

## Suburbanization in the US

### Causes

- 1944: Service Men's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) included provisions for below-market home loans to veterans (Veterans Administration [VA] loans).
- need for housing due to soldiers returning from World War II
- Federal Housing Administration (FHA) from 1934 extended government role by insuring mortgage loans.
- demographic trends: marriage rates, childbirth rates, declining age of marriage, decline in divorce rate, nuclear family
- Migration was facilitated by new construction, loans and indirect government stimulus.
- Construction boom on cheaper land outside of cities; was led by William Levitt with Levittown (1,500 acres with 17,000 mass-produced, low-priced homes on Long Island, New York, and in New Jersey).
  - Levittowns were segregated.
  - In 1960 federal housing laws made it illegal to engage in segregation of tract homes purchased with VA or FHA loans.
  - Race riots in the 1960s accelerated white exodus from the cities.
  - Between 1950 and 1960, 18 million migrated from cities to suburbs.
- popular culture: *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, *LIFE* magazine
- Housing Acts of 1949 ("urban renewal"), 1954
- Army Corps of Engineers/Bureau of Reclamation dams and irrigation projects in arid West
- 1954: white flight/desegregation following *Brown vs. Board of Education*

- Federal Highway Act of 1956 boosted suburban growth (Interstate Highway System).
- 1965: Department of Housing and Urban Development was created.
- Other cold war stimuli included transferring government-built defense plants to private corporations and establishing strategic bomber and missile bases throughout the country.
- Houston TX, Cape Canaveral FL and the Greater Los Angeles area became centers for the Space Race (aerospace industry).

## Consequences

- FHA policies led to discrimination against racially and economically mixed communities.
- Within a generation, the majority of middle-class Americans had moved to the suburbs.
- Businesses, schools and stores followed, leaving a lower tax base in the cities. Many older and inner cities became increasingly poor due to a lower tax base.
- Many older and inner cities became racially divided due to “white flight”: movement of whites to the suburbs.
- Federal Highway Act of 1956 accelerated the decline of mass transit in older cities.
- Suburbs necessitated a car culture with drive-in theaters and fast-food restaurants.
- Civil rights movement: Montgomery Bus Boycott, Freedom Rides
- bomb shelters: During the Cold War arms race, civil defense officials talked confidently of group shelters for 50 million people, but in the new suburban communities the nervous were taking survival into their own hands. Bomb shelters costing from \$100 to as much as \$5,000 for an underground suite with phone and toilet were selling like hotcakes. Families with well stocked shelters

lived with the fear that after a nuclear attack they'd be invaded by an army of friends and neighbors who neglected to build bunkers of their own. Many ordered contractors to construct their shelters in the dead of night so nosy neighbors wouldn't see.

- gentrification: General term for the arrival of wealthier people in an existing urban district, a related increase in rents and property values, and changes in the district's character and culture. The term is often used negatively, suggesting the displacement of poor communities by rich outsiders.
- decline of mass-transit systems
- post-World War II social conformity:
  - domestic ideal of nuclear family
  - rebirth of religious life
  - belief in the group focus on middle-class aspirations such as safety, low taxes, patriotism
- Heightened mobility: the average American moved six times before reaching age 25.
- John Birch Society called for conservative and Protestant values and advocated segregation of "un-American" residents.
- redlining: systematic denial of various services to residents of specific, often racially associated, neighborhoods or communities, either directly or through the selective raising of prices
- race-based real estate covenants
- architectural and psychological conformity
- critics: *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), *The Organization Man* (1956) and *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956)



- urban renewal destruction of minority neighborhoods
- Teens with cars reduced parental control.
- Suburban middle-class lifestyle bred a teen-oriented culture.
- *All in the Family* explored the bigoted side of the suburban family.
- *The Cosby Show* extolled the middle-class accomplishments of African American families.
- By 1985, over half of Americans owned their residences.
- Attractions included shopping malls, parks, new schools and other new infrastructure.