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Trading Suburbs for the City: A Shift Away from the American Car Culture

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U.S. families settle in suburbs. That's been the trend since World War II as American parents looked for safe neighborhoods, good schools, and big backyards for our children. Today, though, higher fuel costs that are [revamping the U.S. auto industry](#) and the ongoing foreclosure and housing crisis are both slowly changing the American landscape. In an effort to eliminate long, expensive, environmentally damaging commutes and live closer to museums and restaurants, people in this country are starting to head back to the cities.



It's called New Urbanism, and Christopher Leinberger, an urban planning professor at the University of Michigan and visiting fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#), says the movement is changing the American dream:

"This change can be witnessed in places like Atlanta, Georgia, Detroit, Michigan, and Dallas, Texas, said Leinberger, where once rundown downtowns are being revitalized by well-educated, young professionals who have no desire to live in a detached single family home typical of a suburbia where life is often centered around long commutes and cars.

Instead, they are looking for what Leinberger calls "walkable urbanism" -- both small communities and big cities characterized by efficient mass transit systems and high density developments enabling residents to walk virtually everywhere for everything -- from home to work to restaurants to movie theaters." - [CNN](#)

Suburbs always worked best for families, anyway, and apparently this trend stems from a demographic shift as much as from an environmental and financial one, as more

Americans choose to remain childless for longer, and sometimes for life. Leinberger notes these people, as well as baby boomers trading the suburban life for an urban retired one, are driving the trend.

"In recent years, a generation of young people, called the millennials, born between the late 1970s and mid-1990s, has combined with baby boomers to rekindle demand for urban living. Today, the subprime-mortgage crisis and \$4-a-gallon gasoline are delivering further gut punches by blighting remote subdivisions nationwide and rendering long commutes untenable for middle-class Americans.

Just as low interest rates and aggressive mortgage financing accelerated expansion of the suburban fringe to the point of oversupply, "the spike in gasoline prices, layered with demographic changes, may accelerate the trend toward closer-in living," said Arthur C. Nelson, director of Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute in Alexandria, Va. "All these things are piling up, and there are fundamental changes occurring in demand for housing in most parts of the country." - [Wall Street Journal](#)

It's not just single or childless residents who want to leave the suburbs, either. Many cities have noticed an influx of families, too, and they've set plans to make urban housing and transportation more family friendly:

"Cities such as Denver, Charlotte, N.C., and Portland, Ore., are making investments in public transportation and spurring the construction of symbols of the new housing era: multifamily residential and retail complexes at or next to transit stations. Reconnecting America, a nonprofit group committed to transit-oriented development, estimates that the number of households near transit stations will soar to 15 million by 2030, from six million now." - [WSJ](#)



Less suburban sprawl means the load of auto emissions lightens and cities experience much-needed (in some cases) revitalization. So what's the downside of such a startling shift in American residential patterns?

Suburbs at the farthest distance from the increasingly vibrant and popular urban centers may face decline, as desirability and housing values drop. Where decay occurs, crime tends to follow:

"For 60 years, Americans have pushed steadily into the suburbs, transforming the landscape and (until recently) leaving cities behind. But today the pendulum is swinging back toward urban living, and there are many reasons to believe this swing will continue. As it does, many low-density suburbs and McMansion subdivisions, including some that are lovely and affluent today, may become what inner cities became in the 1960s and '70s-slums characterized by poverty, crime, and decay." - [The Atlantic](#)

But the news isn't all bad. Some neighborhoods are trying to urbanize and still retain their quiet residential character. These areas are building city centers -a suburban downtown, basically - and offering incentives to companies to build there rather than in the cities. Places like this will likely appeal to families who want to reduce their carbon footprint and their gas bills but don't want to live in the city itself.

Vastly reducing the number of commuters on the road is an unquestionable weapon in the struggle against emissions and global warming. As Leinberger notes in the *Atlantic*, though, facing the challenges of shifting housing patterns just might increase choices for the average American.