

Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

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Reluctant Cities?

Exploring Big Unincorporated Census Designated Places

Robert E. Lang and Dawn Dhavale
Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

Introduction

Census Designated Places (CDPs) are the Rodney Dangerfields of urban geography—they get no respect. The public does not understand them and researchers often overlook CDPs because they are seen as census-derived statistical artifacts as opposed to “real” places.¹ Yet a CDP is a residential concentration whose population sees itself as belonging to a specific place, even if the place is not an official city.² In that sense, a CDP is a real place and their formation and growth warrant some analysis.

The census devised the CDP category to capture urban development that falls outside cities. CDPs range in size from less than 100 to over 100,000 residents.³ The term dates to 1980, replacing the even less evocative label “unincorporated places.” Most large population clusters in the US are officially defined as cities, especially those with more than 50,000 residents. But 1 in 10 places (or 61 of 601) that rise above this threshold is a CDP. Forty one of these big CDPs are unincorporated, while the remaining 20 are incorporated as places other than cities such as “townships.”⁴ We focus on the 41 big unincorporated CDPs and consider why they remain unincorporated—or in our description “reluctant cities.”

¹ This includes one of the authors, who ignored CDPs when developing his Boomburb concept (Lang and Simmons 2003).

² There are two types of census “places,” incorporated places and CDPs. CDPs are densely populated and mostly non-incorporated places that are locally identified by name. The Census Bureau designates these locations at the request of the local government. A CDP, as defined by the census, is a “population center without legally defined corporate limits or corporate powers” (Census 2000).

³ The largest CDPs are technically Honolulu, HI followed by Arlington, VA, but they are left out of this analysis. Honolulu CDP is coextensive with Honolulu Judicial District within the City and County of Honolulu. Arlington CDP is coextensive with Arlington County.

⁴ These places are considered to be CDPs by the Census, but are incorporated according to the laws of the state. They are: Brentwood CDP, Cheektowaga CDP, Irondequoit CDP, Levittown CDP, and Tonawanda CDP in New York; Brookline CDP, Framingham CDP, and Weymouth CDP in Massachusetts; Canton CDP, Clinton CDP, Redford CDP, Shelby CDP, Waterford CDP, and West Bloomfield Township CDP in Michigan; Edison CDP, Irvington CDP, Toms River CDP, Union CDP, and Wayne CDP in New Jersey; and West Hartford CDP, in Connecticut.

Unincorporated CDPs and incorporated places differ in that the latter have legal powers and responsibilities, while CDPs can function as *de facto* cities without official designation. State and county governments recognize CDPs, but the unincorporated ones have no municipal government of their own. This census note provides a window into why some large urban places never undergo the formal process of becoming incorporated cities. It is especially interesting to consider situations where it appears that no need exists for municipal-level government. We believe that in some cases, local conditions render “cities” all but irrelevant.

We look at CDPs above 50,000 because such places are big enough to constitute mid-sized cities. The 50,000 mark is also used by the census as the minimum size for a city to serve as the primary central city in a metropolitan area.⁵ As a group, big CDPs are perhaps the least studied urban phenomena in America. We offer this preliminary descriptive analysis as an exploratory read of these places.

While we examine places above 50,000, most CDPs are far smaller. Modest-sized CDPs can make up a big share of metropolitan areas. Consider, for example, that the majority of residents in Washington’s metropolitan area live in CDPs below 50,000 in the large Maryland and Virginia suburban counties surrounding the District of Columbia.⁶ In the past, many modest-sized CDPs might have formed incorporated local governments below the level of cities. Perhaps, in a future analysis we might find that modest-sized unincorporated CDPs are essentially “reluctant townships.”

Data

Table 1 shows that the 41 big unincorporated CDPs are distributed throughout that nation. Big CDPs can be found in 11 states stretching from California to Pennsylvania. Some big CDPs are obscure, while others are famous suburban communities, such as Levittown, PA.⁷

Also in the big unincorporated CDPs list are notable “new towns” of the 1960s, such as Reston, VA (outside Washington) and Columbia, MD (outside Baltimore). Some high-profile master-planned communities are also big CDPs, such as Highlands Ranch, CO (outside Denver) and The Woodlands, TX (outside Houston).

Paradise, NV (outside of Las Vegas) forms the most populous big unincorporated CDP, with 186,070 residents as of the 2000 census. At the other end of the size spectrum is Aspen Hill, MD (outside of Washington) with 50,228 people. The median for big CDP falls much closer to the low end of the spectrum, with 57,737 residents. Almost 3 million people live in the 41 big unincorporated CDPs, a population just below the Phoenix metropolitan area.

⁵ There are some exceptions such as when a large urban county simply lacks a central city this size. One example is New Brunswick, NJ, which is a central city with just 48,573 residents.

⁶ This includes the two authors of this census note who live in CDPs in Fairfax County, VA.

⁷ There are actually three Levittowns (one in each New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania) built by the same developer Levitt and Sons. Life in the New Jersey Levittown was chronicled by Herbert Gans (1967).

Only five big unincorporated CDPs top 100,000 residents. Three of these places are in suburban Las Vegas, NV. The Los Angeles and New Orleans metropolitan areas are home to the other 100,000-plus big CDPs. Six big CDPs have from 75,000 to 100,000 residents. There are 30 big CDPs that range between 50,000 to 75,000 people. These places scatter around the nation, but are typically found in the most populous states.

Finally, many of the big unincorporated CDP names strike us as a bit contrived—as in probably picked by market research consultants hired by developers. Consider such places as Town ‘n’ Country, The Woodlands, Casas Adobes, Fountainbleau and Rancho Cordova. Any list of places that starts with Paradise as its biggest example is likely to include lots of market-driven names.

Demographics

The demographic data in Table 1 indicates that, as a group, big unincorporated CDPs are similar to the US as a whole. Big CDPs are slightly more diverse than the nation, with a 64 percent non-Hispanic white population as opposed to 69 percent for the US. But recall that many big CDPs are in large urban states such as California and Florida so their diversity is not surprising. The most diverse big unincorporated CDPs are Florence-Graham and East Los Angeles CDPs in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, which are one and two percent non-Hispanic white respectively. Palm Harbor, FL and Levittown, PA CDPs are the least diverse places, with populations that are over 93 percent non-Hispanic white.

Table 1 also shows the household characteristics for big unincorporated CDPs. Interestingly, three places exceed 40 percent of households married with children, which greatly surpasses the figure for the US. Two of these places—Highlands Ranch, CO and The Woodlands, TX—are large master planned communities that also have a mostly white population of affluent homeowners. By contrast, Florence-Graham, CA, the other big CDP with 40 plus percent of married households with kids, has an almost entirely minority population, and has a very low percentage of homeowners.

The vast majority of big unincorporated CDPs lie in major metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles, Washington-Baltimore, Atlanta, Miami, Houston and Denver. We find that despite their relatively large size, most of our big CDPs are not heavily urban places. Most are dominated by residences rather than business. There are few real satellite cities in the list, although Bethesda, MD does contain a large downtown complete with office towers and a subway line.

Perhaps the most urban big unincorporated CDP is Paradise, NV, which contains most of the enormous hotels along the Las Vegas Strip. Paradise also has a low percentage of single family detached homes, and contains a far lower percentage of homeowners and households with children than the US as a whole.

Analysis

Why do some places that reach the population of mid-sized cities not bother to incorporate? We believe that two main conditions explain the rise of big unincorporated CDPs as reluctant cities. There are instances where strong county-level government assumes the role of municipal services and therefore negates the need or incentive to incorporate.⁸ There are also places where large private governments emerged in the form of homeowners' associations that provide essentially the same services as municipalities. Because the homeowners' association fees in these places are often high (and not tax deductible), residents may resist an additional layer of what they see as redundant and expensive government (McKenzie 1994).

In reluctant cities, governance falls to private organizations, or to larger public structures such as the county. Some places exhibit both these trends, such as Miami and Las Vegas. We consider both these conditions below. The key unifying force we believe is that some alternate form of government fills the service vacuum in the absence of incorporation. Behind the reluctance to form a city is not some strident anti-government ethos, but rather a strategic call that municipal government is unnecessary.

Strong County Government

Some states and metropolitan areas have large urban counties that assume the major share of local services. Table 2 shows that list of big CDPs that lie in these counties.

Urban counties are especially strong in Maryland and Virginia, which in part explains why 13 big CDPs lie in the Washington-Baltimore region (Lucy and Phillips, 2003). For example, Fairfax County, VA is the most populous county in its state, but has no incorporated city.⁹ This leaves places like Burke and Annandale clustered like suburban cities, but belonging to the county.

Miami-Dade County, FL, which is a city/county integrated government, also contains several large CDPs¹⁰ – the same is true for Los Angeles County, which is the most populous county in the nation with a correspondingly strong government.

Strong Private Government

Master planned community dominated regions, with strong private governments, comprise the other group of places with reluctant cities. Table 3 shows the list of big CDPs that have these private governments. Some of the big CDPs are single master-

⁸ By using the term strong counties we refer to places that take on many traditional municipal services, such as schools.

⁹ One of the authors classifies Fairfax County as a “MEGA (Massively Enlarged, Growth Accelerated) County,” which includes all fast growing counties above 800,000 people that lie in the 50 biggest metropolitan areas in the US (Lang and Zimmerman-Gough 2003).

¹⁰ Miami-Dade County also qualifies as a MEGA County.

planned communities, such as The Woodlands, TX or the Highlands Ranch, CO.¹¹ Most other big CDPs are in master planned community dominated regions, where the entire area is not a single planned unit, but planned communities form the majority of the housing in the area, such as Las Vegas.¹²

Special Cases

Four reluctant cities do not fit into the two categories of strong county or private government. These leftover CDPs are a result of specific circumstances. For example, Metairie, Louisiana was a population center that needed to incorporate for gas service. After receiving gas service, the citizens found incorporation unnecessary, and unincorporated after 17 years (<http://www.metairie.com/about/aboutmet.htm>). The other three big unincorporated CDPs in the special cases category are Arden-Arcade, CA, (Outside of Sacramento, CA) Goleta, CA (Outside of Santa Barbara, CA and home to the University of California at Santa Barbara) and Sandy Springs, GA (Outside of Atlanta, GA).

Conclusion

It remains to be seen if big unincorporated CDPs will change over time, or if additional forms of big CDPs will evolve. Few CDPs appear to have recently switched from unincorporated to incorporated status.¹³ Comparisons of this sort are complicated, as the boundaries of individual CDPs can switch each census, while retaining the name. It is this lack of continuity that causes trouble for researchers, especially by making longitudinal comparisons difficult.

Big unincorporated CDPs highlight the changing role of cities in providing governmental services for their citizens. If local conditions can create a governance structure, whether through a strong county presence, or private organizations, the traditional route to municipal government through incorporation may be unnecessary. Residents of big CDPs behave as though they are living in incorporated municipalities, and often identify themselves as residents of these areas. Some of these citizens might be surprised to realize they are living in a statistically designed place. The issue of how the local government is created, and who governs, does not seem to matter as long as the some municipal-type structure develops.

¹¹ Note that Reston, VA and Columbia, MD appear on both the strong county government list and the strong private government list.

¹² Three of the biggest CDPs are near Las Vegas. These big CDPs are really the “lost Boomburbs” of Las Vegas. Boomburbs are large (over 100,000 people), fast growing incorporated suburbs found primarily in the Southwest (Lang and Simmons 2001). Technically the Las Vegas region has two Boomburbs: Henderson and North Las Vegas. Except for lacking incorporation, Paradise, Spring Valley and Sunrise Manor fit the Boomburb description, which would give the region a total of five Boomburbs.

¹³ This conclusion is based on a comparison of data from the 1970, 1980 and 1990 censuses. (www.lemoyne.edu/seal/not70.htm).

Authors

Robert Lang is Director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech and an Associate Professor in Urban Affairs and Planning in Alexandria, VA. Dawn Dhavale is a graduate student in Urban Affairs and Planning at Virginia Tech in Alexandria, VA. The authors wish to thank Jennifer LeFurgy and Tom Sanchez for the useful comments that they made on earlier drafts of this note.

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Table 1. Unincorporated CDPs above 50,000, by population rank (Census 2000)

Unincorporated CDP	Total Population	% Non-Hispanic White	% Married with kids	% Homeowner	% SF Detached House
Paradise CDP, Nevada	186,070	59.7%	16.1%	44.9%	35.7%
Sunrise Manor CDP, Nevada	156,120	51.9%	23.9%	61.9%	44.1%
Metairie CDP, Louisiana	146,136	81.8%	18.3%	61.8%	60.1%
East Los Angeles CDP, California	124,283	1.8%	35.8%	36.6%	54.7%
Spring Valley CDP, Nevada	117,390	65.4%	18.9%	57.0%	45.3%
Arden-Arcade CDP, California	96,025	72.5%	14.6%	47.1%	47.4%
Columbia CDP, Maryland	88,254	64.4%	27.1%	66.2%	41.8%
Sandy Springs CDP, Georgia	85,781	73.0%	16.2%	45.7%	33.6%
Brandon CDP, Florida	77,895	73.7%	28.6%	71.6%	71.2%
Silver Spring CDP, Maryland	76,540	38.7%	20.9%	43.7%	40.5%
Kendall CDP, Florida	75,226	41.6%	25.1%	66.9%	42.3%
Town 'n' Country CDP, Florida	72,523	58.5%	21.3%	64.9%	54.4%
Highlands Ranch CDP, Colorado	70,931	87.4%	44.4%	87.6%	84.6%
Spring Hill CDP, Florida	69,078	88.4%	17.5%	86.3%	88.9%
Dundalk CDP, Maryland	62,306	88.8%	18.0%	72.0%	31.3%
Florence-Graham CDP, California	60,197	1.0%	41.1%	37.7%	56.0%
Elk Grove CDP, California	59,984	53.8%	38.1%	82.0%	88.7%
Fountainbleau CDP, Florida	59,549	9.4%	23.6%	51.4%	11.0%
Carol City CDP, Florida	59,443	6.4%	25.4%	82.8%	72.3%
Palm Harbor CDP, Florida	59,248	93.2%	20.5%	78.2%	56.2%
Burke CDP, Virginia	57,737	69.9%	37.8%	83.3%	55.7%
Wheaton-Glenmont CDP, Maryland	57,694	40.0%	25.7%	68.1%	60.5%
Castro Valley CDP, California	57,292	64.6%	24.4%	69.7%	71.2%
Kendale Lakes CDP, Florida	56,901	18.9%	31.6%	78.9%	41.1%
Reston CDP, Virginia	56,407	68.4%	22.9%	66.7%	27.8%
Ellicott City CDP, Maryland	56,397	76.9%	35.3%	74.7%	63.0%
Dale City CDP, Virginia	55,971	52.6%	37.0%	77.8%	67.3%
The Woodlands CDP, Texas	55,649	87.5%	40.8%	78.6%	79.1%
Germantown CDP, Maryland	55,419	57.5%	29.4%	67.6%	17.9%
Bethesda CDP, Maryland	55,277	81.8%	24.3%	69.1%	60.8%
Goleta CDP, California	55,204	67.4%	24.4%	69.4%	60.7%
South Whittier CDP, California	55,193	24.7%	35.9%	64.7%	75.4%
Rancho Cordova CDP, California	55,060	61.4%	20.6%	49.3%	49.7%
Annandale CDP, Virginia	54,994	57.2%	26.5%	67.4%	51.3%
Tamiami CDP, Florida	54,788	11.8%	32.7%	83.9%	57.0%
Casas Adobes CDP, Arizona	54,011	80.5%	22.5%	68.1%	61.2%
Levittown CDP, Pennsylvania	53,966	93.1%	28.2%	85.6%	86.9%
Catalina Foothills CDP, Arizona	53,794	86.2%	19.9%	71.1%	60.4%
Hacienda Heights CDP, California	53,122	22.1%	30.4%	79.5%	79.4%
Towson CDP, Maryland	51,793	85.7%	18.3%	59.7%	37.2%
Aspen Hill CDP, Maryland	50,228	49.2%	24.2%	67.4%	52.1%
<i>Average</i>	72,192	57.8%	26.5%	67.0%	55.5%
<i>Median</i>	57,737	64.4%	24.4%	68.1%	56.0%
<i>Highest</i>	186,070	93.2%	44.4%	87.6%	88.9%
<i>Lowest</i>	50,228	1.0%	14.6%	36.6%	11.0%
United States		69%	24%	66%	60%

Table 2. Strong County Government CDPs

Los Angeles

East Los Angeles CDP, California
Florence-Graham CDP, California
Hacienda Heights CDP, California
South Whittier CDP, California

Miami

Carol City CDP, Florida
Fountainbleau CDP, Florida
Kendale Lakes CDP, Florida
Kendall CDP, Florida
Tamiami CDP, Florida

Washington-Baltimore

Annandale CDP, Virginia
Aspen Hill CDP, Maryland
Bethesda CDP, Maryland
Burke CDP, Virginia
Columbia CDP, Virginia
Dale City CDP, Virginia
Dundalk CDP, Maryland
Ellicott City CDP, Maryland
Germantown CDP, Maryland
Reston, Virginia
Silver Spring CDP, Maryland
Towson CDP, Maryland
Wheaton-Glenmont CDP, Maryland

Table 3. Strong Private Government CDPs

Brandon CDP, Florida
Casas Adobes CDP, Arizona
Castro Valley CDP, California
Catalina Foothills CDP, Arizona
Columbia CDP, Maryland
Elk Grove CDP, California
Highlands Ranch CDP, Colorado
Levittown CDP, Pennsylvania
Palm Harbor CDP, Florida
Paradise CDP, Nevada
Rancho Cordova CDP, California
Reston CDP, Virginia
Spring Hill CDP, Florida
Spring Valley CDP, Nevada
Sunrise Manor CDP, Nevada
The Woodlands CDP, Texas
Town 'n' Country CDP, Florida
