Quality of life and the development of small towns in America

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Quality of Life and the Development of small Towns in America

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RESUME
Qualité de la vie et développement des petites villes aux États-Unis.

Après des années de déclin, malgré une image positive dans les mentalités populaires, les petites villes américaines subissent une croissance étonnante, qui dépose en termes relatifs celle des métropoles: + 15% entre 1970 et 1980. Loin d'être temporaire, ce phénomène, qui se poursuit actuellement, se manifeste au-delà des aires de banlieues dans des villages touristiques, industriels, de retraite...

Le syndrome urbain n'explique pas tout; cette déconcentration correspond aussi à une nouvelle répartition des activités économiques et à la recherche d'une meilleure qualité de vie.

ABSTRACT
Despite a very positive image, for the first time since 1970, rural areas and small towns, had greater rates of population growth than metropolitan centers: + 15% between 1970 and 1980. This increase is not a temporary phenomenon; confirmed by the results of the 1980 census it represents a basic demographic and economic reversal. People fed up with city life began spilling out in small towns where they take local jobs in leisure activities, traditional industries and where they find a better environment.

1. Past trends

Ask any American to describe a small town in 1988 and you will hear variations on some nostalgic theme: good quality of life, democracy, neighborhood friendship, the corner drugstore with friendly people who care about their neighbors; a sentimental image of villages where everybody knows everybody else, a positive image cultivated by writers from Mark Twain to Booth Tarkington...

Despite the persistence of this very positive image since 1790, at which time the U.S. census was established, the country has become more and more urbanized. Metropolitan areas of the north-east and west and other urban centres have grown at the expense of rural areas and small towns. As a result, the population of the U.S. became steadily more concentrated, reflecting the metropolitan trend, a movement of nearly two centuries in duration (in 1980 the 318 SMSAs held 75% of the total U.S. population!).

2. A recent reversal

However, during the decade of the 1970s, for the first time since 1790, rural areas and small towns, had greater rates of population growth than metropolitan centres. The traditional forms of urbanization - faster growth of metropolitan population than the population of the nation as a whole and urbanization of villages adjacent to urban areas - are strongly modified. The faster growth of metropolitan population ceased during the decade (table 1), the population of rural areas growing faster than that of urban areas: the population of rural areas and small towns increased by 15% between 1970 and 1980, while the metropolitan centres grew by 10%. The faster growth of population in rural areas was all but universal: in 49 of the 50 States the non-metropolitan counties had the higher rate of population increase.

This increase of population in many rural areas is not a temporary phenomenon. Confirmed by the results of the 1980 census it represents a basic demographic and economic reversal. Its immediate cause is not due to an increase in the number of people living and working on farms. Overall the rate of increase is greater especially in counties where the economic base is linked to traditional industries, such as textile, clothing and furniture, and to leisure activities. Economic forces thus appear to be responsible for much of the increase of population in rural areas.

The second traditional explanation of the rural growth was the «spreading out» of metropolitan centres. Empirical facts, however, disprove this hypothesis. Counties adjacent to metropolitan areas did grow fairly rapidly during the period 1970-1980; their average population increase was 17% (figure 1). Counties not adjacent to SMSAs, however, grew almost as fast, at an average rate of 14%. As the latter are beyond the commuting range of cities, their growth cannot be con-
<table>
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Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census
Note: 1) Data distorted by annexation.

considered as a manifestation of the continuing expansion of urban centres. People fed up with filthy cities and dull or dangerous suburbs began spilling out into small towns at a rate of about 400,000 per year. Some are retired, some take local jobs in leisure activities and in traditional industries. Many make small town living a full time job.

Several forces have contributed to this tendency. Among these are:
- the establishment of energy and mining projects in rural areas;
- leisure and resort related activities;
- retirement community developments in warm climates;
- the much publicized "urban flight" syndrome (a reaction to urban congestion, crime and pollution).

3. Economic reasons for deconcentration

The changing character of industrial production may be particularly important in the recent shifts in population distribution. The movement of industry to Sunbelt areas, and the consequent rapid growth of employment there, has certainly been a factor in the rapid population growth of small towns in the South and West. It must also be kept in mind, however, that an important flow of illegal immigrants has contributed to the population growth of small towns in the Sunbelt areas. Among the largest groups of illegal immigrants are the Haitians in Florida and the Mexicans in California and the Southwestern States.

In order to comprehend the causes for deconcentration, it is necessary to understand the forces underlying concentration before the 1970s. The concept of economies of scale implies that the return on an investment made in a metropolitan area is higher than the return on an investment of the same size made in the non-core regions. In the metropolitan region is found a large skilled labour force; efficient transportation systems for people and goods; large consumer and commercial markets; and backwards and forwards linkages with the producers and consumers of goods and services. As a result of economies of scale, most industrial plants have been built in the urbanized core as nations industrialize. At a certain level of development the economic and demographic growth of the urbanized core becomes self-reinforcing. The underlying cause of the concentration of the population in a developed country is therefore primarily economic. That demographic and industrial concentration results in efficiency and in the most productive utilization of resources in a society and, hence, in the greatest wealth for the nation, is a fundamental postulate of classical economic thought.

It appears that at some point in the process of economic development the economic advantages of scale begin to decrease. This reduction seems to have come earliest and been strongest in the U.S. The U.S. urbanized core has had a net outflow in its exchange with the non-core regions since 1945. Until 1970 the net loss of people from the core region of the U.S. to the non-core regions was generally small. In the 1970s, however, the migration accelerated rapidly to a rate of at least 400,000 and sometimes 2,000,000 people per year, the highest in the developed countries.

The fact that migration to the urbanized core has been replaced by a flow away from it suggests that the economies of scale have been reduced; several fac-
tors could be responsible. Perhaps the most significant factor is technological development, which has changed the bases for deciding where industrial plants are built. On the one hand, the rise of lightweight materials, miniaturization, a reduction in the number of moveable parts in equipment, and the widespread substitution of electronic for mechanical parts and processes have directly and indirectly reduced the role of transportation costs and of the requirements for large, skilled labour pools in the production and distribution processes. On the other hand, it is argued, advances in telecommunication and in transportation have increasingly overcome the impediments of distance in the provision of producer services. Overall, the argument runs, the need for proximity has been declining.

The considerations in deciding where to build a plant making small computers, for example, are quite different from those in deciding where to build a steel mill. Improvements in transportation and the increases in value per unit weight that characterize modern manufactured goods make location outside of a large urban area more and more attractive for an industry. The workforce in most such plants is small due to the high proportion of technology in inputs; the importance of proximity to a large pool of skilled labour is therefore reduced. Improvements in communications have made it possible for manufacturing firms to locate far from the companies that provide their service inputs. Furthermore, when a high level of economic development has been reached, enough capital is accumulated to allow a given infrastructure to be built in peripheral regions. Therefore, the economic advantage of the urbanized core over the non-core regions has been reduced. As we shall see, however, this advantage applies primarily to manufacturing, and principally to that of a standardized variety. The same generalization cannot necessarily be applied to high technology manufacturing or to high order services.

Moreover, in a dense urban area some of the economies of scale can be transformed into diseconomies. The manufacturing processes of many firms require single-story buildings, thus necessitating substantial tracts of flat land not readily available in dense urban areas. Labour organizations in the urban areas tend to create higher wage-rates; there is congestion on roads; insurance rates are higher; pollution is more pronounced, as are crime and social uncertainty. Such urban-rural shifts can occur only if the non-core regions have suitable locations for factories, for business, and for housing. In the U.S. the non-core regions are equal to the urbanized core, if not superior, in this regard.

Rural industrialization, specifically, is seen to be linked to changes in the cost-structure of an industry or product as it evolves through time. The explanations for the establishment of energy and mining projects and leisure activities follow the same pattern. Non core regions have many more suitable locations for these activities, in the South, West and in the foothills of the mountains, than in the metropolitan areas.

4. Benefits and problems

Small town residents, at once pleased with the benefits of growth, bringing unexpected growth to their own businesses, can sometimes react against it when the population passes the threshold of urbanization. The qualities that attract people to small towns - quality of life, employment, peace, simplicity and democracy - tend to erode as communities grow. With demographic changes the median age of the population falls in industrial small towns from 60 to 30. Condos creep up hillsides, new stores replace the corner drugstore, sleepy roads get congested with more traffic...

More and more tax money is demanded for new government services, like schools with baby booms. Local budgets become strained to meet garbage collection, sewage, water pipes, parking lots, police, schools, hospitals... Even if old timers make fortunes in selling off their properties, they complain about these changes and find it difficult to adjust to them.

However, newcomers often find what they want in terms of neighborhood warmth, pleasant community attitudes, new homes in quiet environments, less pressure in daily living. Enquiries prove this general satisfaction even if newcomers can offend longtime residents by their way of life; the quality of life of newcomers differs from that of the natives. They need more good services, boutiques, health clubs, restaurants, to enjoy a god new life outside the city rat race.

To avoid the confrontation between old and new population some small towns are adopting slow growth measures to preserve the traditional quality of the community. by exercising building controls or an "impact fee" on developers to manage future growth (money used for developing new services). Once small towns get over these growing points, and if they preserve the quality of life of the village, they can expect a bright future; a future no one was dreaming about 20 years ago when children from the villages had to move to cities to find jobs, leaving old people in the villages.

Small town prosperity is a new trend in America based on an image and an economic reality. Growth can improve prospects that were dim in the past, and give many small cities prosperity if they know how to preserve their quality of life and their economic advantages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


