

SUBURBANIZATION

after

W.W. II

Urban Decentralization: 1950-Present

The industrial metropolis reached its peak about 1950. Since then, something of a turnaround has occurred as people have deserted the downtowns in a process known as *urban decentralization* (Edmonston & Guterbock, 1984). Another look at Table 21-4 shows that the largest central cities of the Northeast and Midwest stopped growing or actually lost population in the decades after 1950. For example, the 1990 census count found New York to have half a million fewer people than at mid-century.

But decentralization has not brought an end to urbanization. On the contrary, cities are once again evolving into a different form. Instead of densely populated central cities, our urban landscape now looks more and more like vast urban regions, a trend that is closely tied to the expansion of suburbs.

Suburbs and Central Cities

Just as central cities flourished a century ago, we have recently witnessed the expansion of **suburbs**, *urban areas beyond the political boundaries of a city*. Suburbs began to grow rapidly late in the nineteenth century as railroad and trolley lines enabled people to live beyond the commotion of the city while still being able to commute to

work "downtown" (Warner, 1962). The first suburbanites were the well-to-do people imitating the pattern of the European nobility who alternated between their country estates and town houses (Baltzell, 1979). But the growth of suburbs was also fueled by racial and ethnic intolerance: rising immigration was adding to the social diversity of central cities, prompting many people to flee to homogeneous, high-prestige enclaves beyond the reach of the masses. In time, of course, less wealthy people also came to view a single-family house on its own piece of leafy suburban ground as part of the American Dream.

The economic boom of the late 1940s, coupled to the mobility provided by increasingly affordable automobiles, made this dream come true for more and more people. After World War II, men and women eagerly returned to family life, igniting the baby boom described earlier in this chapter. Since central cities offered little space for new housing construction, suburbs blossomed almost overnight. The government weighed in with economic assistance in the form of guaranteed bank loans, which further encouraged the purchase of suburban homes.

Some of the most successful postwar suburbs were designed for moderate-income people. Levittown, built on potato fields of New York's Long Island in the late 1940s, inaugurated a trend toward inexpensive suburban housing (Wattel, 1958). What some dismissed as prefabricated, cookie-cutter houses were nonetheless purchased by eager families just as fast as they were built. By 1970 more of the U.S. population lived in the suburbs than remained in central cities.

As population decentralized, businesses also began to migrate to the suburbs. Older people today can recall trips "downtown" to shop but, by 1970, the suburban mall had replaced "main street" as the center of retail trade (Rosenthal, 1974; Tobin, 1976; Geist, 1985). Manufacturing interests, too, began to eye the suburbs where there was relief from high taxes, soaring crime rates, and traffic congestion. The postwar interstate highway system with its beltways encircling central cities made the move to new industrial parks all but irresistible.

Decentralization was not good news for everyone, however. Rapid suburban growth soon threw older cities of the Northeast and Midwest into financial chaos. Population decline meant reduced tax revenues. Further, cities lost their more affluent residents to the suburbs and were left to provide expensive social programs for the poor who remained. The predictable result was inner-city decay after 1950 (Gluck & Meister, 1979; Sternlieb & Hughes, 1983). Some major cities, such as Cleveland

and New York, actually plummeted to the edge of financial bankruptcy. Especially to whites, deteriorating inner cities were places to leave, synonymous with low-quality housing, crime, drugs, unemployment, the poor, and minorities. This perception fed on itself, fueling wave after wave of "white flight" and urban decline. Suburbs may have their share of poor housing, congestion, and crime, but they still appeal to many people because they have remained largely white while the inner-city population contains a greater share of people of color (Clark, 1979; Logan & Schneider, 1984; Stahura, 1986; Galster, 1991).

The official response to the plight of the central cities was **urban renewal**, *government programs intended to revitalize cities*. Federal and local funds have paid for the rebuilding of many inner cities. Yet critics of urban renewal programs charge that they have benefitted business communities while doing little to meet the housing needs of low-income residents (Jacobs, 1961; Greer, 1965; Gans, 1982).

Glimpse of the Country:

- ★ FARMLAND covers about half the area of the United States, more than 1 billion acres.
- ★ FRESH BROCCOLI showed the largest percentage gain in consumption of any food over the past 20 years.
- ★ AN ACRE of land can produce 11,000 heads of lettuce.
- ★ TEXAS has about 156,000 farms, more than any other state.
- ★ KENTUCKY HENS lay an average of 240 eggs a year—for an annual total of a half-billion eggs.

U.S. has fewest farms since 1850

WASHINGTON — For the first time since before the Civil War, the number of farms in America has dwindled to fewer than 2 million.

The total has fallen to 1,925,300, the lowest since 1850, the year Millard Fillmore succeeded Zachary Taylor as president, the Census Bureau reported Wednesday.

The number peaked at 6.8 million in 1935.

Although there are fewer farms, the just-released report from the 1992 Census of Agriculture said more efficient methods boosted output to \$163 billion.

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