

Economics



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Since the end of World War II, America has witnessed a rapid growth in suburban and exurban growth. This large-scale migration has been studied for decades. Some theorists have suggested there is no real harm in this outward expansion from traditional population centers. Others point to this migration as the source of urban problems such as failing schools, high crime rates and dwindling tax revenues. Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institute and David Brooks of The Weekly Standard both recognize the realities of exurban growth, but disagree on the real forces driving the migration.

Brooks argues that this migration to what he terms “sprinkler cities” is a part of the American character. While taking a tongue-in-cheek look at the peculiar nature of these new exurbanites (massive outdoor grills, SUVs and shopping at mega-box stores) he focuses more sincerely on his observations about what really motivates this group of people to live in sprinkler cities.

Brooks concludes that it is a combination of factors that are uniquely American. He says that the belief that greener pastures are always to be found in another place is a part of American mythology. This desire for movement is coupled with the desire to be surrounded with people that are similar to them. The belief in technological solutions to modern problems, the desire for relaxed camaraderie and providing a traditional childhood for their children drive them to create new spaces that fit their ideal.

Katz feels that the real cause of the outward expansion of population from city centers isn't caused by something inherent in American culture. He identifies a lack of cooperation between governmental entities as the real root cause of the problem. He argues that misguided land use policies and funding for transportation systems that encourages exurban growth create the atmosphere needed for the expansive growth. He shows that as

households move away from urban centers and older suburbs, what they leave behind is broken neighborhoods and crumbling social and physical infrastructure.

I agree most with the article written by Katz because his focused on sound economic principles. Actually, Brooks alluded to these principles but did not identify them as a real part of the problem. Brooks speaks of the underused six-lane highways, the in-ground sprinkling systems and the availability of enough treated water to have lush grass even in the most arid climate. He identifies these trappings as necessary for the new exurbanite to create their own little Mayberry. But it is Katz that identifies the taxes and planning processes that allow this sort of development to happen in the first place. Part of the attraction of the exurbs is the lower cost of housing, the easier commutes and the high services to taxes ratio. Katz states convincingly that a change in how taxes are used for transportation and the other essential services would probably make living in the exurbs less cost effective. He rightly argues that municipalities surrounding urban centers need to work together with cities to form robust metropolitan cooperatives. These governmental bodies should work together to figure out equitable ways to distribute tax revenue for vital services and transportation. Cities, suburbs and exurbs need to work cooperatively if they are to all remain healthy, vibrant places to live.

I feel that the article by Katz has the best point of view. It addresses the root factors that contribute to urban and suburban flight to the exurbs. While Brooks does have very interesting and often humorous insights into the individuals that inhabit the exurbs, it is the planning policies and tax breaks

that make them so attractive to people that otherwise would be living in urban areas or older suburbs.