17.5E: Shrinking Cities and Counter-Urbanization

Counterurbanization is movement away from cities, including suburbanization, exurbanization, or movement to rural areas.

Learning Objectives

• Analyze the reasons for suburbanization and counterurbanization, specifically white flight

Key Points

• White flight is one explanation for widespread counterurbanization in the post-WWII era in the U.S. It refers to the movement of middle and upper-class whites to suburbs to avoid living in areas with high proportions of racial minorities.

• Counterurbanization can lead to shrinking cities. Cities with declining populations experience economic strains as infrastructure exceeds the needs of a shrinking population and costs more per capita than during the city’s peak.

• Several approaches have been employed in attempts to address the problems of shrinking cities. Often these approaches aim to increase urban density.

Key Terms

• exurbanization: Exurbanization refers to the process in the 1990s when upper class city dwellers moved out of the city, beyond the suburbs, to live in high-end housing in the countryside.

• urban decay: Urban decay is a process whereby a city, or part of a city, falls into disrepair and decrepitude.

• white flight: The large-scale migration of whites of various European ancestries, from racially mixed urban regions
to more racially homogeneous suburban areas.

### Suburbanization and Counterurbanization

Recently, in developed countries, sociologists have observed suburbanization and counterurbanization, or movement away from cities, which may be driven by transportation infrastructure or social factors like racism. In developing countries, urbanization is characterized by large-scale movements of people from the countryside into cities. In developed countries, people are able to move out of cities while maintaining many of the advantages of city life because improved communications and means of transportation. In fact, counterurbanization appears most common among the middle and upper classes who can afford to buy their own homes.

### White Flight

Sociologists have posited many explanations for counterurbanization, but one of the most debated known as “white flight.” The term “white flight” was coined in the mid-twentieth century to describe suburbanization and the large-scale migration of whites of various European ancestries from racially mixed urban regions to more racially homogeneous suburban regions. During the first half of the twentieth century, discriminatory housing policies often prevented blacks from moving to suburbs; banks and federal policy made it difficult for blacks to get the mortgages they needed to buy houses, and communities used restrictive housing covenants to exclude minorities.

White flight during the post-war period contributed to urban decay, a process whereby a city, or part of a city, falls into disrepair and decrepitude. Symptoms of urban decay include depopulation, abandoned buildings, high unemployment, crime, and a desolate, inhospitable landscape. White flight contributed to the draining of cities’ tax bases when middle-class people left. Urban decay was caused in part by the loss of industrial and manufacturing jobs as they moved into rural areas or overseas, where labor was cheaper.

### Suburbanization

In the United States, suburbanization began in earnest after World War Two, when soldiers returned from war and received generous government support to finance new homes. These young men were also interested in settling down, buying their own homes, and achieving independence and a less hectic daily life with a more affordable cost of living than they could find in cities. Thus, suburbs were built—smaller cities located on the edges of a larger city, which often include residential neighborhoods for those working in the area. Suburbs grew dramatically in the 1950s when the U.S. Interstate Highway System was built and automobiles became affordable for middle class families.

### Exurbanization

Around 1990, another trend emerged, called exurbanization: upper class city dwellers moved out of the city, beyond the suburbs, to live in high-end housing in the countryside. This exurbanization may be a new urban form. Rather than densely populated centers, cities may become more spread out, composed of many interconnected smaller towns. The history of counterurbanization calls into question depictions of urbanization as a one-way process. The modern U.S.
experience has followed a circular pattern over the last 150 years, from a largely rural country, to a highly urban country, to a country with significant suburban populations.

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**Shrinking Cities**

Whatever its causes, counterurbanization has had serious effects on cities. As a result of counterurbanization, some cities are now losing population. These shrinking cities may face serious problems as they attempt to maintain infrastructure built for a much larger population. As cities shrink, residents must contribute more per capita to maintain fixed infrastructure costs (e.g., for roads, sewers, and public transportation). Dispersed neighborhoods that characterize shrinking cities are also a major source of fiscal distress. These cities must still provide services like fire protection and trash pickup to fewer and fewer citizens over a larger geographic distance, raising the per capita cost.

Several approaches have been employed in attempts to address these problems. Often these approaches aim to increase urban density. For example, planners may revitalize core areas, like downtown, to make them more attractive to businesses and residents. Other cities have tried setting an urban growth boundary to limit sprawl, which increases density within the boundary. The boundary generally encompasses the city and its surrounding suburbs, requiring the entire area to work together to prevent urban shrinkage. This method is being used successfully in many cities (such as Portland, Oregon) to maximize returns on infrastructure investments.

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**Baltimore—A Shrinking City**: Baltimore, Maryland is an example of a shrinking American city. Its population has decreased by over 300,000 since 1950, leaving infrastructure for a larger population unused.

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