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The Future of the Big American City Is Not Bright

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As COVID-19 begins to wane and become endemic, the question for policymakers, theorists, and Americans at large is: What is in store for our nation's big cities? The nation has moved from a rural to urban population over the past century, but do the hearts and minds of Americans and, in particular, younger generations still pine for the lights and opportunities historically present in our nation's big cities—from New York to Atlanta, Dallas, and Los Angeles?

There may be signs of rebounding, such as Amazon, Disney, and Google all establishing significant urban campuses. But even if the chance for a New York revival exists, Gotham is not representative of the American urban experience.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing rise in crime and mayhem, many Americans across the country are reconsidering and reexamining their priorities regarding where they live. Today, many Americans would prefer to live in suburban areas and small towns or rural areas rather than the dense urban neighborhoods of big cities.

What Research Reveals

Survey data collected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that those big cities—despite the values of propinquity, density, and scale—are simply not where most Americans want to reside. Younger generations of Americans—those who traditionally flocked to big cities for careers, social lives, and cultural amenities—actually show greater interest in suburban living than city living.

Indeed, after being homebound for many months due to the pandemic, more Americans express a desire for personal space than ever before. The majority of Americans today are willing to sacrifice easy access to amenities to have more space to themselves and distance from their neighbors, and city life is simply not where those desires are realized.

Perhaps driven by idealized visions of rural life—small, tight-knit communities that move at a more leisurely pace—many Americans express a preference for small-town life. Roughly four in 10 Americans say they would prefer living in a town (15 percent) or rural area (27 percent). In contrast, only 9 percent say they would prefer to live in a large city.¹

More Americans express interest in living in a small city (16 percent), while one in three Americans prefer the suburbs (33 percent).² Politicos, pundits, and practitioners should take note that while some places may bounce back as the pandemic wanes, Americans may be looking toward dark skies and green yards and not at towers and neon lights of entertainment districts.

Some General Findings About Big Cities and American Geography.

In thinking about the future of cities and residential patterns in the United States, one of the first findings in the American Enterprise Institute's 2021 American Community Life Survey³ about residents today is that Americans are generally happy in the neighborhoods where they reside. When asked to rate their own community as a place to live, almost a third of Americans (30 percent) rate their community as excellent, and 57 percent say their community is a good place to live. Just a small number believe their neighborhood is a fair (14 percent) or poor (2 percent) place to live.

Many Americans also happen to feel closely connected to their neighborhoods and the people who live in them; 9 percent state that they feel very close to where they reside, and another 43 percent say somewhat close. However, about half the population does not feel close to their neighborhood; 38 percent feel not too close, and another 10 percent report not feeling close at all to their areas of residence and those who live in them.

As a general finding, Americans are fairly comfortable and content with where they live, but real differences emerge by urban form: Cities and suburbs are appreciably different in outlook and neighborhood social capital.

The survey data reveal that big cities are notably less desirable overall in the minds of Americans today.

The 2021 American Community Life Survey found that just 21 percent of big-city dwellers rate their neighborhoods as excellent places to live. In contrast, 27 percent of those in small cities think their neighborhoods are excellent. The differences are even more appreciable in the suburbs; 36 percent of those who reside in big-city suburbs and 35 percent of those in small-city suburbs state that their communities are excellent places to live. And towns and rural areas are higher than big cities: 31 percent of those who live in small towns and 36 percent of those in rural areas rate their communities as excellent places to live.⁴

Basically, residents of big cities feel less close to their neighbors than do residents elsewhere. Forty-six percent of big-city residents respond that they feel close to the neighborhoods and the people who live there, but the numbers are much higher (56 percent) for those who live in small towns and rural areas.

Turning to where Americans would like to reside, the 2021 American Community Life Survey asks where one would like to ideally live anywhere in the United States, and the results are once again not looking bright for big cities. The data show that big cities are the least-liked destination: Only 9 percent of Americans would opt to live in a big city. The lion's share of Americans want to live outside big cities and their suburbs; 15 percent want to live in a small town, and another 27 percent idealize a rural area. Put differently, 42 percent of Americans would like to live in rural areas and towns compared to a third (33 percent) who would like suburban areas and a minority (25 percent) wanting to live in cities today.

Breaking this down even further, the data show that most of those who live in big cities would rather live elsewhere. Barely a third of big-city urbanites (29 percent) state that if they could live anywhere, they would like to remain in a big city. In fact, a third (33 percent) would prefer to be in suburbs somewhere, and another quarter (22 percent) would opt to move to a small town or rural area.

The more dispersed places seem to have greater appeal. The plurality of small-city residents would opt to remain in a small city (38 percent), and similar patterns emerge for those who live in suburbs. Almost no suburbanites would like to move into big cities either; just 7 percent of big-city

suburbanites or 4 percent of small-city urbanites pine for the lights of the big city. Forty percent of small-town dwellers would stay put, and just 5 percent would be interested in big cities, while 72 percent of rural Americans would remain in rural areas if they could move anywhere else, with only 2 percent stating that they would have any interest in the big city. So, the fact of the matter today is that big cities do not hold the allure that urban theorists would like many to believe.

Generational Trends. When generational outlook is considered, the 2021 American Community Life Survey shows that big cities hold a greater magnetism to younger cohorts of Americans than other cohorts in terms of residence, but the overall number of those who actually want to reside in big cities is minimal today. For instance, 16 percent of Gen Z Americans—those between age 18 and 24—want to ideally live in a big city. This is more than twice the number of their Gen X parents (7 percent) and three times their boomer grandparents (5 percent). But 16 percent is a relatively small number. In reality, 36 percent of Gen Zers would like to live in suburbs, and another 33 percent aspire to live in rural areas or small towns.⁵

Similarly, despite the popular narratives that empty-nester older generations are excited to move into cities for culture and care,⁶ only small numbers of boomers (5 percent) and members of the Silent Generation (6 percent) would ideally move into big cities today. Instead, a third of boomers (32 percent) would prefer to live in rural areas, and another 16 percent would opt to live in small towns. Another third (29 percent) opt for suburbs.

Living through a global pandemic also may have altered neighborhood preferences further. As of 2021, Americans are more likely to prioritize personal space over access to community amenities. Most Americans say they would prefer living in a community where the houses are farther apart but schools, stores, and restaurants are several miles away, rather than a community where houses are smaller and closer to each other but schools, stores, and restaurants are within walking distance (57 percent versus 42 percent). Neighborhood preferences have changed in recent years, with more Americans expressing a desire for larger houses farther apart. In 2017, Pew found that Americans were about evenly divided over whether they wanted a neighborhood with immediate access to stores, restaurants,

and other conveniences or larger houses where these amenities are less conveniently located (47 percent versus 48 percent).⁷

The Social Life of Suburbs

The social life of suburbs is anything but stale and isolating, despite how it is often portrayed. Popular culture and academia alike are quick to celebrate the vibrant social life of urban spaces while lamenting the sprawling emptiness and deliberately built privacy of rural and suburban America.⁸ The band Green Day chronicled this false portrayal of suburbia in its musical *American Idiot*, which focused on the empty life of suburbia and stifling suburban wastelands,⁹ and this theme is regularly repeated in numerous articles and stories.¹⁰

New data from AEI's Survey Center on American Life and its report "The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss"¹¹ counter this narrative and find little difference in the social lives of urbanites, suburbanites, and their rural counterparts.

The data from the May 2021 American Perspectives Survey reveal few differences in the socialization and friendship habits of those living in urban, suburban, and rural areas.¹² Fifty-one percent of Americans who live in urban and suburban areas say they are completely or very satisfied with the number of friends they have. Rural-dwelling Americans are not far behind their more densely packed counterparts, with 50 percent stating they are satisfied with their number of friends.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation can manifest as easily in dense cities as in sprawling suburban and rural areas. About a quarter of urbanites, suburbanites, and rural Americans reported feeling lonely or isolated at least a few times in the past year (27 percent, 25 percent, and 26 percent, respectively). Approximately two-thirds of each residential type report the past year was more difficult to manage than usual. Urban, suburban, and rural Americans all struggled in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic; no one location was a panacea.

Differences in friendship across urban areas are minor to nonexistent. Thirty-seven percent of Americans who live in urban, suburban, and rural conurbations all report having one to three close friends. Ten percent of

urbanites report having no close friends, compared to 14 percent of those in suburban and rural areas. Despite prolonged periods of social isolation and quarantine that characterized much of American life over the past year, nearly half (46 percent) of Americans report having made a new friend within the past 12 months—again, with no appreciable variance by urban form.

Across cities, suburbs, and rural communities, Americans are making friends in similar ways. Fifty-five percent of suburban and rural respondents have made close friends through employment or career channels, while urbanites are somewhat less likely to do so (52 percent). Almost half have met close friends through their own educational paths. Roughly a third of Americans in each urban form report meeting close friends in their neighborhood. Rural and suburban Americans are not lacking in social connection compared to those living in urban areas; equal numbers of neighbors become close and intimate friends regardless of spatial order.

Finally, narratives readily hold that suburban areas are bland and spatially isolated, leading to a sense of spatial dislocation and loneliness when compared to cities, but the data do not suggest there is truth to these ideas either. The American Community and Civic Life Survey from 2020 reveals that when Americans were asked how closely connected they felt to the area in which they lived, 62 percent of urbanites say very or somewhat close, but that figure barely moves to 61 percent for suburban areas. Moreover, 19 percent of urbanites compared to 16 percent of suburbanites claim to be lonely either nearly all the time or most of the time. These numbers are sadly too high but not appreciably different.¹³

When formal groups that are not religious such as sports teams, book clubs, parent-teacher associations, neighborhood associations, or political organizations are considered—all of which many social theorists see as the glue of communal life—there are no real urban or suburban differences there either. Twenty-one percent of those in cities participate in such groups monthly, identical to those in suburbs. And as for confidence in one's local government acting in the best interests of the people, the differences are minor, with suburbs being a bit better: 57 percent for cities compared to 53 percent for suburbs. Neither cities nor their suburbs are particularly good models for overwhelmingly high levels of civic engagement, but it is not the

case that city dwellers are participating in leagues and groups in any greater numbers compared to their suburban counterparts.

Taking these data together, it is time for the fictionalization that suburbs are devoid of social life and that cities are social panaceas to end. From the streets of Washington Heights to the suburbs of Washington state, Americans are connected regardless of where and how they live.

Nothing of the Sort

The media have seized on the idea that people have sorted and now choose to live in neighborhoods and towns full of others who think just like them. In this narrative, cities have become monolithic progressive bastions while rural areas are populated only with Donald Trump supporters. The idea that Americans are geographically sorting has generated considerable attention in the media and continues to be cited as a real phenomenon nationwide.

Fortunately, sorting is an argument that fails to hold up to empirical reality. Earlier research has already shown that geographic ideological segregation is actually lower than a generation ago,¹⁴ and thanks to data from the American Community and Civic Life Survey, the idea that Americans are choosing to live in completely like-minded enclaves does not hold up.¹⁵

The reality present in the national data is that in our nation's cities, urbanites may be politically sorted and thus divided by partisanship (68 percent Democrat versus 28 percent Republican), but with ideology, just 24 percent of urbanites identify as extremely liberal or liberal and 17 percent as extremely conservative or conservative. Although there are more liberals than conservatives in cities, neither ideological position is anywhere near a majority; centrists and moderates are the dominant position. Moreover, research has shown that social and friendship networks of Americans are socially segregated along several dimensions including politics. Partisans and ideologues are roughly equally likely to have social networks that reflect their own political predispositions—about three-quarters of each group's social network are like-minded politically—but moderates and centrists are diverse and split, with a fairly equal mix of those on the left and the right.

Notably, there is more political diversity in cities than in the suburbs, as 56 percent of suburbanites identify as Democrats and 42 percent as Republicans. Ideologically, identical numbers (21 percent) of those in suburbia identify as either liberal or conservative. Again, the dominant group (56 percent) is those who are moderate and middle-of-the-road with slight ideologues.

In rural areas, Democrats make up 43 percent of the population and Republicans 51 percent. You can see how this plays out in states such as Montana, which has a Democratic governor and a divided congressional delegation and voted for President Trump. There are fewer liberals (11 percent) compared to conservatives (29 percent), but again, this is anything but monolithically conservative, with the overwhelming balance (56 percent) being centrist. None of these numbers get into landslide territory—60 percent or more of one ideology—for the left or right, and it is hard to argue that there is some geographic divide based on ideology.

The second new finding is that people do not significantly consider the politics of their neighbors when thinking about where to live. In the survey, respondents were asked, “Regardless of whether each of the following is available where you currently live, how important is it to you, personally, to live in a community. . .” and were presented with a series of 10 possible features, including being close to one’s extended family and a variety of entertainment options.¹⁶

The results are striking. More than 80 percent of Americans believe that it is important or very important to live in an area with good public schools and easy access to parks. Three-quarters of Americans care about having amenities like restaurants nearby. Almost two-thirds care about being close to extended family and that an area has strong, local communal traditions. And more than half say it is very or somewhat important to be in an area that has a mix of people with different socioeconomic backgrounds and is racially and ethnically diverse.

But if they generally agree what’s appealing in a location, ideology does not much matter. On belief systems, however, the numbers look appreciably different. Barely a third affirm that it is very or even somewhat important to be in a neighborhood where most share your political (38 percent) or religious beliefs (34 percent). Put differently, of the 10 possible features that one could want in their community, only 7 percent of Americans—the

smallest figure on the list—believe it is very important to live in a community with most who share their political views. Simply put, politics is not a significant focal point whatsoever when Americans are thinking about neighborhood and residential life.

It is worth noting that those on the political extremes do see the world a bit differently. Among moderates and those who are slightly liberal or conservative, barely 5 percent say it is very important to be in an area where most people share their political views; 2 percent of those who are slightly conservative care about this. By contrast, 20 percent of extreme liberals and 18 percent of extreme conservatives care about the political leanings of their neighbors—a significant difference from centrists, but not even close to a majority even among more extreme Americans. But, again, these extremes really only account for perhaps 10 percent of Americans who are on the ideological extremes in general, and in the survey here, they account for just 9 percent. Meanwhile, there is almost uniform high support across the ideological spectrum for parks and schools.

The myth of the “Big Sort” needs to be shattered. The constant stream of news stories about Americans moving into like-minded enclaves does not hold up to empirical scrutiny or stories such as that of Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, where one in three residents don’t know the politics of folks next door.¹⁷ The facts are clear: Cities are not monolithically liberal, rural areas are not the exclusive domain of gun enthusiasts, and most people do not at all think about the political orientation of a neighborhood when they think about living there. Americans are thinking about the suburbs and rural areas because they want space and air; politics is, for the vast majority, secondary.

Urbanists, Take Note

With a possible end to the COVID-19 pandemic in sight, one question that remains unanswered is whether the sizable number of people who moved from urban centers to suburban and exurban areas will return to the cities. While some cities will undoubtedly rebound, the ample survey evidence presented here shows not only that an overwhelming number of Americans would like to live outside city centers but also that they find that

their social lives are anything but stale outside cities. It may be foolish to assume that Americans who moved from big-city urban cores dislike their new environs and will want to return.

Even before COVID-19, Americans did not perceive that suburbs were economic or social dead zones. The Survey Center on American Life asked over 3,600 Americans at the end of 2019 about their feelings toward their local communities, and the data make it abundantly clear that suburban areas were the most desirable urban form, while cities were actually the least preferred.¹⁸ Only 16 percent of Americans would opt to live in a city if they could live anywhere in the United States. In contrast, 36 percent—the plurality—preferred a suburban area, with another 28 percent stating a small town and 20 percent a rural area.

Even when age is considered, suburbs are still the area most in demand. This fact is worth noting, for—as mentioned earlier—it is widely thought that young people eschew the bland suburbs for cities. However, just 20 percent of 18- to-29-year-olds would ideally live in cities, while 39 percent would prefer suburban areas and another 23 percent would like small towns. City life was even less popular among older Americans—just 12 percent of those age 55 and older wanted to live in a city—and the data reveal that Americans across the board believed cities were the least desirable conurbation.

Going further, while attitudes about a place may not entirely square with empirical reality, how Americans think about place remains hugely important in their decision-making about living arrangements. And Americans were far more optimistic about their family's future in suburbia than in cities. Suburban Americans are more likely than city dwellers are to think that they live in a place where people look out for each other (76 percent to 65 percent) and that suburbs are a good place to raise a family (90 percent to 77 percent).

Finally, one of the most salient measures of a social community is the existence of “third places”: places where people can go that are outside their homes and places of work to mix and feel connected, such as gyms, bars, and bowling alleys. Once again, suburbs are not all that different from cities. In fact, when asked if they regularly visit a third place—a coffee shop, bar, restaurant, park, or other public place—two-thirds of Americans say they have such a place.¹⁹

Suburbanites do have these places to socialize. In cities, 73 percent of Americans have such places, but so do 68 percent of those in suburban areas and small towns. Only 52 percent of rural-area residents have third places, so those areas are missing these amenities. But it is a myth that suburbs are devoid of social spaces or that they are social deserts.

However, relatively equal numbers of people live in cities and the suburbs by age. Thirty-seven percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds and 40 percent of the 50- to 64-year-olds, for instance, live in the suburbs, and fairly close numbers of married (41 percent) and unmarried (36 percent) people live in the suburbs. Twenty-six percent of 18- to 29-year-olds report living in cities compared to 24 percent of those between 50 and 64 years old.

When respondents were asked about the impact of being a parent or guardian of a child under age 18 living in one's household, there were minor differences. Of those households with children under age 18, 26 percent resided in cities and 40 percent in suburbs, with the balance in small towns or rural areas. Those respondents without children looked almost identical. Twenty-six percent resided in cities, 39 percent in suburbs, and 34 percent in rural areas or small towns. Cities are not devoid of children, and suburbs have plenty of adult households without children. So, the fact remains that those who live in suburbs are anything but monolithic; the demographic profile is close to those of cities.

Cities are wonderful places, but it is imprudent to assume that socioeconomic life outside urban centers is devoid of human connection. The problem with so much anti-suburban rhetoric is that many Americans are satisfied, or more, with their lives in suburbia, and social life in America's suburban areas is thriving; it is anything but empty, economically dead, or soul crushing. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many cities were already losing their allure for numerous reasons including space, cost, and general difficulty in raising families. Cities may bounce back over time, but it would be presumptuous to think those who left urban areas will be miserable and run back as soon as possible. For them, at least, the suburbs provide a richness regularly overlooked by many who write about the city and its virtues. For the most part, big cities are not where Americans see their futures, and it would be foolish to ignore where most Americans see their residential dreams.

Notes

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