

Using Census Data to
Analyze Housing and
Demographic Trends

Census Note 15

Are the Boomburbs Still Booming?

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Summary of Findings

Previous research using 2000 Census data documented the rise of a new type of large, fast-growing suburbs known as “boomburbs.” Boomburbs are defined as incorporated places with more than 100,000 residents that are *not* the largest city in their metropolitan areas and that have maintained double-digit growth rates for several decades. In recent years, many of the top boomburbs have outgrown their traditional and better-known big-city peers.

This *Census Note* updates boomburb growth trends using recently released 2000–2003 population estimates. The analysis reveals that most boomburbs continued to top the list of the nation’s fastest-growing cities. Indeed, between 2000 and 2003 all five of the nation’s fastest-growing cities with populations over 100,000 were boomburbs. The total boomburb population grew 7.2 percent on average, more than triple the 2.1 percent average increase seen in other similarly sized cities.

As a group, boomburbs now have a total population of 9.4 million, more than the Chicago metropolitan area, the nation’s third largest region. Several individual boomburbs continue to ascend the ranks of the nation’s largest cities: Mesa, Ariz. (population 432,376) is now bigger than Atlanta, Ga. (population 423,019). Arlington, Texas (population 355,007), Santa Ana, Calif. (population 342,510), and Anaheim, Calif. (population 332,361) all have bumped St. Louis, Mo. (population 332,223) off the list of the 50 largest U.S. cities.

Although most boomburbs have maintained blistering growth rates, a few have been built out as far as they can go and have added residents more slowly than in the 1990s. In addition, two mature, minority-dominated boomburbs saw sharply lower growth rates than during the 1990s. And two Bay area boomburbs have more or less gone bust with the dot-com bubble.

Introduction: What’s a Boomburb?

Lang and Simmons (2001, 2003) identified a new type of large suburban city called a “boomburb,”¹ defined as an incorporated place with more than 100,000 residents that is *not* the largest city in its metropolitan area and that has maintained double-digit population growth rates in recent decades.

¹ The author thanks Rebecca Sohmer of the Brookings Institution for suggesting the term “boomburbs.”

Lang and Simmons developed the boomburb concept to provide a contrast with more traditional big cities. They observed that since 1950 most fast-growing cities are really overgrown suburbs. The boomburb analysis thus formalizes the classification of these places into a family of cities that share a similar size, growth rate, and infrastructure.

Boomburbs typically do not resemble traditional central cities or, for that matter, such older satellite cities as Long Beach, Calif., and Jersey City, N.J. Although boomburbs have many urban elements, such as apartment buildings, retail centers, entertainment venues, and large offices, they typically do not develop in a traditional urban pattern. For example, boomburbs usually lack a dense business core. Boomburbs are thus distinct from traditional cities — not so much in terms of their function, but in terms of their low density and loose spatial configuration. Boomburbs are urban in fact, but not in feel.

As of April 2003, the United States contained 53 boomburbs. The population in four topped 300,000, and in 15, it surpassed 200,000 (for a list of boomburbs, see Table 1). All boomburbs grew quickly over the past several decades, with some areas experiencing explosive growth. For example, Irving, outside Dallas, grew by a spectacular 7,211 percent between 1950 and 2000. Henderson, Nev., and Chandler, Ariz., also saw startling gains, growing by 4,714 percent and 4,548 percent, respectively.

Although boomburbs are found throughout the nation, most are located in the Southwest. By contrast, in the Northeast and Midwest no big region except Chicago has a single boomburb. Even most large and rapidly growing Sun Belt metropolitan areas east of the Mississippi, such as Atlanta, lack boomburbs. Thus a region can boom and still wind up without boomburbs.

Just 17 percent (or nine) of the boomburbs lie outside the Southwestern states stretching from Texas to California. Los Angeles, Dallas, and Phoenix alone contain 32 (60 percent) of the nation's boomburbs. The Southeast, except for South Florida, contains only a few boomburbs. Only one boomburb with more than 200,000 residents (Hialeah, Fla.) can be found east of the Mississippi River.

Many boomburbs, especially in the West, are products of master-planned community developments, which need to form large water districts.² These communities gobble up unincorporated land as they grow. The land and its new residents are added to municipalities, turning small towns into boomburbs. Also, the public lands in the West that surround big metropolitan areas are often transferred to developers in very large blocks (Abbott 1993). By contrast, master-planned community builders in the East typically assemble their land from mostly smaller, privately held parcels.

Western water districts also play a role in promoting boomburbs. The West is mostly dry, and places seeking to grow must organize efforts to access water (Lang 2002). Large incorporated

² Even a relatively small metropolis such as Las Vegas, with its expansive master-planned communities and desert surroundings, contains two boomburbs. The Las Vegas metropolitan area also contains three large "Census Designated Places" with populations over 100,000. The boomburb analysis, however, does not include these areas because they are not incorporated municipalities (Lang and Dhavale 2003).

places are better positioned to grab a share of the water supply. This greater leverage provides an incentive for fragmented suburban areas to join large incorporated cities.

Inside the Numbers

Most Boomburbs Are Still Booming

The U.S. Bureau of the Census recently released city population estimates for 2000 to 2003 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004a).³ These estimates show that most boomburbs have continued to boom (Table 1). In fact, boomburbs are the fastest-growing U.S. cities with populations over 100,000. From April 2000 to July 2003, five of the fastest-growing cities were boomburbs (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004c).

The four top-growth boomburbs are in the Phoenix and Las Vegas metropolitan areas. Five of the 10 highest-growth boomburbs are in Southern California — four in the Los Angeles region and one in the San Diego metropolitan area.

Gilbert, Ariz. (the fastest-gaining boomburb), grew 32 percent in just over three years. At that pace, Gilbert could easily more than double its population in a decade. The next 11 boomburbs following Gilbert all grew by more than 10 percent over the same period. More than a quarter of the boomburbs (15) each gained more than 15,000 residents.

Overall, the boomburb population jumped from 8.8 million to 9.4 million, a gain of more than a half million residents in just over three years. Together, boomburbs now have a slightly larger population than the Chicago metropolitan area (9.3 million people as of July 2003), the nation's third-largest metropolitan area after New York and Los Angeles (Office of Management and Budget 2004).

Boomburbs Are Still Gaining on Traditional Cities

From 2000 to 2003, population growth in the boomburbs significantly outpaced that in traditional cities of the same size. Nonboomburb cities with populations from 100,000 to 500,000 (the boomburb range) saw a 2.1 percent average growth rate for the period. By contrast, boomburbs had a 7.2 percent average growth rate. In addition, 36 percent of the nonboomburbs (58 of the 161) lost residents, while only 11 percent of the boomburbs (six of the 53) shrank.

In total, cities with populations between 100,000 and 500,000 gained 1,140,066 people from 2000 to 2003. The 53 boomburbs accounted for 602,060 new residents, while the 158

³ The U.S. Bureau of the Census produces yearly estimates for population change at the subcounty level based on the "Distributive Housing Unit Method," which uses building permits, mobile home shipments, and estimates of housing unit loss to update the housing unit change. The census developed a household population estimate by applying the occupancy rate and the average persons per household from the latest census to an estimate of the housing units. The estimates obtained from this method are controlled for by comparing them with the final county population estimate (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004b).

nonboomburbs added 538,006 new residents. Thus, although bloomburbs represent only a quarter of U.S. cities with populations between 100,000 and 500,000, they accounted for more than half the population growth of these cities.

Lang and Simmons (2001, 2003) reported similar findings for the 1990s. Boomburbs added about 2.1 million new residents in the 1990s, a gain of just over 200,000 each year. Based on boomburg performance so far this decade, the group is roughly on pace to match its 1990s population growth.

Since the 2000 census, many of the top boomburbs have jumped ahead of their traditional (and much better known) big-city peers. Mesa, Ariz. (population 432,376) is now bigger than Atlanta, Ga. (population 423,019). Arlington, Texas (population 355,007), Santa Ana, Calif. (population 342,510), and Anaheim, Calif. (population 332,361) have passed St. Louis, Mo. (population 332,223). Aurora, Colo. (population 290,418) has overtaken Buffalo, N.Y. (population 285,018). Finally, Peoria, Ariz. (population 127,580) has surged ahead of its namesake Peoria, Ill. (population 112,907).

Some Built-Out Boomburbs Have Stalled

While most boomburbs are on pace to grow at double-digit rates through 2010, growth in several is slowing or even declining. One reason for stalled population growth relates to growth patterns. Most boomburbs are horizontal cities that build out rather than up. Landlocked boomburbs, such as Tempe, Ariz. (with a 0.2 percent growth rate from 2000 to 2003), have nowhere to go but up. Such landlocked boomburbs are at a crossroads: To keep growing they must change their land-use patterns to accommodate higher-density development, but their original competitive advantage has been their greenfield development opportunities.

The infill market remains untested in most boomburbs. Many now have enough scale and economic assets to make them central to the region. Their mostly centerless form, however, does not offer infill housing consumers the type of dense urban environments they typically seek (Danielsen, Lang, and Fulton 1999). The future of built-out boomburbs may depend on the success of urban design movements — such as the New Urbanism — in introducing more traditional, city-like development into the suburbs.

The “New Brooklyns” Have Slowed

The term “New Brooklyns” applies to boomburbs that are now, or are rapidly becoming, immigrant-dominated communities similar to the Old Brooklyn. Hialeah, Fla., and Santa Ana, Daly City, Sunnyvale, and Anaheim, Calif., have foreign-born populations that either match or exceed that of Brooklyn, N.Y. (currently 38 percent foreign-born). Other examples of New Brooklyns include Pembroke Pines, Fla.; Irving, Texas; and Aurora, Colo., each of which has a foreign-born population that greatly exceeds the national average of 11 percent.

The New Brooklyns tend to be older, denser, and built-out suburbs, factors that can limit population growth. As one commentator observes, “Although the New Brooklyns were once new settlements on the suburban frontier, they’re getting old. Their housing, accordingly, is more

attractive to immigrants looking for bargains and is less attractive to longtime [mostly native-born] Americans who can afford to move up” (Hampson 2003: A2).

Some New Brooklyns can continue to gain population (if not quite boom) if their foreign-born population maintains a relatively high birth rate. These places have also seen resident turnover as large, young immigrant families replace older, empty-nester couples, a trend that fuels population growth. In time, however, the foreign-born population will age and assimilate, which should further slow the New Brooklyns’ growth.

National Boom in 1990s Turns Bust

Another reason some boomburbs are slowing down or even declining is the recent recession in the national and regional economies. The 2000 census gathered data at the peak of the last economic expansion, when employment and equity markets were at all-time highs. Many cities fared well in the decade leading up to the 2000 census. Even older industrial cities experienced their best decade-long population gains since the 1940s (Simmons and Lang 2003).

The latest census estimates, however, hint at a potential reversal in some places. Traditional cities that were growing in the 1990s, such as Chicago and San Francisco, lost population from 2000 to 2003 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004a). In places such as the Bay area, a region hit hard by a tech recession, boomburbs saw significant losses. For example, Sunnyvale, Calif., located in the heart of the Silicon Valley, has lost 2.5 percent of its population since 2000. The fastest-declining boomburb (with a 2.7 percent loss) is Daly City, just south of San Francisco. Sunnyvale and Daly City also happen to be New Brooklyns; their relative maturity, combined with the Bay area’s economic problems, have turned them from `90s boomburbs into this decade’s “bustburbs.”

Housing in the Boomburbs

One of the primary businesses of a fast-growing boomburb is the building of the boomburb itself. A review of the Web sites of the largest national homebuilders — Centex Homes, D.R. Horton, Kaufman & Broad, Lennar, and Pulte Homes — reveals that all five are developing new boomburb residences.⁴ Not surprisingly, these builders are most active in the exploding Phoenix and Las Vegas areas. Although harder to survey, smaller national and regional builders are also active in boomburb markets.

Data from the Census Bureau’s Building Permits Survey provide a more complete picture of overall building activity.⁵ In 2003, 67,117 new housing permits were issued in the boomburbs, with the greatest number of new permits being issued in North Las Vegas; Henderson, Nev.; and Chandler, Ariz. Three-quarters of the permits were for single-family dwellings. Irvine and Riverside, Calif., issued the most permits of any boomburbs (1,742 and 1,329 permits, respectively). Given California’s collapse in multifamily housing in the 1990s (Myers and Park 2002), these multifamily gains are especially impressive.

⁴ Lennar’s site was also searched. It listed 14 pages of projects in Phoenix alone, but it was hard to determine from the Web site in which cities these developments were located.

⁵ See <http://www.census.gov/const/www/permitsindex.html>.

Housing Conditions in the Boomburbs

Homeownership

For all 53 boomburbs combined, the homeownership rate is lower than for the nation as a whole (62.5 percent versus 66.2 percent). As with other area characteristics, however, the rate varies widely across the areas, ranging from 84.9 percent in Gilbert, Ariz., to 37.2 percent in the New Brooklyn of Irving, Texas. Homeownership rates in several other New Brooklyns, including Sunnyvale and Santa Ana, Calif., are also relatively low (47.6 percent and 49.3 percent, respectively).

Overcrowding

Interestingly, some boomburbs with relatively few housing starts still managed to grow significantly. Higher occupancy rates, especially in rental units, appear partly responsible for this growth. A housing unit is generally considered overcrowded if it has more than one occupant per room. By this standard, 21 percent of rental units in the boomburbs are overcrowded, compared with 11 percent of all rental units nationwide. Southern California boomburbs, in particular, have crowded rentals, with 35 percent of renters in such fast-growing boomburbs as Oxnard and Ontario living in overcrowded conditions.

Some slower-growing New Brooklyns also appear to be squeezing more residents into existing housing. In Santa Ana, Calif., more than 60 percent of renters live in overcrowded housing, and in Hialeah, Fla., almost 40 percent of renters live with more than one person to a room.

Age of Housing Stock

The housing stock in most boomburbs is newer than in the nation as a whole. At the time of the 2000 Census, one-third of the nation's housing stock was 20 years old or less. By contrast, half the boomburb housing stock was built after 1980. Gilbert, Ariz., and Henderson, Nev., have the newest homes: Roughly 90 percent of each area's housing stock was built within the last 20 years.

Affordability

Housing in the boomburbs is slightly less affordable than in the nation as a whole, especially for homeowners. Housing is widely considered unaffordable if a household spends more than 30 percent of its gross income on housing costs. By this definition, in 2000 the share of boomburb renters with affordability problems slightly exceeded the share of all U.S. renters with affordability problems (44 percent versus 42 percent). Among owners, the gap between boomburb and national affordability rates was somewhat greater: 27 percent of boomburb owners faced excessive housing costs, compared with 22 percent of all owners.

The most affordable owner-occupied homes are located in the Texas boomburbs. In Mesquite, Arlington, and Irving, only 17 to 18 percent of owners had excessive housing costs in 2000. By

contrast, nearly 40 percent of homeowners in Hialeah, Fla., paid more than 30 percent of their income for their homes.

The boomburb rental market — like the owner market — is most affordable in the Texas boomburbs. In Carrollton and Irving, Texas, three in 10 renters pay more than 30 percent of their monthly incomes for housing. In contrast, more than five out of 10 renters in both San Bernardino, Calif., and Hialeah, Fla., shoulder unaffordable housing costs.

The Future of Boomburbs

For now, most boomburbs seem to be humming right along. But many probably will experience relative population declines in the not too distant future. One problem could be that the West (where most boomburbs are found) is running out of water. Almost all of the West's current water sources — from Denver to Southern California — have been over-allocated (McKinnon 2003). Unless planners find ways to divert more water from agriculture or to tap new supplies, the West will likely face a crisis that could dampen its boomburb growth.

Even if the water supply problem is resolved, the current group of boomburbs will ultimately experience much slower population gains. The fact is that no place can (or should) boom forever. Today's boomburbs are tomorrow's mature cities. But a whole new batch of boomburbs is already emerging. Consider Arizona's Central Valley: As Tempe's growth stalls, and Mesa's slows, places such as Apache Junction and Buckeye are just getting started.

Author

Robert Lang is director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech and an associate professor in the University's Urban Affairs and Planning Department. He is currently working with Jennifer LeFurgy on a book entitled *Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities* for the Brookings Institution Press. The author thanks Dawn Dhavale for preparing the data for this report. The author also thanks Patrick Simmons and Jennifer LeFurgy for reviewing this manuscript.

***About the Census Notes Series**

The Fannie Mae Foundation's *Census Notes* series provides timely analyses of Census 2000 data to stimulate discussion and further research. Although *Census Notes* are reviewed internally and on an informal basis externally, they have not been subject to the formal process of external peer review that is commonly used for the Foundation's research publications. Therefore, they should be viewed as works in progress and their findings considered preliminary.

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opinions expressed in this note are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Fannie Mae Foundation or its officers or directors.

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Table 1: Boomburb Population Change, 2000–2003

Rank	Boomburb	State	Metropolitan Area	April 1, 2000 Population	July 1, 2003 Population	Percent Change 2000–2003	Numeric Change 2000–2003
1	Gilbert	AZ	Phoenix	109,949	145,250	32.1	35,301
2	North Las Vegas	NV	Las Vegas	115,488	144,502	25.1	29,014
3	Henderson	NV	Las Vegas	175,406	214,852	22.5	39,446
4	Chandler	AZ	Phoenix	176,643	211,299	19.6	34,656
5	Irvine	CA	Los Angeles	143,072	170,561	19.2	27,489
6	Rancho Cucamonga	CA	Los Angeles	127,743	151,640	18.7	23,897
7	Fontana	CA	Los Angeles	128,937	151,903	17.8	22,966
8	Peoria	AZ	Phoenix	108,685	127,580	17.4	18,895
9	Chula Vista	CA	San Diego	173,553	199,060	14.7	25,507
10	Corona	CA	Los Angeles	125,251	142,454	13.7	17,203
11	Riverside	CA	Los Angeles	255,175	281,514	10.3	26,339
12	Moreno Valley	CA	Los Angeles	142,379	157,063	10.3	14,684
13	Plano	TX	Dallas	222,008	241,991	9.0	19,983
14	Mesa	AZ	Phoenix	397,776	432,376	8.7	34,600
15	Pembroke Pines	FL	Miami	137,415	148,927	8.4	11,512
16	Coral Springs	FL	Miami	117,549	127,005	8.0	9,456
17	Santa Clarita	CA	Los Angeles	151,131	162,742	7.7	11,611
18	Scottsdale	AZ	Phoenix	202,596	217,989	7.6	15,393
19	Naperville	IL	Chicago	128,409	137,894	7.4	9,485
20	Grand Prairie	TX	Dallas	127,427	136,671	7.3	9,244
21	Arlington	TX	Dallas	332,969	355,007	6.6	22,038
22	Carrollton	TX	Dallas	109,578	116,714	6.5	7,136
23	Glendale	AZ	Phoenix	218,831	232,838	6.4	14,007
24	Oxnard	CA	Los Angeles	170,359	180,872	6.2	10,513
25	Thousand Oaks	CA	Los Angeles	117,005	124,192	6.1	7,187
26	Lancaster	CA	Los Angeles	118,718	125,896	6.0	7,178
27	Ontario	CA	Los Angeles	158,011	167,402	5.9	9,391
28	Chesapeake	VA	Norfolk	199,184	210,834	5.8	11,650
29	San Bernardino	CA	Los Angeles	185,237	195,357	5.5	10,120
30	Aurora	CO	Denver	275,923	290,418	5.3	14,495
31	Simi Valley	CA	Los Angeles	111,365	117,115	5.2	5,750
32	Salem	OR	Portland	136,991	142,914	4.3	5,923
33	Fullerton	CA	Los Angeles	126,003	131,249	4.2	5,246
34	Mesquite	TX	Dallas	124,523	129,270	3.8	4,747
35	Oceanside	CA	San Diego	161,029	167,082	3.8	6,053
36	Santa Rosa	CA	San Francisco	147,854	153,386	3.7	5,532
37	Orange	CA	Los Angeles	128,821	132,197	2.6	3,376
38	West Valley City	UT	Salt Lake City	108,896	111,687	2.6	2,791
39	Westminster	CO	Denver	100,998	103,391	2.4	2,393
40	Escondido	CA	San Diego	133,747	136,093	1.8	2,346
41	Irving	TX	Dallas	191,615	194,455	1.5	2,840
42	Santa Ana	CA	Los Angeles	337,977	342,510	1.3	4,533
43	Anaheim	CA	Los Angeles	328,071	332,361	1.3	4,290
44	Garland	TX	Dallas	215,794	218,027	1.0	2,233
45	Costa Mesa	CA	Los Angeles	108,756	109,563	0.7	807
46	Fremont	CA	San Francisco	203,413	204,525	0.5	1,112
47	Tempe	AZ	Phoenix	158,625	158,880	0.2	255
48	Hialeah	FL	Miami	226,419	226,401	0.0	-18
49	Bellevue	WA	Seattle	112,495	112,344	-0.1	-151
50	Clearwater	FL	Tampa	108,902	108,272	-0.6	-630
51	Lakewood	CO	Denver	144,137	142,474	-1.2	-1,663
52	Sunnyvale	CA	San Francisco	131,844	128,549	-2.5	-3,295
53	Daly City	CA	San Francisco	103,625	100,819	-2.7	-2,806

All Boomburbs

8,804,307 9,406,367 7.2 602,060

Notes: Rank is based on percent population change, 2000–2003.
April 1, 2000, population reflects adjustments to the Census 2000 population as a result of the Census 2000 Count Question Resolution program, updates from the Boundary and Annexation Survey, and geographic program revisions.
Source: Author's tabulations based on U.S. Bureau of the Census (2004a).