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# HOW TO SAVE OUR URBAN CENTERS

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JOEL KOTKIN



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Cover image credit: Los Angeles neighborhoods south of downtown, with the city downtown and Mount Baldy in the distance. Source: [Alek Leckzas](#), CC 4.0 License.

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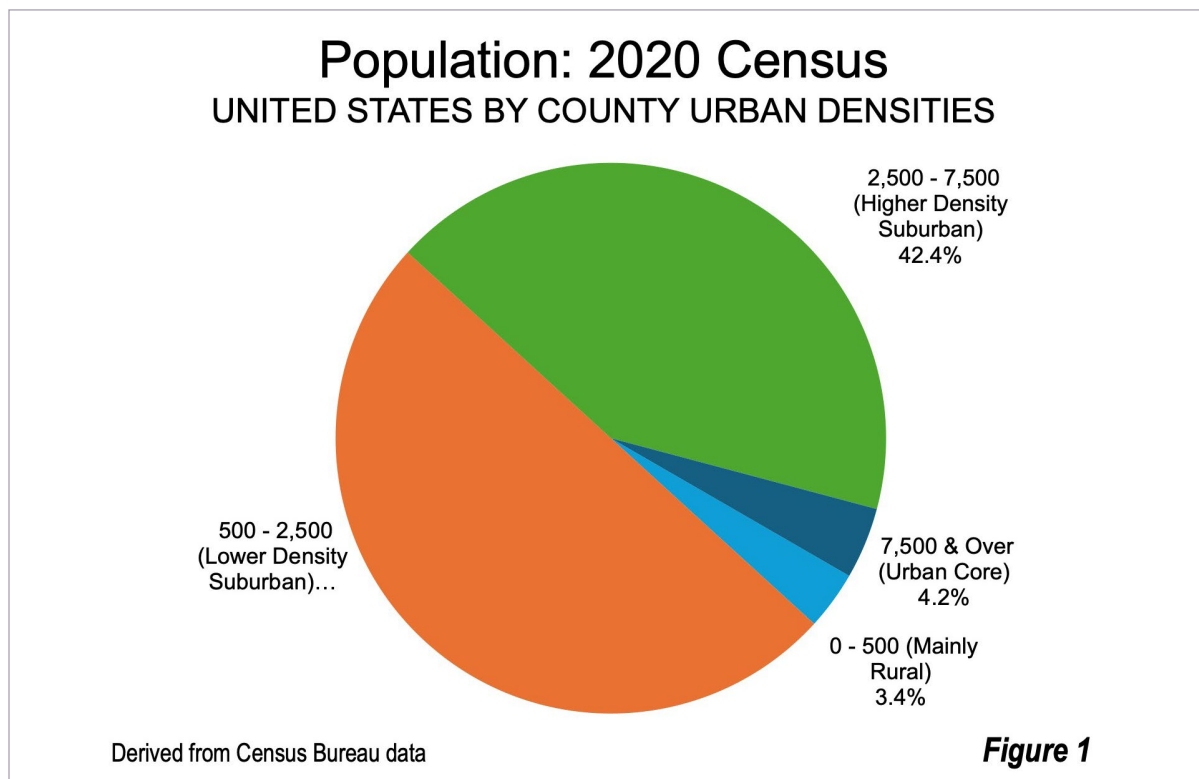
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A great city is not to be confounded with a populous one.

*Aristotle*

American cities face an existential choice. They can continue down their current path – adopting policies that work against the interests of local residents – or develop new approaches to make urban life work for the broad majority.

Today, many urban centers, particularly older cities, are in decline. The proportion of Americans living in core urban areas has been decreasing for generations, a trend that has only accelerated in the wake of the pandemic, rising crime, and increasingly radical politics.



Economic and sociological trends are driving these changes. Even before the pandemic, the “transactional city” conceived by Jean Gottman – center of exchange, not production - was already facing challenges.<sup>1</sup> Demographic and economic growth has shifted to less dense, often

newer communities. The cities most identified with the transactional model – San Francisco, Chicago, and New York – are among those suffering the most.

Yet, urbanity itself – the concept of people living in proximity within a defined place – is far from dead. We continue to see the emergence of new communities on the urban periphery, as well as the revitalization of older suburban communities that are developing their own successful urban centers. In some major cities, even as office demand declines, residential construction continues to grow – particularly for the childless, young and affluent.

Rather than dismiss the urban future entirely, this paper explores how urbanism is being redefined in communities across the country. Cities, from the earliest times, have long been the cornerstones of human civilization. They will remain so – but in new and oft unrecognized forms, if local communities can organize themselves successfully.



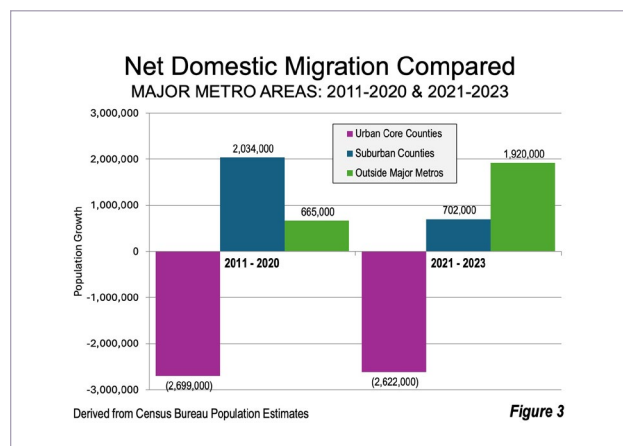
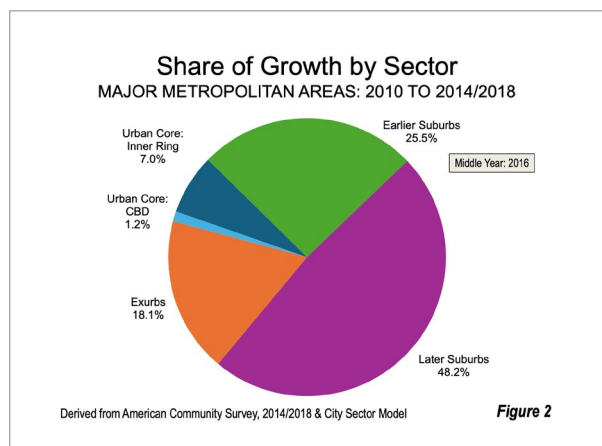
*View of the ancient city of Mardin, showcasing its unique architecture and historical significance in the Mesopotamian region. Source: Picryl, Public Domain.*

## WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

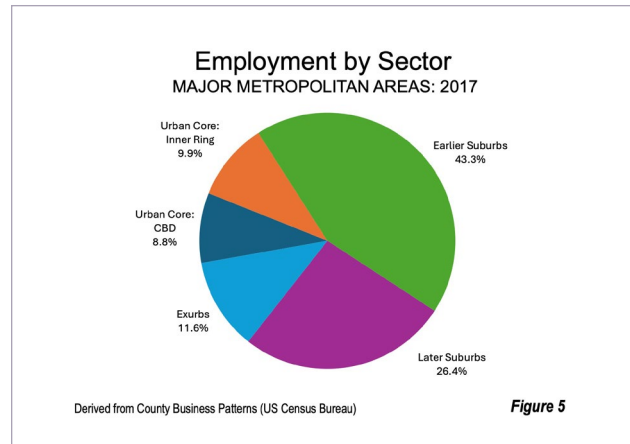
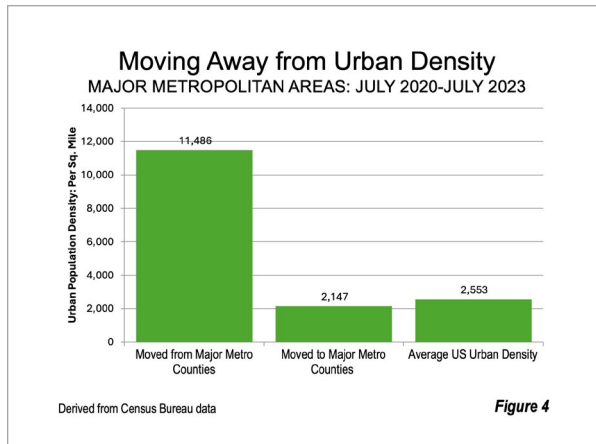
Over the past half century, media and academic sources have repeatedly suggested that dense urbanity would dominate the future. “Mayors” should “rule the world”, suggested enthusiasts.<sup>2</sup> It was routinely claimed that economic growth would cluster in a handful of superstar cities, like London, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. *The New York Times*’ Neil Irwin observed, “...a small number of superstar companies choose to locate in a handful of superstar cities.” The big winners were to the ‘skilled city’ – dense urban centers and college towns.<sup>3</sup>

Even amidst the pandemic, some analysts predicted a return to dense urban growth and greater office occupancy.<sup>4</sup> They promoted visions of ‘smart cities’ that would be like catnip for potential residents.<sup>5</sup> But traditional urban centers have continued to lose both people and economic influence – a trend evident for decades and further accelerated by the pandemic and rise of remote work.<sup>6</sup>

This has been a long-term trend. Since 1945, more than 90 percent of U.S. population growth has occurred in metropolitan areas.<sup>7</sup> In 1950, core cities accounted for nearly 24% of the population; today, that share has dropped to 15%. Meanwhile, the suburbs and exurbs have seen explosive growth – rising from 13% of the metropolitan population in 1940 to 86% in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Suburban, and especially exurban, dominance of metropolitan growth has only accelerated in recent years.<sup>9</sup>



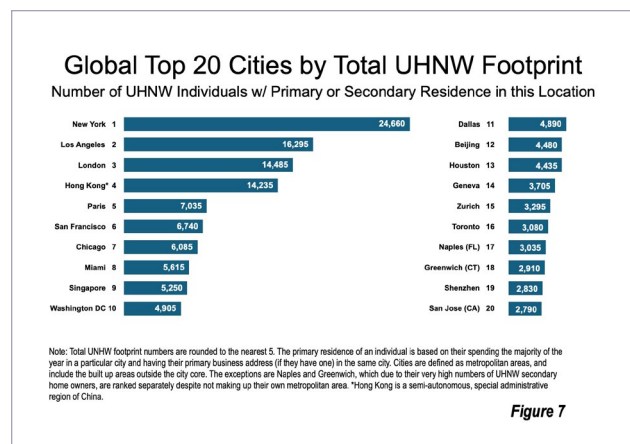
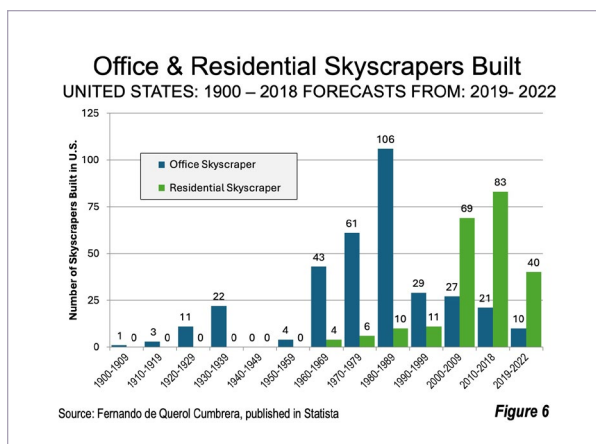
Even before the pandemic, two-thirds of millennials preferred suburban living.<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, educated millennials have been leaving the larger coastal metros for the suburb-dominated Sun Belt, including smaller and mid-sized cities.<sup>11</sup> Fast growing counties – home to most of the planned communities discussed below – have seen substantial gains among households earning over \$75,000, particularly those between the ages of 30 and 44.<sup>12</sup> According to a recent MIT study, suburban and exurban lifestyles, which are built around cars, now constitute roughly 80% of the nation’s metropolitan population, while barely 8% live in the urban core and another 13% live in traditional transit-oriented suburbs.<sup>13</sup>



The outward movement of employment has also continued steadily since the 1950s. New research, including a recent report from Brown University, suggests that neither city size nor density strongly correlates with higher productivity.<sup>14</sup> Among the major metropolitan areas, more than 75% of jobs have been outside downtown and larger commercial centers, such as 'edge cities' for at least two decades. Later data indicated that 91 percent of employment growth among major metropolitan areas was outside CBDs between 2010 and 2017.<sup>15</sup>

Simply put, the urban core has become less dominant. Office occupancy has been declining since the turn of the century, while building of new space has also fallen.<sup>16</sup> In 2019, before the pandemic, construction was one-third the rate of 1985 and half that of 2000.<sup>17</sup> Urban retail has also hit a rough spot, with strip malls – the suburban *bête noire* of planners – emerging as the most resilient sector. From 2010 to 2017, over 80% of all job growth was in the suburbs and exurbs. The 50 highest growth counties had an employment increase of more than 2.5 times that of other counties in 2019.<sup>18</sup>

The decline in office occupancy and commercial property – whose taxes account for roughly one-third of New York City's budget – poses a serious threat to the already beleaguered finances of many cities.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as we discuss below, there is still a dynamic market for high-end residential centers. While US office construction has plummeted from 106 in the 1990s to 27 in the 2000s and a projected 10 since 2019, the number of residential high-rises, just 11 in the 1990s, has soared to 83 in the last decade and a projected 40 since 2019.<sup>20</sup>



The core city may no longer be the epicenter of economic life, it continues to serve a distinct role as a hub for young professionals, globe-trotting elites, and cultural creators. In New York, for example, while the overall population has declined, the number of ultra-wealthy residents has continued to grow.<sup>21</sup> Increasingly, global cities like New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, and Miami are functioning as showcases for luxury brands such as LVMH, which continue to invest heavily in these markets.<sup>22</sup> Even landmarks like Rockefeller Center are actively reinventing themselves as destinations for recreation, tourism, and the arts.<sup>23</sup>



## PERIPHERY: THE RISE OF NEW CITIES

For generations, urbanists have sought to slow or reverse the migration shift to the periphery. The fashion among progressive intellectuals at publications like *The Atlantic* has been to paint suburbs as a failing “Ponzi scheme”.<sup>24</sup> Suburbs have long been a particular target for cultural elites, who have historically shown disdain for them and largely continue to do so.<sup>25</sup>

This contempt for suburbs reached a peak following the 2008 global economic crisis. Mainstream media asserted that “America’s suburban dream” was “collapsing into a nightmare”.<sup>26</sup> One prominent urbanist wrote that the exurbs would become “the next slums”, the equivalent of “roadkill” doomed by changing economics and demographics and the only future for “fringe suburbs” would be “death”.<sup>27</sup>

The reality is that many suburbs and exurbs are thriving. They are riding the wave of the information economy, which does not need a dense urban core. The leading tech centers in the country, like Silicon Valley, Orange County, North San Diego County, as well as Austin and Raleigh are primarily suburban in nature.<sup>28</sup> Traditional tech centers like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have been losing educated young people to cities like Sarasota, Nashville, Jacksonville, Las Vegas and Austin.<sup>29</sup>

While these areas are largely car-dependent, many have built a distinctly urban infrastructure. Carmel, Indiana, for example, has transformed itself into a vital cultural and business hub.<sup>30</sup> There have been significant downtown revivals in Orange and Fullerton, in Southern California, but also small towns in Middle America.<sup>31</sup>

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Source: Matt Gush, iStockphoto

We could be on the verge of birthing new cities in a way that has characterized the American since the founding, with many cities, like Chicago, arising out of the wilderness in rapid order. Today we see new cities, with town centers, are being planned by developers. This also includes efforts notably by Elon Musk in Texas, Bill Gates in Arizona and by a gaggle of California oligarchs in the rural reaches of Solano County.<sup>32</sup>

But we do not have to wait for tech oligarchs to know this model works. For a generation we have seen successful examples like Columbia and Reston outside Washington, DC, Irvine in Southern California, the Woodlands and Cinco Ranch outside Houston, New Albany in metro Columbus, and the Domain just outside Austin. These communities reflect the promise of “garden cities”, as proposed by the British visionary Ebenezer Howard, with their own or nearby offices, recreational facilities, and cultural amenities.<sup>33</sup>



*Philcomanforterie, Office Buildings in The Woodlands, Texas CC 4.0License*

As envisioned by Howard, these new communities allow people to live closer to nature, often with hiking and biking trails amidst extensive woodland. “This field is just exploding,” says Gretchen Daily, a professor of environmental science at Stanford University.<sup>34</sup> The pandemic-induced acceleration of remote work has reduced the importance of urban cores. These trends may also be a win for the environment, as fewer people spend energy going into dense cities, where the “heat island” effect impacts their level of emissions.<sup>35</sup>

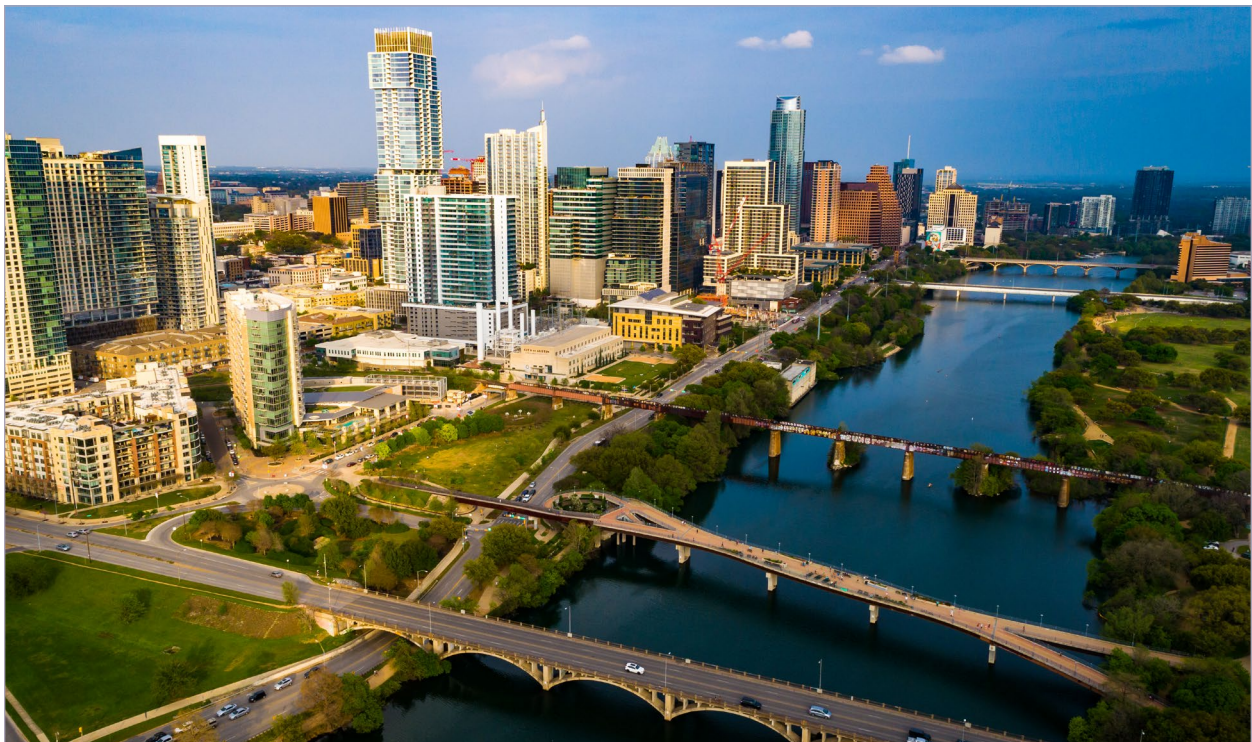
Frank Lloyd Wright describes these type of communities as “a means of liberation” for families because it allows them to work at home or nearby, while also being close to the blessings of



nature. Rather than an abandonment of the city, they are a sign of its continuing reinvention. As Wright advocated, “After all is said and done, he – the citizen – is really the city. The city is going wherever he goes.”<sup>36</sup>

## THE FUTURE OF DOWNTOWNS

Along the slow-moving shores of the Colorado River, the Waterline Apartments stand as the tallest building in Texas. At 74 stories, they surpass Houston’s JP Morgan Chase Tower by nearly 20 feet.<sup>37</sup> In many ways, Austin’s evolving residential skyline represents the future of older downtowns. It reflects an emerging urban reality that H.G. Wells envisioned over a century ago. Rather than the centers of metropolitan life and economy, he saw cities as largely childless “places of concourse and rendezvous”. In contrast, he saw families clustering in the suburban periphery over an ever-expanding terrain.<sup>38</sup> This analysis has been further developed by the University of Chicago’s Terry Nicholas Clark who described downtowns as “entertainment machines”.<sup>39</sup>



*Waterline building & river, Austin (Bryan Roschetzky / iStockphoto)*

Futurists have long debated about how remote work and the growth of the information economy would reshape urban geographies. While some predicted the dominance of major metropolitan centers, many workers now prefer to work from home at least part of the time.<sup>40</sup> Even large multinational firms, historically anchored in cities like New York and Chicago, are rethinking their real estate strategies. According to the Financial Times, many companies are planning to reduce their office footprints by 10 to 20 percent. A study from the University of Chicago found that as much as one-third of the workforce could operate remotely, and up to 50 percent in Silicon Valley.<sup>41</sup>

The New York Times warns of an “urban doom loop”, however, there are ways to revitalize the assets of traditional cities.<sup>42</sup> The key lies in supporting and appealing to diverse lifestyle choices. Places like New York’s “pencil towers” as well as downtown Milwaukee and the nation’s largest conversion program at Detroit’s Renaissance Center offer a contained and attractive urbanity. They offer amenities like waterfront parks and entertainment venues. In areas like Manhattan there could be large-scale office conversions. CBRE expects office conversion projections to double in 2024 compared to 2023.<sup>43</sup>

**T**he modern downtown appeal(s) to young professionals who do not feel sufficiently stimulated by life in the suburbs.

In Austin, developer and real estate agent Kevin Burns sees the modern downtown appealing to young professionals who do not feel sufficiently stimulated by life in the suburbs. There is clearly an appeal. Since 2000, the area’s population has tripled to 15,000 but has far fewer children per capita than in the region – under 3 percent compared to over 21 percent. Its residents are also whiter, nearly 50 percent wealthier, better educated and their homes are \$170,000 more expensive than the regional average.<sup>44</sup> The future of downtowns largely depends on offering a wealth of amenities to attract professionals and those who support them.



## THE QUESTION OF GOVERNANCE

Already some cities once seen as models for urban density, like Chicago, Portland, Oakland and San Francisco have suffered due to disorder on the streets, including in the loss of affluent residents and key businesses.<sup>45</sup> Successful cities are not born successful; to thrive they must be nurtured.

In Los Angeles's South Side, we see clear evidence of what effective, localized governance can accomplish. A sharp contrast is visible between a cluster of independent cities and the surrounding areas governed by the progressive-led city. In some city-controlled areas, for example, an unfinished high-rise has become a canvas for graffiti, while a rash of copper thefts from city streetlights have left neighborhoods literally in the dark.<sup>46</sup>

Paramount is a predominantly Latino city of over 50,000 residents located just 18 miles from downtown Los Angeles. Once described as "an urban disaster area", Paramount was hit hard by the economic downturn of the 1980s, when aerospace and automobile manufacturers pulled out of the region.<sup>47</sup> But today, Paramount and other South LA towns like Downey, Southgate, Bellflower, and Cerritos stand as testaments to effective local governance and resilience. They boast thriving downtowns, with attractive restaurants and shops.



Downey (Matt Gush / iStockphoto)

The change revolved around the election of often younger, reform-oriented city councils. "The people who turned the city

## Growing Up in Lynwood

by M. Andrew Moshier

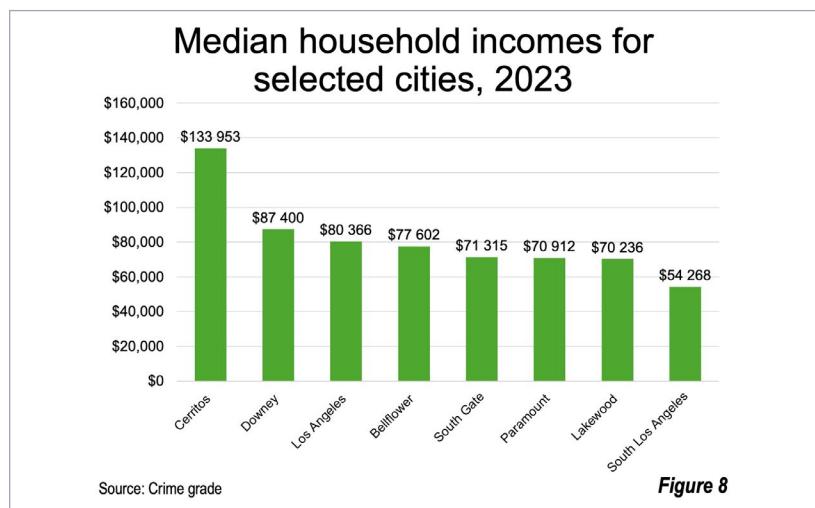
Growing up in Lynwood, CA and later moving to Downey, we lived in places that few outside our local towns even knew existed. We were not LA, Long Beach or Orange County. There was even less there than in Gertude Stein's Oakland.

Do not mistake this characterization as depreciation. Life (as least for the kids) was really good. Lynwood attracted families for its quality schools, as did Downey and other cities. Good sports, school music programs, a remarkably kid-friendly municipal art museum, all were valuable parts of my childhood.

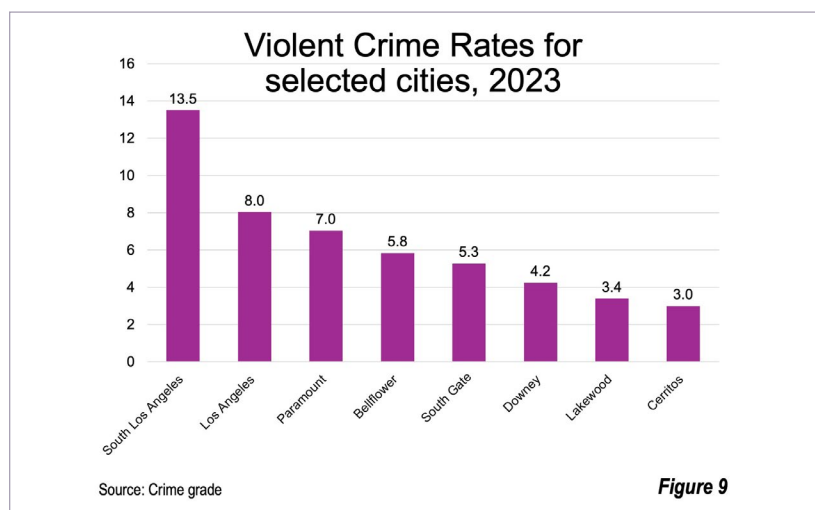
Things got worse from the later 70s through the 90s. As newlyweds in 1981, my wife and I moved just outside the city limits of Paramount. That same year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development declared Paramount one of the worst urban environments in the country. Other cities in the area were faring better but were in noticeable decline, including some serious problems of local corruption.

A few months ago, my wife and I decided on a whim to take a drive through some of our old haunts in Paramount and south Downey. We were struck by how much nicer the commercial districts and the residential

around come from here,” notes Bellflower City Councilman Victor Sanchez as we walked down Bellflower Blvd.



Rather than duplicate the already existing array of malls, they worked on sparking new businesses, from furniture and upholstery making, to a comedy club, coffee shops and unique eateries. Some are housed in 1930s era buildings. The people who Bellflower around focused on the critical basics of urban life. “What we needed was to create something local, and special” Sanchez explains. “Local businesses and residents knew what we were doing before was not working. We are taking control of the city and getting stuff done.”



Clean-ups and graffiti removal have spurred new downtown developments. Most of the cities have programs that allow citizens to report graffiti, which is then removed within 24 hours. Locally grounded leadership that deals with common urban problems has led to positive results. Clean-ups and graffiti

neighborhoods seemed. Maybe this was just reverse nostalgia – we were poor newlyweds back then, so maybe we just were just projecting a bad contrast to where we are today.

But after a few more visits we became convinced that something interesting and encouraging was happening. It seemed to us there had been more vacant stores, more messy front yards, and more graffiti back when we lived there. So, my colleagues and I at Chapman’s Center for Demographics and Policy started looking at concrete economic metrics and interviewing local leaders. It has turned out the news from these once obscure towns was more than just a modest improvement.

In recent years, the region has really begun to thrive, thanks it seems to a remarkable revival of good local governance (with some sad recent exceptions). Several of the cities there, including formerly distressed Paramount, are growing economically under sound civic leadership. Crime, including gang activity, is much reduced. Schools are improving and are taken seriously by community leaders. Home ownership rates are going up. Commercial occupancy is up. Moreover, this is not a gentrification story. The area has become more Latino but at the same time more vibrant, safe and prosperous – a very livable region.

removal have spurred new developments along the city's downtowns. Most have programs that allow citizens to report graffiti, which is then removed within 24 hours. "In places like Paramount, people get things done because that's where they live," jokes former Paramount City Manager Pat West, "In LA they have meetings."

Most of this success stems from a focus on the fundamentals. Cities like Paramount prioritize core urban services such as parks, public spaces, and landscaping. Neighborhood beautification initiatives, like subsidizing flower beds and white picket

**We** went from being a place with shootings and murders to one that attracts young families who see this as an up-and-coming place...."

**John Moreno,**  
**Paramount City Manager**

murders to one that attracts young families who see this as an up-and-coming place," suggests Moreno. "We had a lot of blight but the citizens, the churches brought it back." He adds, "When I go to LA I am amazed how they are not doing these basic things."

Though the region remains obscure to the national or local press, the contrast with Los Angeles remains highly positive as it has become, against the odds, a economic gateway for upwardly mobile families.

fences, have helped improve curb appeal. In stark contrast to the dysfunction plaguing Los Angeles public schools, Paramount's local school district has seen remarkable improvement. As current City Manager John Moreno notes, graduation rates have risen from 71% to over 90%, a success he attributes to strong community spirit and active collaboration between city government, local businesses, and the independent school district. Los Angeles, by comparison, suffers from a more "siloed" administration.<sup>48</sup>

These improvements, Moreno explains, are a direct result of a tight-knit community, increasingly led by young families that are either homeowners or hope to be. "We went from being a place with shootings and

## THE CURRENT OPPORTUNITY

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency is being met by many urban leaders with about as much enthusiasm as a reprise of the bubonic plague. The National Urban League warns of an “extreme right” administration that will ban abortion, threaten the civil service, and roll back immigration and racial quotas.<sup>49</sup> Trump has even proposed building new planned cities – so called freedom cities – that could compete with the existing urban landscape.<sup>50</sup>

It is clear that the GOP-led Congress will not fund much more mass transit or other city services.<sup>51</sup> Given the GOP’s meager support in big cities, some progressives fear Trump’s actions will force them to “go it alone.”<sup>52</sup> However, given that many cities have declined over the past five years under Democratic leadership, a reduction in federal support may actually spur much-needed reforms. As cities like Los Angeles struggle, others are shifting to a more pragmatic approach.

Emerging from this new wave of mayors are Houston’s John Whitmire, Fort Worth’s Mattie Parker, and San Francisco’s newly elected mayor, Dan Lurie. Rather than assume that power and money will head their way, these mayors – like their counterparts in South LA – wish to compete with much faster-growing suburbs and exurbs.<sup>53</sup>

Dan Lurie represents a break from San Francisco’s entrenched political machine. While occasionally producing bright lights like Willie Brown, it has more often delivered mediocrities like Gavin Newsom, Kamala Harris and the now deposed London Breed.<sup>54</sup> In 2024, Wallet Hub credited it as the country’s worst run city with high crime rates, immovable bureaucracy, accompanied by virtue signaling on race, gender and climate.<sup>55</sup>



*Homeless person sleeping on the street in San Francisco*  
Source: Christopher Beland; Public Domain license

Mayors like Lurie could draw on successes from the 1990s and early 2000s, when effective governance restored urban vitality. Reform-minded leaders – Democrat and Republican – such as New York’s Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, Houston’s Bob Lanier, Indianapolis’ Steven Goldsmith, Philadelphia’s Ed Rendell, and Los Angeles’ Richard Riordan demonstrated that pragmatic leadership could drive meaningful change. Their administrations prioritized regulatory reform, tax restraint, and most importantly, improvements in public safety.

However, the reform successes were often replaced by progressive mayors like Bill DeBlasio in New York, who dismantled law enforcement reforms.



This trend continues today with leaders like Chicago's Brandon Johnson, whose policies are accelerating the decline of what was once the nation's third-largest economic powerhouse. Chicago now has the highest pension debt per capita among major U.S. major cities. His formula for destruction – big raises for this teacher union funders while losing many of his most productive citizens. A similar trajectory is unfolding in far weaker, less favored St. Louis.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than seek help from Washington, the new urban reformers follow the old gospel dictum, "cure themselves." As cities vie for high-value industries, they must also attract the educated workforce that is increasingly relocating to states like Florida, Arizona, and Texas.<sup>57</sup> These qualitative issues – safety, livability, and cultural vitality – are central to the emerging urban agenda. In today's highly competitive landscape, cities must enhance their appeal with safe streets, walkable downtowns, and cultural attractions.

**E**verything starts with  
addressing urban crime

Everything starts with addressing urban crime, still greatly elevated from pre-pandemic levels, particularly once the drop in arrests and convictions is considered.<sup>58</sup> Recent murders on New York's subways, random attacks on the street, decline of a half million people,

and proliferating rat populations have heightened these concerns. In DC, police warn pedestrians not to wear expensive jewelry or designer sneakers in public.<sup>59</sup>

Fortunately, many cities are refocusing their efforts on reducing crime. There is growing momentum to replace progressive district attorneys whose lenient policies have been linked to rising lawlessness. A dozen Soros-funded DAs, in Portland, Los Angeles, San Fransico, Seattle and St. Louis, were turfed out. In New York, a tough new Police Commissioner, Jessica Tisch, has started to roll back the disorder that has plagued the city.<sup>60</sup>

Under better leaders, cities do not need to fall into a "doom loop". Urban dysfunction is not inevitable, but a choice. Fortunately, there are signs that common sense is making a comeback. City residents are increasingly unwilling to be passive witnesses to their city's deterioration.

American urbanism, in all its increasingly diverse forms, is far from a lost cause. What is needed now is a renewed commitment to realistic, responsive leadership – and a willingness to meet the challenges of today with clear eyes and practical solutions, from the exurbs to the heart of the inner city. ✱

**A**merican urbanism,  
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## AUTHOR



**Joel Kotkin** is the Roger Hobbs Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures and author of eleven books, including *The City: A Global History*, *The Human City: Urbanism for the Rest of Us* and, most recently, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class*. He writes a regular column for *Quillette*, the *American Mind*, the *National Post* (Canada) and *Spiked*. He also writes for *Unherd*, *National Review*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Spectator*. He has written extensively on issues of class and housing in Europe, North America, and East Asia.

## RESEARCH TEAM



**M. Andrew Moshier** is a native of Southern California. He earned a Ph.D. in Computer Science from the University of Michigan in 1988, and has since then been involved in research in several areas of mathematics and computer science, including energy modeling for the Department of Energy, computational linguistics, cryptographic algorithms, and mostly in recent years, in areas of logic and topology. He is a Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science at Chapman University, where he has been on the faculty since 1994. In his tenure at Chapman he has served as chair of the mathematics and computer science department, and recently was dean of the School of Communication.



**Bheki Mahlobo** was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and is a senior analyst at the Centre for Risk Analysis (CRA), a South African think tank with a global perspective. Mahlobo is a regular speaker and media commentator, providing analysis of the political and economic trends in South Africa and global markets. With John Endres, he is the coauthor of the CRA's client Risk Alert, a weekly bulletin that identifies the key risks in South Africa and the world. He also contributes research to the Socio-Economic Survey of South Africa, the CRA's flagship reference guide.



**Alicia Kurimska** has worked as a research associate at Chapman University's Center for Demographics and Policy and the Urban Reform Institute. She is the co-author, with Anne Snyder Brooks, of *The Millennial Dilemma: A Generation Searches for Home... On Their Terms*. She has lived in Stockholm, Prague, Slovakia, and California.

**Rhonda Howard** is a graphic designer based in Southern California

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