



## AGE OF AFFLUENCE

# Geography

## in American History

### The Age of the Suburb

After World War II, affluence spread rapidly throughout the American middle class. Before the war, 90 percent of all the money collected in income taxes came from the pockets of only about 600,000 people. By 1960, that 90 percent was collected from 32 million taxpayers. One result of the new affluence was a sudden increase in the number of people who owned their own homes, which in turn fueled phenomenal growth in the nation's suburbs.

*In this reading, you will learn why suburbs developed so quickly and how the flight from the cities altered the urban experience.*

### A Place Changes Character

Until 1947, the Hempstead Plain in Nassau County on Long Island, New York, provided a quiet, rural setting for its few inhabitants. Motion picture companies filmed westerns on its wide expanse; potato farmers reaped their harvests from its level soils. Fewer than forty students attended the single local school, which was staffed by only two teachers.

By 1960, however, the potato farms were gone forever. More than 17,400 houses had been built on the Hempstead Plain. Some 678 teachers taught more than 18,000 students attending fifteen different schools in four separate school districts.

### Geographic Pressure

What happened on the Hempstead Plain became a symbol for the suburban boom that occurred throughout America after World War II. It was a simple story. In 1947 a developer named Levitt began building single-family houses on plots of land measuring 60 feet by 100 feet. He knew that during the Great Depression and the war years few houses had been built in the nation. Returning veterans received generous help from federal agencies to finance mortgages for the housing they badly needed. But not even an entrepreneur with Levitt's foresight could have fully anticipated the larger forces at work that were to change the face of the countryside.

After the war, landowners in the nation's cities began converting residential properties to more profitable commercial uses. Apartment seekers, including hundreds of thousands of returning veterans, looked in vain for affordable apartments; most were forced to settle for any available cramped quarters.

Land outside the city was still inexpensive and plentiful. Outside New York, Levitt and other developers turned to Long Island and other outlying truck farm regions. Near Los Angeles, developers bought out the orchards of the San Fernando Valley. The suburb builders offered instant communities to young families—complete with streets, recreational facilities, and sometimes even school complexes.

A veteran and his family could move into a house in Levittown just by showing military discharge papers, proving that the veteran was employed, and signing up to pay a modest mortgage. Thousands took possession of nearly identical Cape Cod or ranch houses with refrigerators and washing machines already installed. Although some Long Islanders were horrified at the monotonous look of the development, for many these homes represented luxury beyond their highest hopes.

Urban life had been dominated by a political machine that seemed unresponsive to the needs of young families. But in Levittown and similar developments, suburbanites suddenly had a significant voice in all facets of government. In addition to having four school dis-

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tricts, by 1960 Levittowners formed part of four water districts, four fire districts, and two congressional districts.

### The Movement Factor

Well over half of Levittown's new residents had moved from the boroughs of New York City. In the early 1950s, more than 65 percent of Levittowners commuted to work in the city by rail transit or by car. Throughout the nation, cheap automobile transportation was a major factor in the spread of suburbs. Before the invention of the automobile, cities had grown outward only along rail lines, because people in outlying areas needed rapid transit to return to the offices or factories they had left behind in the city.

Although white-collar businesses remained in the city through the 1950s, factories began to relocate outside the city. At first most of Levittown's male workers held white-collar jobs in the city, but as the decade progressed, a male Levittowner was more likely to be blue-collar, as white-collar workers became less willing to make the trip into the city to work.

### Suburban vs Urban Regions

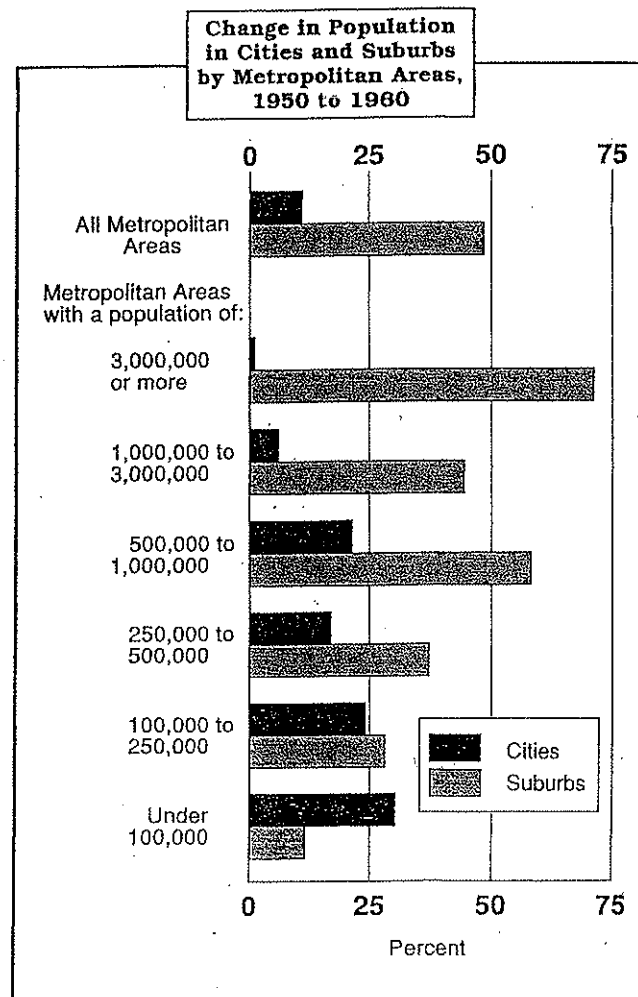
While the population of the suburbs rose by nearly 50 percent nationwide during the 1950s, the inner cities grew only 10 percent, as the graph at the right shows. Some cities actually declined in population. New York, for example, had a net loss of more than 100,000 people.

This loss of population imposed drastic changes on many cities. Some analysts argue that the young, middle-class families who moved to the suburbs relieved the cities of a financial burden because they were the group with the greatest need for expensive services, such as schools. Others point out that the vacated housing was often taken over by economically deprived immigrants who could not afford to pay for city services. And when industries moved out of the cities, they took job opportunities for immigrants with them.

Often the new city residents were minorities—African-Americans from the South,

Asians, or Hispanics. They now faced the same city political machines that had made even the middle class feel powerless. Worse, political decisions in cities were often influenced by landowners and business operators who had also moved into the suburbs but who continued to maintain control over their city property. On a national level, cities lost political clout as congressional districts shifted farther from the inner city.

Levitt and his fellow developers were not solely responsible for halting the growth of the urban cores and creating the encircling suburbs. They merely answered a critical geographic need.



Source: William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963).