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## Until City Living Gets More Civilized, Suburbs Are the Way to Go

[Gideon Kanner](#)

When the Los Angeles Times waxes orgasmic on its editorial page over something, it's a good idea to check it out carefully. Case in point: the Times' support for legislation to put an end to sprawl. What's wrong with that? Nothing. It's just that the proposed cures don't work. For one thing, there is no concise, workable definition of sprawl. One man's suburban growth is another man's sprawl. So let's see how we got that way.

As Jane Jacobs notes in her acclaimed book "The Death and Life of American Cities," the push for sprawl started in the 1930s when Herbert Hoover came out "against the moral inferiority of cities and [delivered] a panegyric on the moral virtues of simple cottages, small towns and grass." He was joined on the left by Richard G. Tugwell, the federal administrator responsible for the New Deal's Green Belt demonstration suburbs, who wanted the government to entice people to move out of cities.

Then, after World War II, we got the GI Bill, one of the greatest, though underappreciated, events in American history. In one fell swoop, hordes of young, formerly working-class types became "college men" - what before the war was a privilege of the rich. This was something. By graduating from college in those days, you became a member of the middle class, with all the ambitions and appetites of the middle class,

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one of which was a desire to live in a suburban house. No sooner said than done. The GI Bill made low-cost home financing available with no money down, and the Federal Housing Administration insured similar housing loans for civilians. Enter Bill Levitt, who built Levittown and started selling real suburban homes en masse for under \$10,000 with no money down. What a deal!

The rest is history. People started moving out of cities to the suburbs. Also, Federal legislation (12 U.S.C. Section 1701n) required federal agencies to reduce the vulnerability of cities to enemy attack by promoting urban decentralization. New roads were built with federal funds to facilitate commuting to city jobs. Before long, businesses followed their customers, making life still more convenient in the suburbs. City neighborhoods began to empty out. Some, like the South Bronx, were abandoned altogether. That urban vacuum was partially filled by a migration of Southern blacks whose old rural lifestyle came to an end as sharecropping ceased to be viable. Besides, they wanted to get away from oppressive Jim Crow laws. Urban areas in the industrial North thus experienced a culture clash. Some of it was inspired by racism, but some was not. "Block busting" and "white flight" followed, leaving behind more abandoned city neighborhoods.

In the wake of the 1960s riots, Department of Housing and Urban Development assistant secretary Charles Haar conducted a study that concluded that cities faced a choice: Become armed camps or face more "white flight." President Lyndon Johnson got wind of that study and ordered it classified for 30 years. The flight to the suburbs continued. You can read about in Roger Biles' November 1998 article in the *Journal of Urban History*, "Thinking the Unthinkable About Our Cities, Thirty Years Later."

Next came urban redevelopment, which became a machine of mass destruction of low- and mid-priced urban housing, displacing hundreds of thousands of urban dwellers annually, and replacing their homes with shopping malls and downtown office buildings mostly occupied by day by commuting suburbanites who wouldn't be caught dead living in the city, and who, at the end of the day went home to the suburbs, leaving behind empty city streets of interest only to cops and robbers. And speaking of cops, the 1970s saw a decline in law enforcement and a rise in urban crime. Living in cities meant fearing for one's safety when walking down city streets. Suburbs kept looking better and better.

The unkindest cut was the catastrophic decline in quality and safety of urban schools. Quality of local schools is the most

important factor in families' decisions on where to live, so the consequences were predictable. Busing of students made it worse. The Supreme Court held in *Milliken v. Bradley*, that busing was OK only within the school district being integrated. That prompted more parents to get out of Dodge.

Could it get worse? It could, and it did. The laid-back, pot-puffing hippie culture was replaced by illicit distribution of hard drugs. Cocaine, "the caviar of drugs," became cheap crack that metastasized into the city, motivating junkies to turn to crime to finance their habit. All these things pushed people out of cities, but some things pulled them out.

Buying a good suburban home became a road to wealth in one's old age. Those little Levittown homes that sold new for under \$10,000 rose to over \$400,000. And let's not forget Mom. With the coming of feminism, women gained lucrative employment and, acting alone or pooling incomes with their husbands, could buy bigger and better homes. But homes like that are either unavailable or exorbitant in cities. Not in the suburbs. The rest is a no-brainer. Remember all those lines in front of suburban home sales offices?

But if you move to the suburbs, you face the NIMBY problem - Not In My Back Yard. Those nice folks who you would join as your neighbors, don't want you there and protect their turf with exclusionary land-use regulations. Two Presidential Commissions on Housing have concluded that the NIMBY phenomenon is a major cause of escalation of home prices. It's supply and demand. You demand suburban housing and they constrict the supply. So you (and the developers who want your business) head out to the urban fringe, where land is cheaper and there are no NIMBY neighbors to keep you out. More sprawl.

But there is always the unexpected, and now it's gas prices. A \$100 per tank gas fill-up gives one pause. Will that put an end to suburban growth? Maybe. While some people will likely move closer to work, some employers may move to where their workforce lives. Stay tuned on that one.

So now, along come the New Urbanism mavens, who tell us that sprawl is out and city living is in, that it's time to chuck that four-bedroom, 3,500 square foot, three-car garage manse and move back into a cramped city apartment. Will it work? You tell me. All I know is that the leadership of urban society isn't moving en masse from Westlake Village to Echo Park. The Census Bureau says that American cities continue to lose populations.

The solution? I'm not sure there is one in the short run. It took over a half-century of government policies and lavish government financing to get us to where we are, and it will take time and effort to reverse things, assuming they are reversible.

City living can be civilized, provided so is the city. And there's the rub. Unless the quality of city life improves, don't expect an exodus from the suburbs. As New York Times columnist David Brooks put it: "Go ahead and denounce the soullessness of planned communities and condo villages and exurban developments. But it's way out there, amid the new towns and barely charted byways, that the American dream is most largely lived."

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#### FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS ISSUE, CONTACT:



**Gideon Kanner** Mr. Kanner is an acknowledged expert on eminent domain and inverse condemnation law. He has been practicing appellate law in his specialty for over forty years. Mr. Kanner has been counsel for property owners in numerous precedent-setting cases before the California Supreme Court and has appeared as counsel for parties and amici curiae in a number of inverse condemnation cases in the United States Supreme Court. Prior to joining Manatt, Mr. Kanner was Professor of Law at the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, where he remains a Professor Emeritus.