by allowing some suburbs to mimic the more desirable aspects of urban life.

(1) <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/26/opinion/the-death-of-the-fringe-suburb.html>

(1) <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:E9k69-VTJfUj:international.metropolis.net/events/israel/papers/menahem/menahem.doc+&hl=en&gl=us>

(2) <http://www.citypopulation.de/Israel.html>

Blog post

Density without walkability

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 1, 2012, 3pm PST

I had heard of "dense sprawl" and "density without walkability" in the past, but before spending a week in Jerusalem last month, I had never really lived through these problems.

My parents (who I was staying with) rented a unit in a high-rise condo complex called Holyland Tower. Although Holyland Tower was the tallest building in the area, there were numerous mid-rise buildings, and lots of two-and three-story apartment and condo buildings. While walking through the area, I saw nothing resembling a single-family home. In sum, this area was a pretty dense neighborhood in a pretty dense city (Jerusalem's overall density is roughly comparable to that of the city of San Francisco).

But although the density supported walking, the design did not. To find the area, go to Google Maps (maps.google.com) and go to a street called Avraham Perrera. You will note that the street is in a section of looped streets that make the typical American cul-de-sac seem like a masterpiece of clarity. As a result, very little of interest is within walking distance, and what is within walking distance is hard to find unless you know the area really, really, really well.

For example, the nearest restaurant is less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile away as the crow flies, but is about two miles away in reality. To get there, you have to go on five separate streets. (To try it yourself, go to Google Maps and ask for directions from Avraham Perrera to 5 Hose San Martin).

Because the succession of street loops is so confusing, even places that are actually not very far are hard to find. For example, after I was in Jerusalem for a week I discovered that there was in fact a small supermarket a ten or fifteen minute walk away, but because of the messy street design (and admittedly, the rough terrain as well) we were unaware of its existence. By contrast, in a neighborhood with enough of a grid to distinguish commercial from residential streets, commercial destinations are easy to find. Admittedly, grids are more difficult on hilly terrain such as that of Jerusalem. But some American neighborhoods manage to combine walkability and hilly terrain- for example, most of San Francisco, as well as Philadelphia's Manayunk.

So what my Jerusalem neighborhood taught me was that with sufficiently poor street design, even a fairly compact neighborhood may be more confusing to navigate, and separate uses more aggressively, than some sprawling suburbs.

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