

DEMOGRAPHIA



DETROIT: URBAN POLICY WHIPPING BOY Trumping Up Comparisons to Toronto

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan Area Population (2004)	5,400,000	Dallas-Fort Worth, Toronto
Urban Area Population (2000)	3,903,000	Houston, Belo Horizonte, Chongqing
Urban Land Area: Square Miles (2004)	1,261	Houston, Nagoya, Washington
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers	3,267	
Population per Square Mile	3,100	Adelaide, Calgary, Portland
Population per Square Kilometer	1,200	
*Continuously built up area		

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Detroit leaps to mind when the subject of urban decay is raised. Moreover, it is not without reason. Since 1950, the core city of Detroit has lost more than one-half of its population, falling from 1,850,000 to 900,000 in 2004. At the same time, however, the suburbs have grown strongly, adding a net 2.4 million population since 1950.

However, the decay of the central city is undeniable. Other cities have lost more of their population, such as Antwerp,¹ St. Louis and Pittsburgh. Manchester and Liverpool have lost approximately the same share of their population. Nevertheless, the decay is far more evident in Detroit. The population loss is not obvious in the well-preserved, historic core of Antwerp. Downtown Pittsburgh, with its strong international corporate headquarters,

¹ Within city boundaries as in existence before 1980s consolidation.

has managed to remain comparatively vibrant as a commercial center. Even in St. Louis, the worst decay is carefully tucked away in places that would never be seen by out-of-towners for whom downtown and tourist sites that are the limit of their travels. For all of its problems, no one would ever confuse downtown St. Louis with downtown Detroit.

However, in Detroit, the decay strikes you in the face. Downtown is truly decrepit. There are virtually empty buildings of up to 40 stories. Many of these were built in the “glory days” of US skyscraper construction, in the 1920s, with art deco and other attractive designs. There is, mercifully, little of the post-war international style, except for Renaissance Center, which is protected by the equivalent of a moat from the rest of the downtown area. Some years ago, one of downtown’s great old hotels, the Book Cadillac, was to be

refurbished. The picture taken this morning shows virtually no progress. Some of the little new life in downtown has been sucked away from at least one other area. General Motors moved to Renaissance Center some years ago, abandoning its “New Center” offices that include a 28-story art deco building (Fisher Tower) and the former General Motors building, with its gigantic footprint. Now it is the Cadillac Center, a state of Michigan project. New Center is located in the Woodward Avenue corridor approximately two miles north of downtown, and was perhaps the first “edge city” in the United States.



What went wrong in Detroit? My vote is city politics combined with destructive intervention by the courts. It also did not help that the city suffered the most intense and destructive civil disorders up to that point. In 1967, a police action provoked a riot that lasted several days, resulted in more than 40 lives, 1,000 injuries and left a huge swath of the Woodward Avenue corridor, just north of downtown, a burnt out wasteland. However, the damage to the physical structure of the city paled by comparison to the psychological damage that was to follow.

Not long after that, a court action threatened a forced school busing system that would have been perhaps the most aggressive in the nation. As opinion polls have shown, neither whites

nor African Americans like the idea of their children being bused to schools across town, instead of attending their neighborhood schools. Many who could afford to leave, moved to the suburbs. Many who stayed started driving their children to school, a legacy that has become the norm today.

One of the healthiest premises of the new urban movement today is the recognition of the neighborhood school as crucial to the community, though many do not make the obvious connection between driving children to school and the court ordered abandonment of neighborhood schools in many large urban centers.

The aggressive busing program was never fully implemented, but the threat was all that was needed to accelerate movement from the city.



Then there was colorful Mayor Coleman Young, who I had the privilege of working with in a successful effort to block the merger of the city and suburban bus systems (D-DOT and SEMTA).² The late Mayor Young was one of the most engaging personalities one could

² This was the beginning of the “Big Four” decision making process, which included Mayor Young, Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy (my client), Wayne County Executive William Lucas, then Edward Macnamara and the board chairman of Macomb County.

ever meet. However, his loose and often playful rhetoric contributed to the decline of the city. At one point, he suggested that white people should move north of “Eight Mile Road,” the northern city boundary. Whether he was serious or not is not important, because people believed he was. In the aftermath of the riots and the prospect of busing, it is not surprising that the exodus to the suburbs accelerated.

The resulting panic to leave, combined with the all too obvious urban devastation lining the city’s principal corridor (Woodward Avenue) contributed to the decline of downtown. St. Louis and Pittsburgh did not have this burden. Perhaps part of the problem was that Detroit itself was an accident, arising from its becoming the headquarters of the American automobile industry. The city added more population between 1900 and 1930 than Los Angeles in any three-decade period. The city rose with the automobile industry. If the American automobile industry had remained more competitive, perhaps downtown Detroit would have had a better chance.



Detroit v. Toronto: Fans of Toronto often like to make comparisons to Detroit to demonstrate differences that they like to highlight between Canada and the United States. But it is an unfair, if not juvenile comparison:

- Both metropolitan areas have grown strongly. In 1950, the Detroit metropolitan area had 2.8 million people, more than double metropolitan Toronto’s 1.2 million. Since that time metropolitan Toronto has grown to 5.2 million, while metropolitan Detroit has grown more slowly, with a current population of 5.4 million.
- The starkest difference is in the central city. The core city of Detroit has lost nearly one-half of its population. The core city of Toronto has virtually the same population today as in 1950. There are all manner of theories about why the two core cities have experienced such different trends and many of them are wrong. No mayor of Toronto threateningly admonished a major ethnic group to move north of Steeles Avenue (the northern city boundary). No court threatened to bus Toronto school children across town.
- Detroit is, or at least was, the world headquarters of a dominant American car manufacturing industry. In many ways, the metropolitan area was an “industry” town. The decline of the American manufacturing industry has nothing whatever to do with anything in Detroit, at least anything outside the boardrooms, union halls and strategies of the companies that have suffered declines.
- Toronto had the unparalleled advantage of having Canada’s premier urban area abdicate that position as it returned to its French roots. Montreal had been Canada’s largest urban area for decades. In 1950, the Montreal metropolitan area had one-quarter more population than Toronto, and many corporate national headquarters were

there. As late as 1981, the Montreal metropolitan area was nearly as large as Toronto. However, over the years, as Quebec has restored French Canadian culture to prominence, much of the corporate base left Montreal. Today, the Montreal metropolitan area trails the Toronto metropolitan area by 1.6 million.

- All of this has permitted Toronto to become Canada's dominant city, its "world city." Detroit ranks ninth in the United States and will fall to 12th, behind Houston, Miami and Atlanta before 2010.

Critics of Detroit also fail to recognize that even with all of its problems and all of Toronto's advantages, total metropolitan growth in Detroit has been substantial, at 2.4 million, a figure no other Canadian metropolitan area has added in the same period.



The Appropriate Comparison: Toronto v. Atlanta: If there is an appropriate American comparison to Toronto, it is probably Atlanta. Atlanta does not have the advantage of having grown, to a significant degree, because a neighboring urban area abdicated its economic leadership to achieve other objectives.

Nonetheless, Atlanta's performance has been impressive. In 1950, the Atlanta metropolitan area had one-half the population of Toronto. As early as 2010, Atlanta's metropolitan population will exceed Toronto's. Median household income in Atlanta is higher, and housing is considerably more affordable. Relative to income levels, the median house price is approximately \$100,000 less in Atlanta than in Toronto. Further, Atlanta's residents get more house for the money and larger lots. Finally, by that meaningless standard so popular among urban planners, Atlanta leads Toronto in having built 46 miles of high quality metro, compared to less than 40 miles in Toronto. Comparing Toronto and Detroit is like comparing Atlanta and Winnipeg. Toronto and Atlanta have been in the path of growth. Detroit and Winnipeg have not.

Detroit has had its difficulties. But few cities have experienced the advantages of Toronto. Moreover, much of what Toronto has accomplished is the result of things that happened elsewhere.



Renaissance? However, as in other American cities, there is a renaissance going on in central Detroit. Some older buildings are being converted into condominiums. Others are being built in

the lots made vacant in the Woodward Avenue corridor nearly 40 years ago. However, as elsewhere, this renaissance is not so much the return of the city as it is the advance of the suburbs. This is evident by the large parking structure under construction beside an old office building being converted into condominiums on Woodward Avenue. The residents, like those in new condominiums in Chicago, Kansas City and elsewhere, will travel by car when they cannot travel by foot. Other new parking structures can be seen in other cities. In addition, where new buildings have been built, as in the core of Chicago, the parking is hidden below ground or in the lower floors of the new buildings.

There are also the downtown entertainment venues. Two new stadiums have been built as downtown Detroit imitates the one unparalleled success of other US downtown areas, that of virtual urban amusement parks. It is an appropriate role, since their dominance in employment has long since been erased, though not in the eyes of the urban theorists or the downtown business community.

Suburban Detroit: The urban analysts rarely get to the suburbs, because they somehow consider the suburbs to not be a

part of the urban fabric. In fact, they are the predominant portion of the urban fabric not only in Detroit, but also in Toronto, Paris and Tokyo. Detroit has some of the nation's most attractive suburbs. The most affluent suburbs stretch toward the northwest in suburban Oakland County. Others stretch to the southwest, northeast and south. To the direct south, is Windsor, Ontario, situated on the only land in Canada to the south of the United States.



David
Scott
Building
(Nearly
Empty)

Overall, Detroit probably has the greatest variation that will be found in any US urban area. Here is the greatest urban devastation along with suburbs and exurbs as leafy as in metropolitan areas whose core cities have fared better.

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