
The Wonder and Paradox of Urban Life

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Place matters. Whether it's the exhilaration some of us feel when the hometown team wins the big game, or the desire to escape our surroundings and seek our fortune elsewhere (or, paradoxically, the ability to feel both sentiments simultaneously), we care passionately about the places where we live. Even when we choose to leave the places where we grew up, we are often nostalgic for "the old neighborhood" or "the old country." We carry our origins with us even as we reinvent ourselves, crafting lives that are different from those of our parents or grandparents. While the reach of technology—radio, television, and the Internet—permits us to share more in common, the place we call home still affects us in profound ways.

Where we live says a lot about who we are and what our daily lives are like. Four-fifths of Americans today live in *metropolitan* areas—in central cities or suburbs. This means that urban living, with its challenges and promises, is essential to most of us, just as the exigencies of rural life were for 95 percent of the nation's families who lived in villages or on farms at the time of the American Revolution. Moreover, understanding urban issues, from the causes and consequences of local economic development and suburban "sprawl" to the problems associated with urban/suburban income inequality and disparity in the provision of public services, helps us to better understand—and possibly find remedies for—some of the most persistent problems facing American society.

Urban Issues and the Social Science Lens

Social science looks for patterns in human behavior and tries to explain them. Each of the key social science disciplines—economics, political science, and sociology—approaches social phenomena in a different way. Economics focuses on the role of markets in understanding how people relate to each other; in a sense, dollars count. Political science examines the role of nonmarket institutions (such as political parties) that operate through an array of public institutions where votes and political influence count. Sociology analyzes human social relations beyond the bounds of the market or government institutions; social standing and the web of relationships within one's community matter.

Economics is divided into two broad fields: **Macroeconomics** looks at the big picture, the behavior of large aggregates of consumers or business firms, focusing on factors that determine the level of total production in a society. Essentially, macroeconomists try to understand why an economy experiences booms and busts and what can be done to smooth out the economic roller coaster of inflation and recession. **Microeconomics** studies the behavior of individual consumers and firms, how prices are set in individual markets, and how output is divided among workers and families and among firms.

Urban economics is important because it takes macroeconomic and microeconomic concerns and places them in a context—a physical space where they can be studied under a microscope. We can look at all the factors that determine the general level of output in a particular city or metropolitan area. Why is median family income in the city of Seattle nearly double (+ 92%) that in St. Louis? Why is per capita income growing rapidly in Phoenix while it is stagnant in Newark and Cleveland? Instead of looking at individual markets in the abstract, we can study specific conditions—the kind that determine the price of housing in cities and suburbs, or why the wages of janitors in San Francisco are so much higher than in Birmingham or Kansas City. The study of urban economics provides a special lens through which we can understand human behavior in the real world, in places where people really live.

By itself, though, economics cannot do justice to an understanding of urban issues and urban public policy. We need to add the perspective of other social sciences, including political science and sociology, if we are to explain both behavior and outcomes in cities and suburbs. In a thousand different ways, political decisions involving public expenditure, taxation, and direct and indirect regulation influence and often trump the pure economic calculus of the market. Cities and towns that have instituted a minimum wage or “living wage” try to change the outcome of local labor markets. Zoning determines where housing and commercial properties will be developed. Building codes alter the way our homes are constructed.

Sociology is important, too; as the scientific study of human social relations and group life, this discipline is central to understanding how large numbers of people live in close proximity to each other in cities and suburbs. By studying social class, race and ethnicity, family and community, and the social uses of power, sociology adds to the study of metropolitan regions the subtle but powerful impact of neighborhood groups, community organizations, and similar nongovernmental units that affect daily life. A “Not in My Back Yard” mentality (NIMBYism) often explains why there is an insufficient supply of new housing to meet increased demand better than anything we know about land values and real estate law. Community organizations made up of active neighborhood residents can use their power to influence how mayors and city councils implement public regulations that affect the market decisions of commercial developers.

Urban public policy thus draws on economic, political, and sociological theory and combines them to yield important insights about the well-being of various racial and ethnic groups living in central cities and suburbs; the reasons for rising or falling

crime rates; the location of housing, commercial, and industrial properties within a city or suburb; and a myriad of other matters that affect where and how we live. The metro area becomes the laboratory for exploring economic, political, and social issues that affect how our communities and neighborhoods are organized.

Our Love/Hate Relationship with the City

As in the classic children's fable about the city mouse and the country mouse, some of us are energized by the bounteous offerings of the big city, while others prefer the peace and tranquility of smaller places. But our fascination with the big city is evident both in popular culture and in works of literature. New York City, often called the Big Apple or the City That Never Sleeps, is the setting for numerous TV sitcoms and dramas that shape—and distort—our image of the place. Likewise, Los Angeles, the City of Angels; Chicago, the City of Big Shoulders; Boston, the Hub of the Universe; and New Orleans, the Big Easy, have all been the settings for popular TV series and Hollywood films. In earlier times, the endless possibilities offered by the city were exuberantly celebrated in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

For many of those who live in them and others who visit, cities offer the thrill of a fast-paced life. Research by sociologist Robert Levine (1997) reveals that the pace of life varies according to where one lives. Within the United States, Levine finds important regional differences, with the cities of the Northeast having a faster pace (as measured by speed in walking, talking, banking transactions, and the proportion of people wearing wristwatches) than those of the laid-back Southwest.

Besides its quick pace, many observers of city life have celebrated its theatrical aspects. Lewis Mumford (1961), a leading urban historian of the mid-twentieth century, likens the city to a "stage," while the insightful urban commentator Jane Jacobs (1969) describes the "ballet" of daily life on a busy neighborhood street. The sociologist William H. Whyte (1989) harkens back to the "agora," or marketplace, of ancient cities, but he is less concerned with economic interchange than with the role of the city as a public meeting place. These urbanists prize the serendipity of life in the city, the unexpected delights, the chance encounters, the sheer pleasure of watching people in a place with so many people to watch.

Yet, even as the metropolis captures our imagination with its infinite offerings, there is also ingrained deep within our traditions a distrust and fear of big cities. Thomas Jefferson envisioned a nation of yeoman farmers living in small towns, far removed from the industrial cities of England with their "dark Satanic mills," as the poet William Blake described them. In *Sister Carrie*, the early-twentieth-century American novelist Theodore Dreiser (1900) tells the story of a sweet and innocent young woman from a small town who loses her virtue when she goes to the big city of Chicago; from there she travels on to New York, an even bigger metropolis, and descends into greater shame and corruption. In Dreiser's narrative, Carrie is not just corrupted in the city, but she is also corrupted by the city. On TV, we have seen not only the mischievous urban humor of *Seinfeld* and *Friends* but also the depictions of mean streets and urban violence found in *NYPD Blue*, *CSI Miami*, and *The Sopranos*.

Our Love/Hate Relationship with the Suburbs

The desire to avoid the crime, disease, poverty, noise, and congestion that often typified city life fueled a centrifugal movement away from the centers of large cities even before the advent of automobiles at the beginning of the twentieth century. When people left big cities, they generally did not move to rural areas, but instead settled in the quieter places just outside the city limits. Although these suburbanites no longer lived inside the city, they usually continued to identify with it. Even today, if travelers far from home are asked where they are from, they are likely to say "Chicago" or "Detroit," when they actually live in suburban communities like Evanston or Southfield. There is a good chance that people outside the Midwest will recognize the names of the two big cities, and a much smaller likelihood that they will recognize the names of the suburbs.

For many, the quintessential symbol of the American Dream is the suburban single-family house complete with lawn (white picket fence optional). In his study of Levittown, a New York suburb built right after World War II on Long Island, sociologist Herbert Gans (1967) argues that "perhaps more than any other type of community, Levittown permits most of its residents to be what they want to be—to center their lives around the home and the family, to be among neighbors whom they can trust, to find friends to share leisure hours, and to participate in organizations that provide sociability and the opportunity to be of service to others." It is much easier and much less expensive to build such communities on the cheaper, often unoccupied land at the periphery of the metropolitan area than to do so in the central city.

As Levittown and the older suburbs of the East and the Midwest began to age, a newer generation of suburbs was being created in the Southwest, on wide-open land that stretched to the horizon. The journalist David Brooks (2002) refers to these as "Sprinkler Cities," because so many of them are being carved out of the often-arid land of the Southwestern desert. He notes that "people move to Sprinkler Cities for the same reasons people came to America or headed out West. They want to leave behind the dirt and toxins of their former existence—the crowding and inconvenience. . . . Sprinkler City immigrants are not leaving cities to head out to suburbia. They are leaving older suburbs—which have come to seem as crowded, expensive, and stratified as cities—and heading for newer suburbs, for the suburbia of suburbia." In these newer communities, as in Levittown, people seek orderliness, cleanliness, easy friendships, leisure-time (often sports-related) activities, and rich, healthy childhood experiences for their kids.

Of course, there are many critics of the suburban lifestyle. They focus on its mass-consumption aspects: the "need" for every household to have its own lawn mower, snow blower, megasize gas grill, and, in many cases, more automobiles per household than there are drivers. Others emphasize the lack of aesthetic considerations in the design of suburban housing, and the unrelenting sameness of suburban subdivisions across the United States.

Along with the suburban housing developments themselves, there has been a growing worry about the "mallings" of America, as one strip mall after another is

built in suburban communities. While wonderfully convenient, these palaces of consumption look nearly identical no matter where they are located. Hence, the title of James Kunstler's (1993) critique of the suburbs, *The Geography of Nowhere*, which dwells on the undifferentiated sameness of suburbs with their nearly identical homes and identical shops as compared with the rich diversity of central city life. Even though a majority of the U.S. population now lives and works in a suburb (Hobbs and Stoops 2002), Eric Bogosian's play *SubUrbia* paints a dark vision of the sterility and boredom of such places, with their supposed conformity, materialism, and lack of drama.

To some extent, our love-hate relationship with cities and suburbs is based on stereotypes. Suburbanites may exaggerate the dangers of the big city; city dwellers may underestimate the range of people and activities that actually can be found in the suburbs. People often stereotype the racial, cultural, and/or social characteristics of city or suburban residents, but the complexity of both city and suburban life is such that any stereotype will always be more misleading than not. Life in many central cities is safe and clean, and there are suburbs that offer rich diversity in the racial and demographic composition of their residents, in their housing, and in their retail districts.

To be from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or any other major metropolitan area may mean one thing to the baby boomers who came of age there in the post-World War II era and quite another to young adults today. A program from the early days of television, *The Naked City*, proclaimed that there were "eight million stories" to tell (a reference to New York City's population at the time). Race, gender, ethnicity, income, and social class all have a profound influence on the way we experience our surroundings. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, "it was the best of places, it was the worst of places."

Annie Dillard (1987) wrote a well-regarded memoir, *An American Childhood*, about growing up in Pittsburgh in the 1950s. Dillard grew up in a relatively privileged, white, native-born household. However, growing up in Pittsburgh during that time would likely have been a substantially different experience for another young girl who was the child of Hungarian immigrants or for a young boy who was the great-grandchild of slaves.

Moreover, it is not just that the city will be experienced differently by *different* people but also that a large city offers the anonymity necessary for the *same* individual to explore different facets of his or her personality. Sociologists use the concept of **multiple identities** to describe a situation in which an individual may have one persona within a specific group at one time and a completely different persona with another group at another time. For example, a gay teen from a religious family background might find that the city affords sufficient anonymity to express both aspects of his personality while continuing to build a comprehensive sense of self. The anonymity of the city also allows for fresh starts; it facilitates that uniquely urban practice of "reinventing" oneself. In small towns and rural communities, this is often difficult to do. Everyone there knows everyone else and much that is private quickly becomes public.

Vibrant metropolitan areas theoretically provide a range of neighborhoods from which people can choose the physical and social environment that suits them best. But how much freedom they have in choosing where they live has always had a lot to do with income, and often with race and ethnicity. Metropolitan areas provide a magnificent economic, political, and social laboratory where we can seek to better understand the promises and challenges of society as a whole.

The Importance of Density

Large numbers of people living in close proximity to each other—what sociologists and demographers call **population density**—is the hallmark of urban areas. It provides cities and their environs with a range of activities that rural areas could never afford nor duplicate. If, for example, only one in a hundred people ever attends a professional hockey game or a ballet performance, the economic survival of a National Hockey League franchise or a dance company can only occur in a metro region where there are hundreds of thousands of people. Similarly, other businesses catering to rare or expensive tastes need to have a critical population mass and this, too, will be found only in the larger cities.

Because of density, metropolitan regions function in ways that are different in kind, not just in degree, from places where households are more sparsely settled. Residential neighborhoods are more likely to have the critical mass necessary to provide elementary schools within walking distance of their pupils, restaurants that can cater to varied tastes, and a range of recreational and cultural attractions that can please even those with unconventional preferences. Similarly, density is what allows the construction of a well-developed physical infrastructure—the road network, the mass-transit system, water and sewer systems, and power grids—at a relatively low cost per household. Density also permits a complex social infrastructure to develop based on a wide array of neighborhood and community-based organizations and formal and informal interpersonal networks for the exchange of ideas and information. If, as the saying goes, “variety is the spice of life,” large cities are generally “spicier” than other places simply because they have the population density to permit it. This is also why cities are particularly good at fostering creativity, a major advantage in an era when economic success increasingly relies on the production of ideas, which flourish where there are many creative minds concentrated in one place (Florida 2002).

Urban Spillovers

With so much activity taking place, cities are littered with “spillover” effects. One can enjoy window shopping along a street filled with specialized boutiques without spending a penny. However, the exhaust from cars, trucks, and buses along the route could make a person dread such a stroll downtown. The first represents a positive spillover; the latter a negative one. The closer people live to one another and the denser the level of economic activity, the greater the number of such spillovers—or what economists call externalities—and the greater their impact. In the nineteenth

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century, before major reforms in public health and sanitation, the extraordinarily high densities in large cities made them centers for air- and waterborne illnesses. Today, central city residents often suffer a higher incidence of asthma and other diseases. In shifting to a less dense pattern of suburban development, though, we have also changed the way we use land, leading to current concerns about urban sprawl and environmental degradation. Because these problems are usually more prevalent in metropolitan areas than rural communities, they have become urban policy issues worthy of careful study.

As the economic activities of the dense central core of early American cities spilled over into surrounding areas, cities typically expanded their political boundaries through annexation of adjoining towns to keep pace with the geographic expansion of the area's economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, efforts to annex independent suburban jurisdictions met with resistance across the established metropolitan areas of the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states. From then on, as the economic boundaries of the metropolitan area expanded, the political boundaries remained unchanged, leading to a curious duality: A metropolitan area is a single economic unit—encompassing most of the residences of those who work there and most of the workplaces of those who live there—but with a set of fragmented political units containing, in some instances, dozens if not hundreds of separate municipal jurisdictions. This tension between economic integration and political fragmentation often places severe constraints on the development of area-wide public policies. Initiatives that would benefit the entire metropolitan area but adversely affect any one jurisdiction (e.g., the expansion of a major research university that would bring economic growth to the region but remove property from the tax rolls of the municipality in which it is located) will require a lengthy and often contentious process of negotiation.

The Dynamics of Metropolitan Development

Places change constantly. The sturdy, working-class neighborhood of one generation might become the dangerous slum of the next. The seedy warehouse district of a previous era might be transformed into today's trendy neighborhood of artists' lofts. The changing fortune of individual neighborhoods might also mirror the changing fortunes of entire cities, metropolitan areas, and even regions. The Sunbelt states of the South and West continue their rapid expansion, while many cities in the Snowbelt states of the Northeast and Midwest stagnate or decline. During the past thirty years, Las Vegas, Nevada, has been the fastest-growing city in America. Cities like Youngstown, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, have seen their populations decline sharply. The fact that some places might be on the upswing while others fall on hard times has important implications for the well-being of families, businesses, and communities. While many changes might appear to be random, a well-trained eye can often spot an underlying pattern. As any accomplished sleuth would testify, recognizing the pattern is the first step in finding the solution to the mystery.

In the mystery of what we call metropolitan dynamics—the rise and fall (and sometimes the rise again) of individual cities and suburbs—the pattern is more easily recognized if we keep our eye on the factors noted in **Figure 1.1**. We want to follow **demographic shifts**, changes in the racial and ethnic composition of cities and suburbs. We need to pay special attention to **industrial transformation**, as certain industries expand and prosper while others become technologically obsolete. And, finally, we want to trace the **spatial relocation** of households and businesses from one region to another (including immigration from abroad), from one city to another, or from city to suburb and back again. These three forces, working through private-market forces, augmented by public policy, social networks, and community process, largely determine the ebb and flow of urban life across the nation.

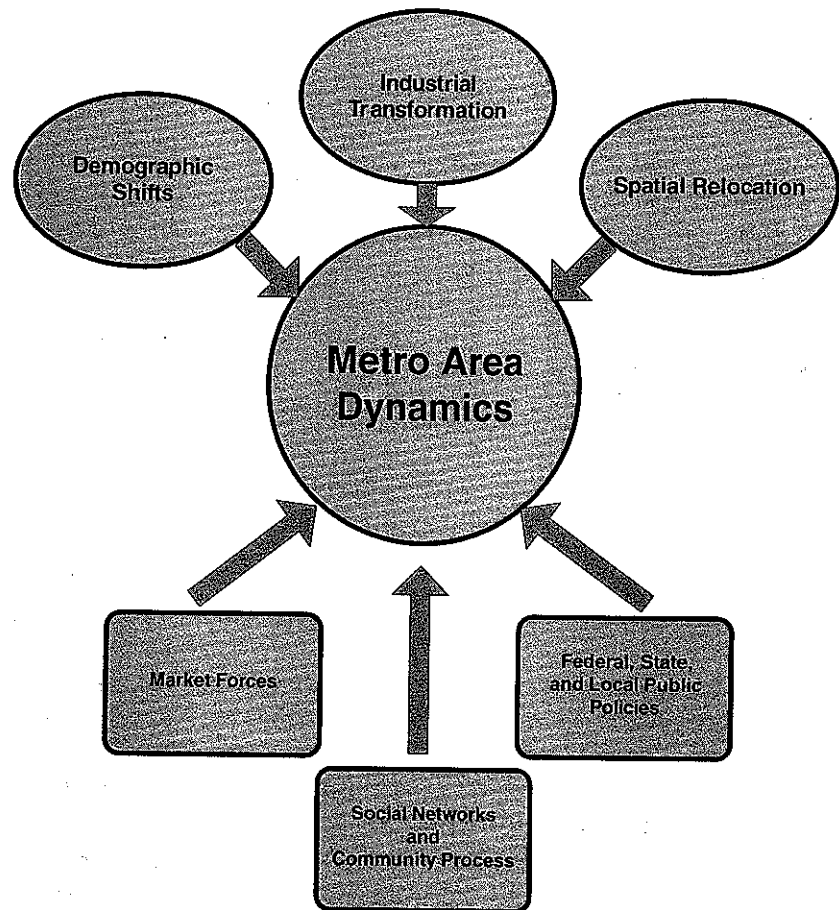


Figure 1.1 The Factors and Forces of Metropolitan Dynamics. Metropolitan areas are affected by changes in the size and composition of their populations and their business firms, along with changes in the way these households and business firms are located across the area. All of these changes are affected by the complex interplay of private markets, government interventions, and informal community practices and traditions.

rise and fall (and the pattern is more the same). We want to see the composition of cities change through transformation, as old forms become logically obsolete. The cities and businesses are moving from one city to another, working through the process, and community is being reformed in the nation.

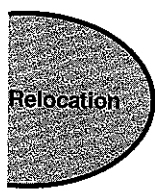
In part, the individual choices made by thousands upon thousands of households and business firms determine whether places will grow and prosper or whether they will wither and decay. People might be drawn to a place for any number of reasons: a mild climate, proximity to natural beauty, or a population that shares the same ethnic or religious background, educational opportunities, or employment opportunities. But as they flock to a location, they also transform it. What was once a sleepy little town is now a bustling suburb. The places left behind are also transformed, as declining populations translate into fewer stores on Main Street and bleaker prospects for attracting new companies. Business firms, too, might be attracted to a particular location because of cheap land, superb transportation facilities, or a skilled workforce. Their relocation also transforms both the place where they came from and the place where they went.

Even as thousands of individual choices accumulate into good news or bad for specific neighborhoods, cities, and entire metropolitan areas, the well-being of these geographic entities exerts its own influence on the choices available to individuals. A prosperous community can provide safety, security, and high-quality education for its children; an area that has fallen on hard times will be far less able to do so. These feedback effects—success breeds success; failure breeds failure—make it ever more difficult for places that have fallen behind to catch up.

When the steel mills in Pittsburgh began to close down, younger and better educated residents often left to build their futures elsewhere. For a time, this made Pittsburgh even less attractive to potential new businesses. The ever-declining prospects of the city led to further rounds of destructive “selective migration.” When people begin to abandon a city, the city’s tax base erodes, making it more difficult to support good schools and public amenities. This leads to successive rounds of out-migration and diminished services in a downward spiral—at least until new industry springs up or existing industries undergo a renaissance. Pittsburgh and its suburbs have been able to build a new employment base and stem the city’s population loss by attracting new businesses and diversifying its industrial base, in part because of its relatively depressed land costs and its highly respected universities.

Boston’s heyday based on shipping came to an end by the early nineteenth century, but it was replaced by a resurgent economy based on manufacturing. Its fortunes declined sharply again after World War II until the last quarter of the twentieth century when higher education, health care, and financial services became critical to American economic success. With its more than forty universities and colleges, its rich array of hospitals and clinics, and its role as the birthplace of the mutual fund industry, Boston was poised for an economic renaissance once these industries began to grow. Now, because of its great success, the cost of living in the city is so high that it is once again challenged to retain and attract jobs and population.

But urban success or failure is not merely a matter of individual choices made by households and businesses. The various branches of government—at the local, state, and federal level—make decisions that have an impact on which places will flourish and which will languish. Early massive public investment in public works played a



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crucial role in catapulting New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles to the top of the charts among U.S. metropolitan regions. Intriguingly, the key public works projects in all three cities had to do with redirecting the flow of water. In the case of New York, the development of the Erie Canal in 1825 provided the impetus for growth, by creating the best route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. This gave the Port of New York an edge over the East Coast port cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and fueled the phenomenal growth of this world-class city of commerce. In Chicago, the stupendous engineering feat of reversing the flow of the highly polluted Chicago River so that it emptied into the Des Plaines River rather than into Lake Michigan allowed the city to protect the safety of its water supply. This gave Chicago its competitive edge over such midwestern contenders as Cincinnati and Indianapolis. In Los Angeles, redirecting the rivers of northern California to flow into the parched region surrounding the city made the City of Angels what it is today. Without the water supply from these rivers passing through an elaborate system of aqueducts, the city could not have supported anywhere near its current population.

The interplay of private-sector decisions and public policy helps to explain the rise of that quintessential Sunbelt city, Houston. The development of air-conditioning made it livable and an economy based on oil and gas made it prosperous, but it was the enthusiasm and political clout of then vice president Lyndon Johnson that helped to bring the headquarters of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to the city, thereby aiding Houston's growth. The interplay of market forces and public policy propelled the growth of suburbs throughout the country and dramatically changed the shape of metropolitan areas in the mid-twentieth century. Federal housing programs and federal highway dollars made suburbs affordable and accessible. Successive rings of suburbs have grown and receded around many of America's major cities. Inner-ring suburbs have often seen their fortunes decline, while outer suburbs and the even farther out "exurban" regions grow rapidly. Cities and suburbs never stay the same for very long; they are always changing.

Well-Being and Public Policy

As realtors tell us, "The three things that are most important in valuing property are location, location, and location." Place is important for several reasons. A particular site might be appealing for its inherent beauty, or repugnant because of the toxic wastes it contains. Alternatively, we may be interested in a specific place because of its proximity to something else. When we choose where to live, for example, we might take into account how long it takes to commute to work, or whether friends and family are close by.

Place also may be important because each specific location ties us into a different network of opportunities and constraints. Just as communication systems and transportation networks link some places and leave others out of touch, there are neighborhood-based social networks that can provide access to important resources. Being in the right network makes a difference. A family living on one side of a

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district line sends its children to a school considered exceptional, while a family on the other side sends its children to a school with a poorer reputation. One town provides excellent connections to neighborhood associations and community resources while another does not. Every location offers a different mixture of advantages and disadvantages. How well individuals are connected to places, to things, and to other people will help to determine their well-being in various parts of the metropolitan area.

The economist George Galster has introduced the concept of "opportunity structures" to capture the fact that where people live has a major impact on their access to resources (Galster and Killen 1995). These opportunity structures are continuously shaped and reshaped by the interaction of individual choices, private business decisions, and government policy.

Opportunity structures vary across race, ethnicity, income, and wealth, contributing to tensions within a metropolitan area. Various groups attempt to use government to address their own needs and to expand their choices. This inevitably leads to conflict over public budget priorities, regulatory decisions, and tax policy. As a result, intersections of public policy and private decision making present some of the most complex aspects of urban life. How much should be spent on public works such as water and sewer lines, roads, and bridges? How much should be spent on public primary and secondary education, police and fire protection, and public health and sanitation?

These decisions are fraught with controversy as individuals and interest groups contest both for resources and over who should pay for them. When the commonwealth of Massachusetts spent more than \$14 billion to depress Boston's Central Artery as part of its famous "Big Dig" project, the overriding question was how much the taxpayers of Massachusetts would pay for the new road and how much would be paid by the federal government. When cities face severe fiscal crises as a result of a downturn in the national economy, mayors and city councillors have to decide where to make budget cuts: Should teachers' jobs be sacrificed to avoid laying off police and firefighters, or vice versa? In either case, some jobs will be lost and some constituents will lose valuable services.

The Role of Political Power and Interest Groups

Put more generally, politics and political power count. Metro areas constantly evolve, at least in part, as the result of external pressures. Detroit's decline from its status as one of America's wealthiest cities was due in large measure to the globalization of the auto industry. The rise of San Jose, Boston, and Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, North Carolina, owes much to the information revolution and the role that great research universities have played in spawning industries related to the computer, biotechnology, and nanotechnology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Prodigious increases in agricultural productivity have sharply reduced the need for farm labor, compromising the growth of cities and towns that sprung up to serve them in the farm belt.

Yet, the quality and pace of change in the urban setting is also intimately related to the array of interest groups and political alignments within each metro area. As Logan and Molotch (1987) argue, there are powerful local interest groups who have a stake in promoting growth because of its subsequent enhancement of land values. This **growth machine** includes real estate interests and the politicians who rely on them for campaign contributions, along with the local media (such as newspapers and radio and television stations), whose power and profits depend on population growth, as well as others (like utility companies), whose fortunes are tied to a specific locality. Even if these groups disagree on other matters (e.g., even if construction companies and unions in the building trades are adversaries in wage negotiations), they would nevertheless be aligned together as part of the area's pro-growth coalition.

Businesses, labor unions, nonprofit voluntary organizations, and community groups all interact to influence the political process and the fate of cities and suburbs. Through the chambers of commerce and other business groups that exist in virtually every municipality, business leaders use their economic clout to influence the mayor and city council or town selectmen to make decisions over taxes, regulations, and spending that support the interests of business. Public-sector unions strive to use their power to increase the wages and benefits of police officers, firefighters, teachers, and other city employees and to set work rules regarding what their members can and cannot do on the job. Voluntary organizations that range from advocates for public transit, neighborhood parks, and the homeless to Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and community development corporations all vie to influence political leaders to address the issues that stir their passion. Neighborhood associations work to protect the value of the homes in their communities and to serve the interests of those who live there.

Inevitably, there are conflicts—often powerful ones—that erupt among these many interest groups as they all compete to support their own interests. Businesses often fight for lower taxes, arguing that high taxes discourage investment in the city and this would cost the community jobs that are badly needed. But with lower taxes, how would the city or suburb pay for quality schools, police and fire services, and pleasant parks? Public-sector unions usually take every opportunity to push for better compensation for their members, but this often strains municipal budgets. Housing developers try to get zoning laws changed and building regulations modified in order to make it easier for them to build new homes. But neighborhood associations often battle back if they feel that the developments being planned will change the character of their communities or bring in new families that are “different” from them. Conflicts arise regarding where to place new highways and roads since these inevitably affect property values in adjacent neighborhoods. This often pits one local 'hood against another.

Every group attempts to gain political favor by contributing to local political candidates and lobbying the city council or the school board. Every group tries to mobilize its members to act in solidarity for the positions they take. In the end, given the unequal power of individual interest groups, what comes out of the political

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process is not always what benefits the entire community, but what serves the interests of those who are most adept at political maneuvering.

Since the 1960s, political scientists have debated whether the interest groups that exert influence on local governments are best described as a business elite united around issues like economic growth and redevelopment (as in Floyd Hunter's 1953 study of Atlanta) or a more disparate group of organizations with competing interests that require negotiation and compromise (as found in Robert Dahl's 1961 study of New Haven). More recently, this dichotomy between **elitism** and **pluralism** has been leavened by a concept introduced by Norman and Susan Fainstein (1983) and Clarence Stone (1989)—**regime theory**—broadly described as the informal channels and arrangements that influence formal government authority. According to Stone (1993), these regimes can take several different forms: development regimes that emphasize growth; middle-class progressive regimes that endorse neighborhood and environmental protections that slow growth; lower-class opportunity expansion regimes in which disadvantaged groups press for a greater share of resources; and maintenance regimes, which tend to be static caretaker governments less reliant on private-sector resources. It is less clear within these categories, but just as important, that the competition for power and influence in cities and suburbs is part of an ongoing and probably never-ending struggle.

Paradox and Urban Inquiry

Adding even more excitement to the study of metropolitan areas is an array of puzzles and paradoxes that require an understanding of urban economics, sociology, political science, and public policy. Why do poor people tend to live on the expensive land close to the center of the city, while wealthier people live on the cheaper land at the periphery? Why does rush-hour traffic seem to get even worse after a new highway is built to relieve congestion? When artists convert a marginal neighborhood into a more attractive and livable community, why do they wind up not being able to afford to live there themselves? Why are suburban subdivisions so often named for the orchards or forests they destroyed, so that the innumerable "Shady Groves" dotting the landscape offer no shade and contain no groves? Why is wine bottled in rural areas, close to where the grapes are grown, but beer is bottled close to major metropolitan areas, far away from where the barley, malt, or hops are grown? Why will a new restaurant often want to locate on a street with many other restaurants, rather than finding a street where it wouldn't have to share potential customers with its competitors?

In each of these cases, the spatial aspect of the decisions made by households and businesses forms the core of our analysis. In looking at the dynamics that affect the quality of poor inner-city urban housing, for example, we need to understand the forces that led to its deterioration. Unlike some of the housing in rural areas, which might have been poorly constructed initially, or perhaps built without indoor plumbing, housing in urban areas is more likely to have been built originally to conform to prevailing middle-class standards. However, if middle-class households decide to move elsewhere, and landlords then rent to people with less ability to pay,

these property owners might decide to skimp on maintenance and repairs, assuring that these buildings will begin their descent to lower quality. The process by which we get poor-quality housing in rural areas is entirely different from the process whereby urban housing deteriorates. And it is the location decisions of households and business firms that make all the difference between the two instances.

Key Issues in Urban Policy

Metropolitan areas are where many of the hottest domestic issues of the day are being played out—issues around disparities in income and wealth, inequalities by race and ethnicity, inequities in educational resources, and the integration of new immigrants into the mainstream, to name but a few. Cities are simultaneously places of boundless opportunity for some and deadly poverty traps for others. Some cities are doing well economically, but one in three central cities of metropolitan areas have poverty rates of 20 percent or more, even when poverty rates for the nation as a whole have been at or below 15 percent since the mid-1960s. Why are some cities wealthier than others? Why have cities provided upward mobility for some, but not others? What factors contribute to the distribution of income and wealth in a metropolitan area? Why do central cities often include the metropolitan area's wealthiest families and at the same time its poorest? These are all questions of urban policy.

Understanding urban dynamics is also necessary for insightful public policy in the crucial area of education and the labor market. Among the important services provided by local governments is schooling from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Individuals need access to *effective* education, and also need to have *opportunities* to transform the education they receive into income. Providing for good schools and making them available in the inner city as well as the suburbs raises many questions. How does education relate to the economic dynamics of a metropolitan area? What determines differences in access to high-quality education? Why can some people find jobs, while others with equal training levels cannot? What particular factors distinguish urban labor markets? Why do some metro areas have higher unemployment rates than others?

Besides good schools and good jobs, a thriving metro area needs to find a way to provide all its households with decent housing at affordable prices. Yet, in numerous communities, the price of housing exceeds what many families can afford. What determines the cost of housing? Why does a house in one location cost a great deal more than an exact duplicate of that house located elsewhere in the same metro area? Why are housing prices in San Francisco and Boston so much higher than in Detroit, Albuquerque, and Boise? How, if at all, should city governments respond to problems of housing affordability? How can cities respond to problems of homelessness?

For many economic and social reasons that are discussed later in this book, housing is different from most other goods. It is more costly, more durable, and less transportable. It requires land, and consequently places those who seek housing in competition with other potential land users. Since the early 1900s, housing has been subject

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to zoning regulations implemented by local governments. While some zoning laws are designed to protect residential areas from noxious industrial activities, zoning has also been used to exclude households on the basis of race or income—or both.

Transportation is another vital area of public policy. The economic and social well-being of cities depends upon the ability of workers, consumers, and residents to move from one point to another within the metropolitan region. In addition to moving people, it is also necessary to have an efficient way to move goods. The repair of potholes, the design of new thoroughfares, the enforcement of parking regulations, and the creation and management of public transportation are all among the many important tasks undertaken by governments in metropolitan areas. Why do some cities have worse traffic jams than others? How have commuting patterns changed over time? Why do some metropolitan areas have a great deal of public transportation, while others have relatively little? What determines the availability of public transportation in different parts of a metropolitan area? Who should bear the cost for highways?

Other questions of public policy and quality of life surround many aspects of metropolitan growth. What conceptual tools do we need to understand the effect of metropolitan growth on environmental quality? How do activities in one part of the metropolitan area affect the well-being of other parts? How does urban sprawl affect the costs and quality of water supply and sewer lines? How does it alter our decisions about transportation planning and other components of metropolitan infrastructure?

In the chapters to come, we use the tools of economics, political science, and sociology to address the questions and issues we have just posed, as well as many others. We examine how and why particular industries grew up in specific metropolitan areas, and how that changed over time. Cities developed initially as a result of proximity to some natural resource or an advantageous feature, such as a deep harbor. With changes in transportation and communication costs and new technology, those advantages declined in importance, and other factors made cities desirable or undesirable places in which to locate. Cities that came of age during different transportation eras have different configurations. Nineteenth-century cities were highly centralized, but newer cities tend to be decentralized. Some metropolitan areas have been able to reinvent themselves, as the emerging industries of one era have become the sunset industries of another. Others have had a more difficult time adapting to change. The separate political jurisdictions within a metropolitan area have an incentive to cooperate for the good of the area as a whole, but they are also in competition with each other. The prospects for the well-being of households, businesses, and communities within the metropolitan area depend on the successful resolution of these conflicting forces.

The Changing Role of the U.S. City in a "Flat" World

Just as changes in transportation and communication technologies reshaped U.S. cities in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, they continue to play a role in determining which metropolitan areas will thrive and which will fall on hard

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times, as well as determining changing patterns of land use within metropolitan areas. While previous eras of technological change intensified the competition between U.S. metropolitan areas, current technological developments have intensified the competition between metropolitan areas worldwide. With falling transportation costs and declining communication costs, it is feasible for an increasing amount of work to be done far afield of the initial supplier or the final customer. The most efficient location for production of any particular product or service—in economic jargon, the place that has a **comparative advantage** relative to all others—can now be selected from a vastly wider array of metro areas, both domestic and foreign.

To use Thomas Friedman's (2005) metaphor for the leveling of the playing field between potential competitors, the world is indeed becoming "flat," and in such a flat world, the key to metropolitan prosperity depends even more on developing a workforce with specialized skills, talents, and expertise that cannot easily be replicated elsewhere. This is what Michael Porter (1998) refers to as establishing a **competitive advantage**. If older metropolitan areas are able to reinvent themselves, the sturdily built factories, lofts, and warehouses that provided industrial jobs to previous generations will be recycled to provide postindustrial jobs as well as attractive living spaces for its current generation of residents.

When a wide variety of goods and services can be produced almost anywhere, does place still matter? Surely, but it matters for different reasons. As we will discuss more extensively later in the book, successful places do not necessarily offer proximity to raw materials nor do they offer especially favorable transportation costs in an era in which transportation costs are so low that they don't matter very much. Instead, successful places offer the social interactions that help people create and transmit knowledge, and they provide the amenities—recreational, cultural, and environmental—that enhance the quality of life and therefore attract workforces with needed skills.

The Tools of the Trade

To address the wide range of issues raised here, we need to rely on a battery of concepts and research tools that are the province of the economics profession, but which are important to political scientists and sociologists alike—even if they do not use the economist's jargon. We use these because they provide insight into the mysteries of how metropolitan areas operate. A few of these concepts—like *opportunity cost*, *the criteria of equity and efficiency*, *externalities*, and *unintended consequences*—appear as themes throughout the book and, because of their importance, are briefly introduced here. Additional concepts are explained as needed in later chapters.

Opportunity Cost

Who was the better economist, poet Robert Frost or baseball catcher Yogi Berra? We believe the poet Frost. Here's why. Berra, known now as much for his hilariously fractured use of English as for his legendary skills as a catcher with the New

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York Yankees, once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” It would be impossible, of course, to follow that advice, since you cannot travel down two roads simultaneously. You have to choose. Frost, on the other hand, understood this. In his poem “The Road Not Taken,” he comes to a fork in the road and must make a choice, knowing full well that his choice has consequences—that it “made all the difference.” In choosing the one, he necessarily forgoes the other.

This is the crux of opportunity cost, one of the most fundamental concepts in economics. We can’t have everything, so we must make choices. And every time we make a choice, we give up the chance to follow an alternative path. The cost of choosing A is the forgone opportunity of being able to have B, if your income only permits the purchase of one. To economists, this sacrifice of the next best alternative is the “true” cost of making a choice, and it applies to time as well as money. Your out-of-pocket cost for a movie ticket might have been \$8, for example, but an economist would want to know not only what else you could have done with that money but also what else you could have done with that time. The value of the next best alternative is the most important way to measure the cost of making a choice.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost

In the urban setting, there are all kinds of opportunity costs. A tax dollar spent on repaving a road is a dollar that cannot be used to pay for improving a subway system. A dollar spent on public health is a dollar that cannot be spent on improving public

*Source: This poem, first published in 1916, is widely available on many Web sites, including www.bartleby.com.

schools. The choices made by taxpayers and their municipal governments can sometimes "make all the difference" in whether a city or town grows or declines, whether it becomes a more attractive place to live or one that residents wish to leave.

The Criteria of Efficiency and Equity

Efficiency and equity are criteria used to evaluate economic outcomes, especially the outcomes produced as the result of public policy initiatives through laws, regulations, and judicial decisions. **Efficiency** refers to being as productive as possible with limited resources. Technically speaking, a process is efficient if it results in producing the most output (of given quality) with a given amount of input. Alternatively, efficiency occurs whenever a given output of given quality is produced in a manner that uses the least input. Implicitly, efficiency requires being mindful of the opportunity cost of using scarce resources. Because almost all resources are scarce—from basic building materials and skilled labor to natural resources like clean water—efficiency requires not only using resources in the least wasteful manner but also using those resources for the best purpose.

Equity, on the other hand, refers to fairness with respect to the distribution of resources or income. This concept can be quite elusive, since each of us might have a different idea regarding what constitutes "fairness." Many of us would argue that equity requires that all residents of a city have clean water, a decent and safe place to live, and a fair chance to get a good education and receive adequate health care. To the extent that there is great inequality in access to a clean environment and to housing and a great disparity in education and health resources, one could argue that the goal of equity has not been fulfilled.

Ideally, we would like our local, state, and federal governments to enact only those programs that are both efficient and equitable. Some of the most difficult choices occur when the criteria are in conflict and there are trade-offs that must be made: A program that is warranted on the grounds of efficiency might not be equitable, or vice versa. Efforts to reduce traffic congestion, for example, might justify subsidizing high-speed commuter rail lines to attract a ridership among high-income suburban motorists, even if those rail lines do nothing to address the transit needs of lower-income communities. When the criteria of equity and efficiency conflict, economic analysis cannot determine which of the two should take precedence; that becomes a political question, rather than a purely economic one. How much to sacrifice efficiency for equity (or vice versa) is one of the toughest issues before any mayor or city council, before any governor or state legislature, or before the U.S. president and the Congress.

Externalities

When a market functions smoothly, it automatically takes into account *all* of the costs of producing a good and *all* of the benefits of consuming it. In some instances, though, the market is incapable of doing this and some costs or benefits remain unaccounted. A transaction between a buyer and a seller leaves some third parties better off or worse off, but compensation to or from the third party cannot be easily made.

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Examples of such **externalities** (or spillovers) abound. Mrs. Frisoli, for example, has a lovely rose garden that she has planted next door to Mr. Jones. She paid a good deal of money to a nursery to plant these roses and she has worked hard to keep them well fertilized and healthy. From his porch, Mr. Jones gets enormous pleasure from seeing Mrs. Frisoli's roses and smelling their beautiful aroma. Yet he doesn't pay a cent for this benefit. It is a purely positive externality to him. Perhaps he should subsidize Mrs. Frisoli to help her pay for the roses, but he has never done so and no one is forcing him to do it.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Frisoli's roses pose a severely negative externality for Mr. Jones's wife, who is allergic to the pollen and coughs and sneezes every time they bloom. Perhaps Mrs. Frisoli should compensate Mrs. Jones for the discomfort she experiences and for the cost of prescription drugs she takes that allow her to breathe more easily. But no such compensation has ever been offered or required.

In other cases, we have resorted to government to "internalize" externalities. That is, the government has stepped in to subsidize a positive externality, tax a negative externality, or regulate the production of goods that would otherwise generate huge positive or negative externalities to society at large.

Pollution is a good example of a negative externality. If a new paper mill opens up and pollutes a stream that residents had been using for fishing and swimming, the residents have been made worse off, but have no recourse to receive compensation through the normal workings of the market. Government action of some sort is required—minimally, to define property rights, impose a tax on the polluter that is used to clean up the pollution, or more forcefully, to pass strict antipollution laws.

Elementary and secondary education provides positive spillovers for others in the community, who reap the benefits of a more productive workforce and a better-informed citizenry. In the absence of government subsidies, families might not purchase enough years of education for their children, since they would not take the positive spillovers into account. As a society, we believe so strongly in the positive externalities of elementary and secondary education that we collect the necessary tax revenue to offer the service free of charge to the consumer. If that is not inducement enough, we also regulate education by making attendance mandatory for children up to age 16.

As we pointed out earlier in this chapter, although positive and negative externalities can occur anywhere, we are particularly cognizant of them in urban areas because they are more likely to occur when people live at higher densities. Playing your sound system at top volume will generate more negative externalities if you live on a street of apartment buildings than if you live 5 miles from your nearest neighbor; being inoculated against polio and thereby helping to avoid an epidemic will generate more positive externalities in the dense city than the rural town.

Unintended Consequences

Although much of this book addresses the role of public policy in trying to improve the workings of metropolitan areas and the lives of the people who reside there, it is

best to approach the topic with a large dose of humility. As we shall see, many of the public policy initiatives launched with great fanfare in previous generations have ultimately failed because their full consequences were not foreseen.

Consider the case of kudzu, a plant native to China and Japan, where its growth is kept in check by natural enemies. It was used as a ground cover in the United States to protect against soil erosion, and planted across the nation by Civilian Conservation Corps workers during the Great Depression of the 1930s. With ideal growing conditions and the absence of any natural enemies in the southeastern United States, it has overrun many areas in that part of the country, engulfing cars, houses, and just about anything else in its path. The plant has been declared a weed for the past thirty years, but efforts to eradicate it have been notably unsuccessful. A seemingly good idea to make abandoned open-pit coal mines more attractive ended up having serious unintended consequences.

Other Important Economic Concepts

Concepts like supply and demand, income and price elasticities, fixed and variable costs, comparative and competitive advantage, path dependency, negative sum/zero sum/positive sum games, economies and diseconomies of scale, and specialization and the division of labor are all incredibly useful in deciphering how cities and suburbs work and how people thrive or suffer within them. We introduce these terms as we need them, not because of their intrinsic value, but because of their power to help explain the mysteries, paradoxes, and secrets of urban life. For those already familiar with such concepts, insight will be gained as to how these ideas can be used in the specialized study of metropolitan areas. For those not already familiar with these terms and ideas, we have tried to explain all in nontechnical language.

This book is also data rich. We use a large number of charts and tables to present information that helps bring the more abstract concepts and ideas of urban economics, political science, and sociology to life. With the statistics presented here, you will be able to compare metropolitan areas across the country and contrast urban outcomes whether related to family incomes, housing values, or say, crime statistics. With the accompanying CD, you will be able to compare and contrast the same types of statistics for virtually every metro area and city in the United States—including your own or one near you.

The theories, concepts, and tools of social scientists are brought together with a rich array of city and suburban data, all calculated to provide a new, exciting, and rich understanding of the urban world around us. Read on, learn, and enjoy.

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Chapter 1 Questions and Exercises

1. Land area, population, and density of all metropolitan areas in the United States can be found at the following Bureau of the Census Web address:

<http://www.census-charts.com/Metropolitan/Density.html>

- + Which MSAs have a density of more than 2,000 people per square mile?
- + How does your MSA (or the one closest to your home) rank in density?
- + How does your school's MSA (or the one closest to it) rank?

2. Using the *Urban Experience* CD, create a table that displays the population of your city or town and the population of the CBSA in which you live (or the one closest to you) for the period from 1970 through 2000 (or 2005).

To obtain these data in the *Urban Experience* CD, follow these steps:

- Go to the "Get Data" screen.
- In the "Choose Data Items" section, click on the arrow immediately to the right and choose "Counts."
- Check the box next to "Counts" when it appears under "Choose Data Items" and a drop-down list of data categories will appear.
- Check the box next to "Population."
- Another box, labeled "Total Population," will appear. Check this box.
- Next, go to the "Choose Locations" section of the screen.

- Double-click on "By CBSA Name" and a drop-down list of all CBSAs (metropolitan areas and micropolitan areas) will appear.
 - Scroll down until you locate the CBSA in which your city or town is located.
 - Double-click on the name of the CBSA and a list will appear. The first item in the list is the sum for all principal cities of the CBSA (the identifying name ends with "CBSA-Prin Cities"). The second item in the list is the sum for all suburbs in the CBSA (the identifying name ends with "CBSA-suburbs"). The next items in the list are each of the individual principal cities in alphabetical order (there may be one or more than one). After all principal cities have been listed, the list continues with each of the individual suburbs in alphabetical order. Check the box for your city or town.
 - Scroll back up to the top of the drop-down list. Note that the box for the CBSA itself is offset to the left above the drop-down list. Check that box.
 - Finally, in the "Choose Years" section of the screen, check the boxes for all of the years that are available.
 - Click on "Go."
 - On the far left side of the screen, click on "Table."
 - ♦ In which decade did your city or town grow the fastest or decline the most?
 - ♦ In which decade did the CBSA in which you live (or the one closest to you) grow the fastest or decline the most?
3. List and describe three of the major externalities in your home city or town.
 4. How do these externalities affect you and your household?
 5. How does your city or town attempt to deal with these externalities?
 6. In your city or town, which individuals and groups are powerful? What power do they have and how do they exercise it?
 7. What types of changes do you think residents of your city/town would want to make regarding municipal agencies or programs?
 8. Which organizations, city officials, and individuals in your city/town are important in making changes in education, housing, access to jobs, crime, public transportation, health care, and business growth?