Growth, Decline, Regrowth & Regression

From 1950 to 2000, American cities evolved from compact monocentric hubs into sprawling car-oriented conglomerations prevalent today. For decades, central cities continued losing residents, jobs and wealth to surrounding suburbs, leaving central cities with dwindling revenues even as the costs of servicing their disadvantaged populations and decaying infrastructure rose. But urban areas are not all alike, nor are the neighborhoods within them, and recent population trends in urban cores have only become more diverse. While some central neighborhoods continued to decline, others rebounded. Farther out, growth in more inner-ring suburbs cooled off, but in some regions, combined growth was common. New regional and local patterns of change have come to be as prominent as the historically universal pattern of outward dispersal.

Patterns in Common
In the early postwar decades, inner-city populations consistently declined, as indicated by blue, turquoise, green and gold tracts in most city centers. Meanwhile, inner-ring suburbs generally grew, as indicated by the lavender, purple, pink and orange tracts in the outskirts of cores. Where cores did not show this pattern, it is likely due to missing 1950 data, represented by light brown.

In contrast, trends of recent decades show fewer consistent patterns. Most central business districts are green, indicating that downtown revitalization and residential development are common in the 1940s and 1950s. Even the outer edges of most cores are purple, indicating recent stabilizations or declines in most inner-ring suburbs. Beyond these two commonalities, the most remarkable patterns and recent trends vary from region to region, or by individual urban area.

Patterns of Difference
Many patterns in recent trends are regionally distinct. Most prominently, the dominance of blue and purple hues throughout the central U.S. indicates a consistent lack of recent growth in Midwestern cores, with the exception of Chicago, Milwaukee and Minneapolis-St. Paul, where green and gold repopulation was relatively common. Repopulation was also prevalent in the Northeast in New York and Boston, in the West in San Francisco-Oakland and Seattle, and in Dallas-Fort Worth in the South. The strongest regional distinctions occurred in Southern California, where large swaths of both Los Angeles and San Diego experienced orange and pink continued growth.

Many other patterns in recent trends are unique to specific urban areas, often related to patterns of race and socioeconomic segregation. In many cases, the areas of strongest continued decline are in traditionally black neighborhoods, such as in Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Dallas. In contrast, wealthier neighborhoods are often relatively stable, as in New York's Upper East Side or Chicago's North Shore. But increasing wealth and gentrification can also be accompanied by population declines as households diminish in size, as in northeastern Brooklyn, New York, or around the lakes of southwest Minneapolis.

The Data Behind the Maps
The most recent population trends throughout 34 of the largest U.S. urban areas, broken out by the core and the core plus the next ring. Data was compiled from historical U.S. Census Bureau data and demographic trends, and visualized with the help of the Infographic System for Urban Information (ISUI). A full list of the sources and the data is available on the MPC website.

The map was created by Jonathan Schneider, a data visualization specialist at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. It is available for download and use with attribution.

For a detailed look at the data and trends, visit the MPC website at www.mncenter.org.

Trend Composition Charts
This chart shows the percentage of different types of population trends among other trends. These are raw counts for each of the 34 urban areas. Each area has been ranked by population size, and the most recent trend is shown for each area. For a detailed explanation of the trends, visit the MPC website at www.mncenter.org.

Maps of the U.S. population in 1950 and 2000 are available on the MPC website at www.mncenter.org. For more information, contact Jonathan Schneider at jonschneider@umn.edu.