

# Staying the Same: Urbanization in America

by [Wendell Cox](#) 04/27/2012

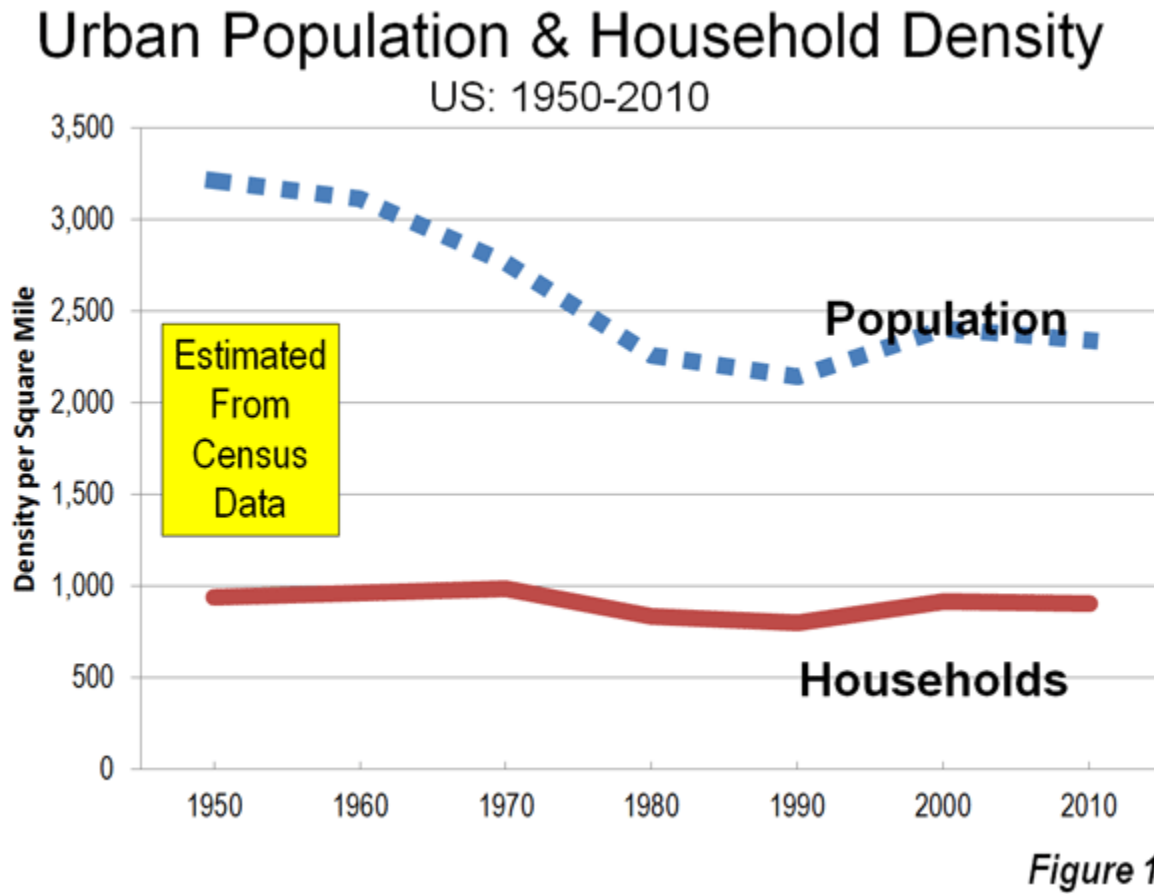


The [recent release](#) of the 2010 US census data on urban areas (Note 1) shows that Americans continue to prefer their lower density lifestyles, with both suburbs and exurbs (Note 2) growing more rapidly than the historic core municipalities. This may appear to be at odds with the recent Census Bureau 2011 metropolitan area population estimates, which were widely mischaracterized as indicating exurban (and suburban) losses and historical core municipality gains. In fact, core counties lost domestic migrants, while suburban and exurban counties gained domestic migrants. The better performance of the core counties was caused by higher rates of international migration, more births in relation to deaths and an economic malaise that has people staying in (counties are the lowest level at which migration data is reported). Nonetheless, the improving environment of core cities in recent decades has been heartening.

The urban area data permits analysis of metropolitan area population growth by sector at nearly the smallest census geography (census blocks, which are smaller than census tracts). Overall, the new data indicates that an average urban population density stands at 2,343 per square mile (904 per square kilometer). This is little different from urban density in 1980 and nearly 10 percent above the lowest urban density of 2,141 per square mile (827) recorded in the 1990 census. Thus, in recent decades, [formerly falling US urban densities have stabilized](#) .

Urban density in 2010, however, remains approximately 27 percent below that of 1950, as many core municipalities lost population while suburban and suburban populations expanded. This resulted in the substantial expansion of urban land area reflecting the preference for low-density lifestyles among Americans and most people in other high-income areas of the world. Between the 1960s and 2000, [nearly all of the growth in the major metropolitan regions](#) of Western Europe and Canada has taken place in suburban areas, as these nations' urban areas have dispersed in a manner similar to that of the United States. The trend continued through 2011 in [Canada](#) and domestic migration data in [Western Europe](#) shows a continuing movement of people from the historical cores to the suburbs and exurbs.

This dispersion, pejoratively called "urban sprawl" has been routinely linked with everything from obesity and global warming to "bowling alone." In fact, while population densities have fallen, household densities have remained steady, barely droppping at all. Average household size has fallen dramatically, as fewer children have been born and divorce rates have soared. New households have been formed at more than 1.5 times the rate of population growth. The result is that a 27 percent decline in urban density since 1950 translated into a much more modest 4 percent decline in household density. A more genuine target for anti-suburban crusaders would be household sprawl rather than urban sprawl (Figure 1).

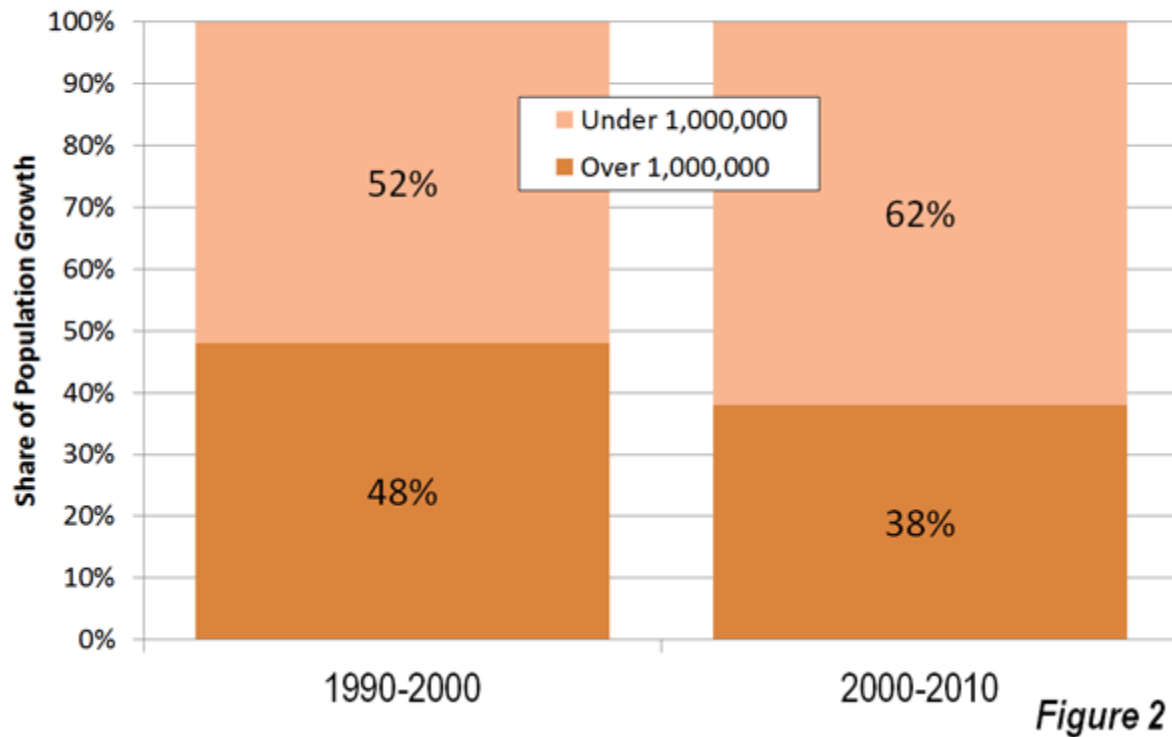


#### Smaller Urban Areas Growing Faster

Even as urban densities have reached a floor, Americans still continue to move to areas of lower density and smaller populations. For example, the urban areas of more than 1 million population in 1990 attracted 48 percent of the nation's urban growth between 1990 and 2000. Between 2000 and 2010, these areas attracted a smaller 38 percent of urban growth (Figure 2).

# Urban Growth: Larger & Smaller Areas

GROWTH: 1990-2010 BY 1990 SIZE

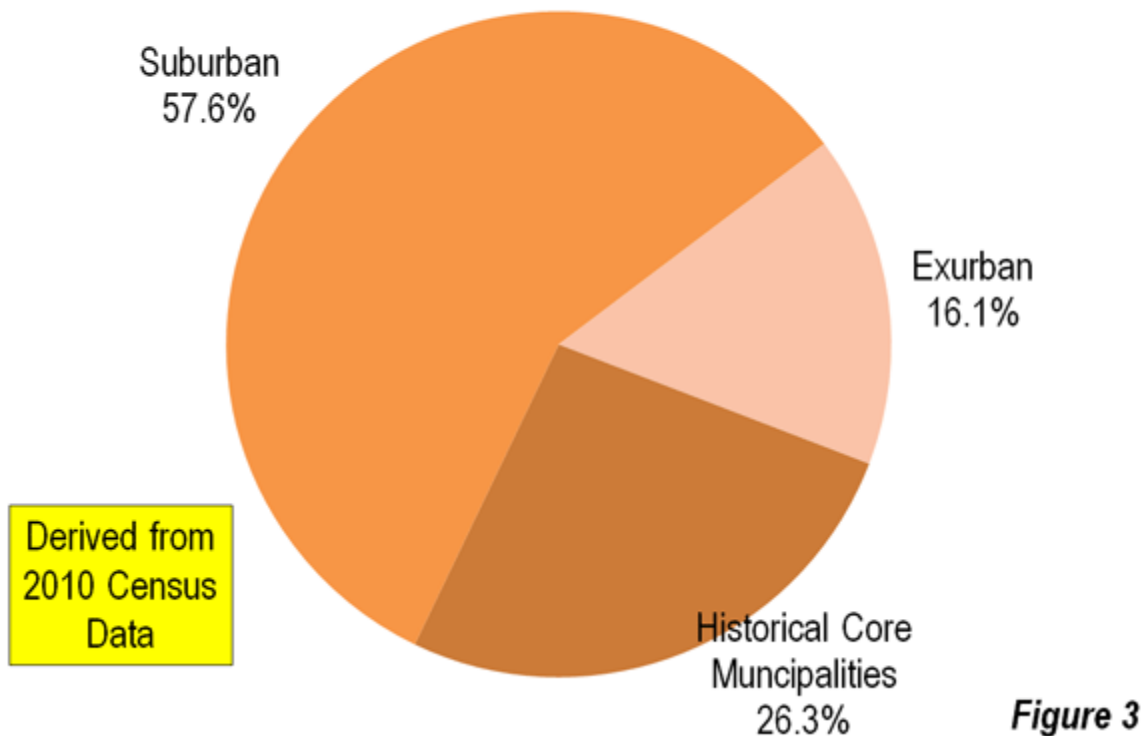


## The Exurbs: A Two-Way Exodus

For much of the last decade (and even before), the media has been heralding an epochal “return” to core cities. This idea is fundamentally misleading since most suburbanites actually came not from core cities but smaller towns and rural areas. The [census results](#) have made it clear that the urban focus of population growth was largely anecdotal, although small inner city areas of some core cities (such as small sections of St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, San Diego and Portland) have experienced uncharacteristic growth. But overall, most growth continued to be in the suburbs and exurbs. Measured at the census block level, exurbs are constantly at risk of being converted into suburbs as they become a part of the continuously developed area. Even so, as of 2010, exurban areas accounted for 16.1 percent of the population in the 51 major metropolitan areas. The historical core municipalities accounted for 26.3 percent of the population, while suburban areas housed 57.6 percent of the population (Figure 3).

## Major Metropolitan Population by Sector

### 2010: AREAS OVER 1,000,000 POPULATION



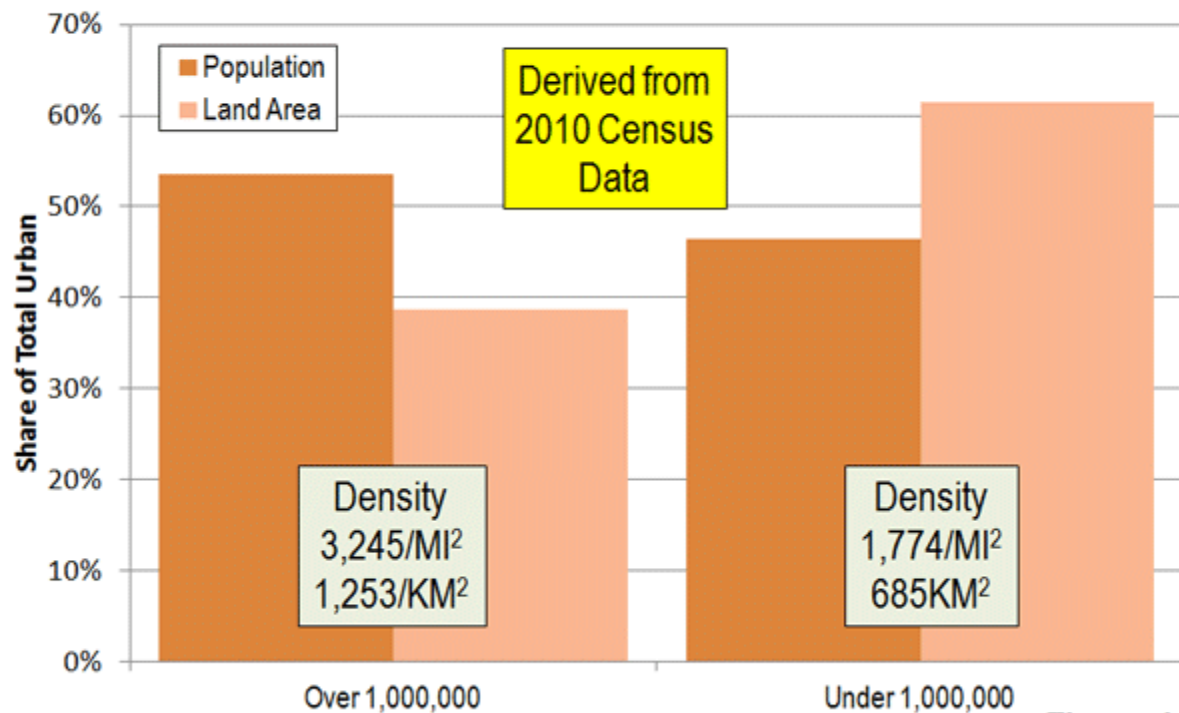
It should be considered, however, that in many urban areas --- such as Houston, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Portland, Seattle and Orlando --- many historic city neighborhoods were developed as and remain suburban in their form, being dominated detached homes and automobiles. It is unlikely that exurban areas (measured at the census block level) will exceed the historical core cities in population, since they are at constant risk of being merged with suburbs (as the urban area expands).

#### **Smaller Urban Areas: Where the Sprawl Is**

The principal urban areas of the major metropolitan areas are nearly twice as dense as the rest of America's urban areas. These urban areas have 53 percent of the urban population, but occupy only 39 percent of the urban land area. By contrast, the smaller urban areas have 47 percent of the urban population, while occupying 61 percent of the urban land area (Figure 4). It seems odd that the fury of urban planners is directed at the larger, more dense urban areas rather than the smaller, much less dense urban areas, that sprawl to a far greater degree (Figure 5).

# Population & Land Area Share By Size

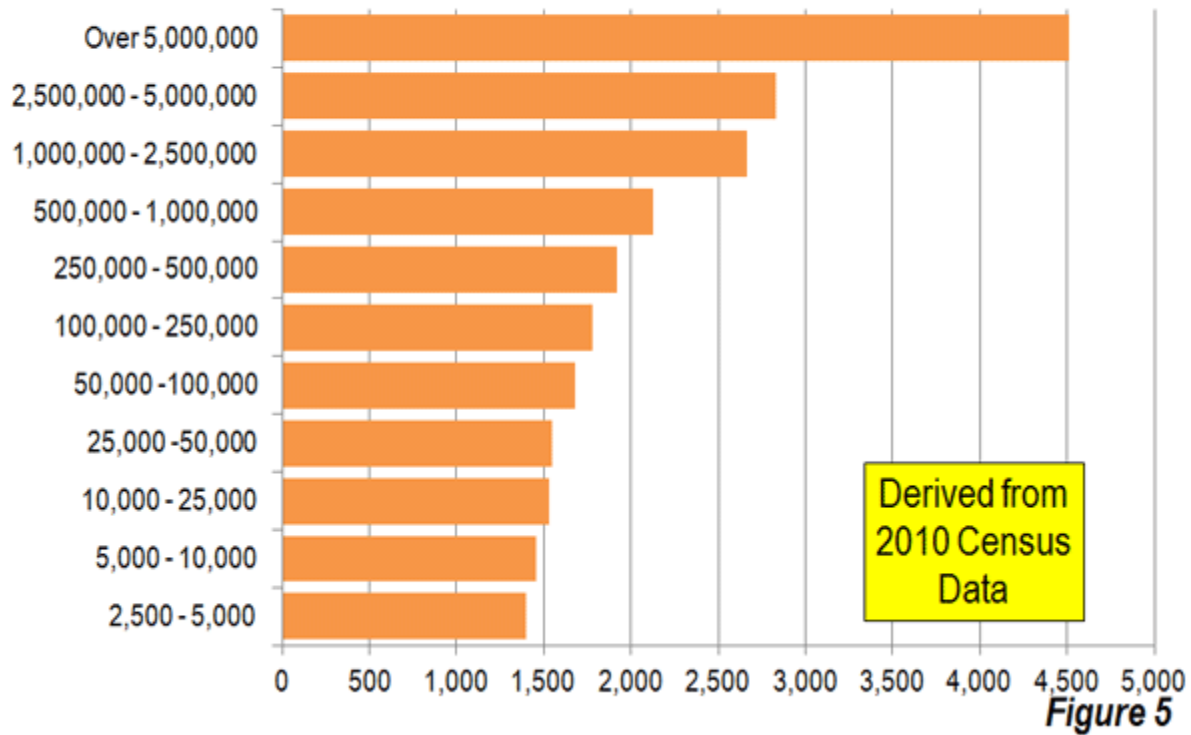
## 2010: US URBAN AREAS



**Figure 4**

# Urban Area Density by Population

UNITED STATES: 2010

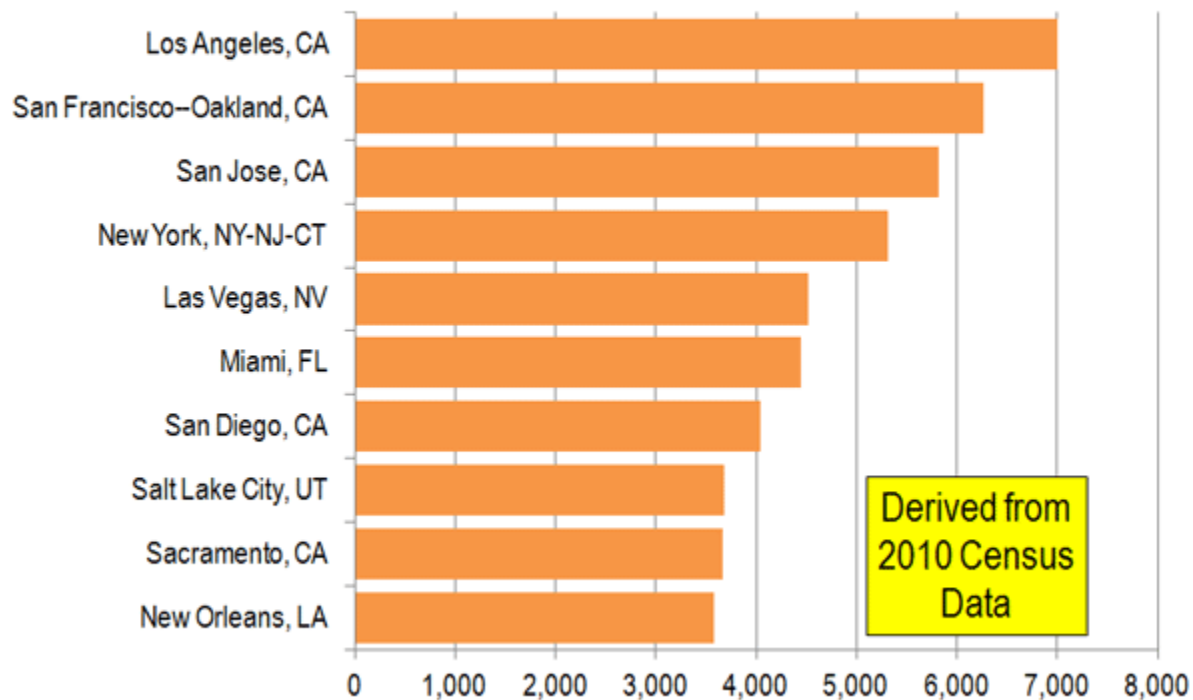


## Most and Least Dense Major Urban Areas

Among the major metropolitan areas, the most dense urban area is Los Angeles, at a density of 6,999 per square mile (2,702 per square kilometer). This is a 32 percent denser than fourth ranked New York whose hyper-dense core is offset by its low density suburbs. In fact, San Jose, which is virtually all suburban in its urban form and was a small urban area in 1950 ([link to 1950-2010 data](#)), ranks third and also is more dense than the New York urban area. Second ranked San Francisco is also more dense than New York (Figure 6). New Orleans ranked 10th most dense, however experienced a reduction in density of more approximately 30 percent due to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina

## 10 Most Dense US Urban Areas: 2010

### WITHIN MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS



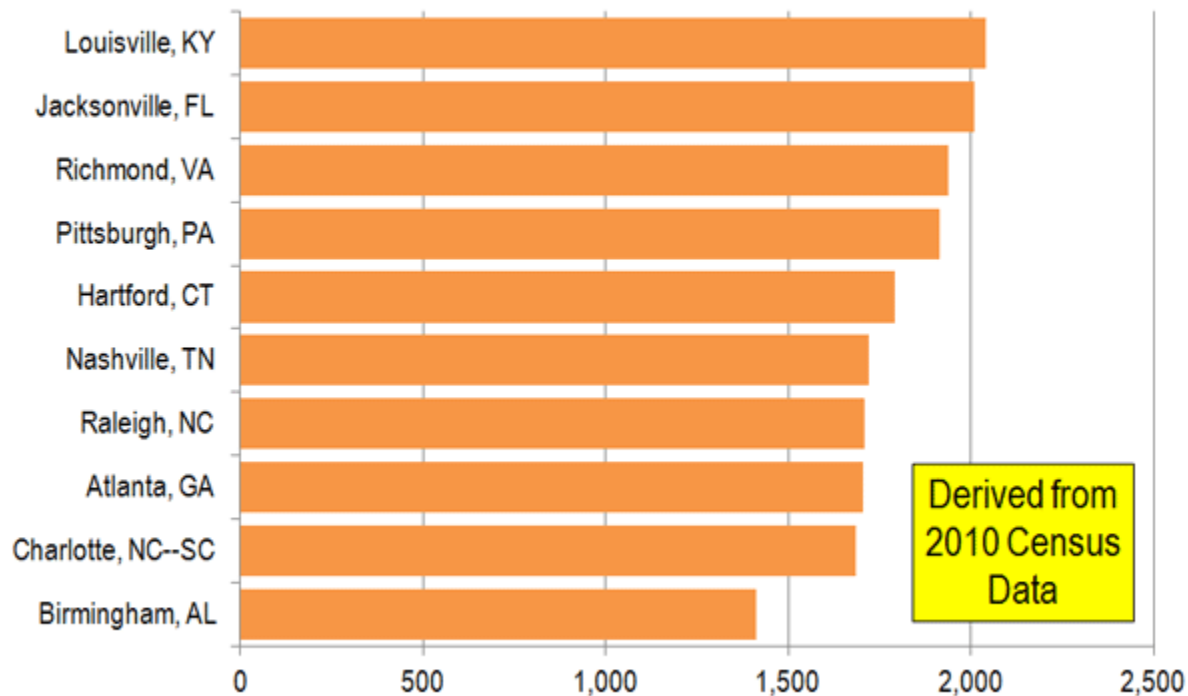
**Figure 6**

It may be surprising that Portland, with by far the most radical densification policies in the nation, does not even rank among the 10 most dense urban areas. Portland ranked 13th, behind urban areas like Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, San Diego, Sacramento, Denver and exclusively suburban Riverside-San Bernardino (and even the much smaller urban areas of Fresno, Bakersfield, Turlock and Los Banos in California's San Joaquin Valley). However Portland did densify, reaching one-half the density of Los Angeles. Portland will catch Los Angeles in density by 2120 at the current rate.

The least dense urban area is Birmingham, with a population density of 1,414 per square mile (546 per square kilometer). Atlanta, the least dense urban area of more than 3 million population in the world right is the third least dense at 1,707 per square mile (659 per square kilometer). The second least dense urban area, Charlotte, had a density of 1,685 per square mile (651 per square kilometer), while increasing its land area over the decade at twice the rate of Atlanta (Figure 7).

## 10 Least Dense US Urban Areas: 2010

### WITHIN MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS



**Figure 7**

### Staying the Same

Urbanization in the United States over the last decade can be characterized by the old French proverb that "the more things change the more they stay the same."

As in [Europe](#) and elsewhere (see the [Evolving Urban Form](#) series), when they move, Americans go to less dense areas such as to suburban and exurban areas within the larger metropolitan areas as well as smaller, lower density urban regions. The extent to which they move, however, will depend more upon economic improvement than the lure of core areas that, in reality, [continue to lose younger people](#) in their thirties while continuing not attracting their boomer parents as [they get older](#).

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Note 1: Urban Areas and Metropolitan Areas: An urban area is the area of continuous development and as Sir Peter Hall put it, is thus the "physical" urban form. The urban area is a similar, but fundamentally different concept than a metropolitan area and analysts routinely confuse the terms. The United States Census Bureau calls urban areas over 50,000 population "urbanized areas." The metropolitan area is larger, and includes one or more urban areas as well

as economically connected rural areas. . The metropolitan area is the "functional" urban form. There is no rural territory within urban areas, but there can be substantial rural territory in a metropolitan area (For example, the US defines metropolitan areas by counties. This can lead to artificially large metropolitan areas. For example, the Riverside San Bernardino metropolitan area, in the West where counties tend to be larger, covers 27,300 square miles (a land area larger than Ireland). The Cleveland metropolitan area, with a principal urban area similar in population to Riverside-San Bernardino, covers only 2,000 square miles, because it is located in Ohio, where counties are smaller. At the same, the far lower population density of the Riverside-San Bernardino metropolitan area is despite the fact that the urban area is approximately 50 percent more dense than the Cleveland urban area

Note 2: Historical Core Municipalities, Suburbs and Exurbs: For the purposes of this article, an area outside a [historical core municipality](#) is considered a suburb if it is in the urban area and an exurb if it is in the corresponding metropolitan area, but outside the principal urban area. Urban areas are delineated at a small census geographical area (the census block), which makes more precise analysis possible than is available at the county level, the lowest level at which domestic migration data is available.

Note 3: Principal Urban Areas: The principal urban area is the urban area within a metropolitan area that has the largest population. For example, in the Riverside-San Bernardino metropolitan area, the Riverside-San Bernardino urban area is the principal urban area. Other urban areas, such as Murrietta, Hemet and Indio (Palm Springs) would be secondary urban areas.

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Photograph: Exurban St. Louis (photo by author)

## New US Urban Area Data Released

by [Wendell Cox](#) 03/26/2012

This morning the US Bureau of the Census released data for urban areas in the United States. The urban population of the US rose to 249.3 million in 2010, out of a total population of 308.7 million. Urbanization covered 106,000 square miles, representing 3.0 percent of the US land mass. Overall urban density was 2,342 per square mile (905 per square kilometer).

The Los Angeles urban area was again the nation's most dense, at 6,999 per square mile (2,702 per square kilometer), a slight reduction from the 7,068 figure (2,729 per square kilometer) in 2000. The most dense urban areas with more than 1,000,000 population were Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose, New York and Las Vegas (in that order).

Overall, the 41 major urban areas had an average density of 3,245 per square mile (1,253 per square kilometer). The table below provides data for the major urban areas and overall data.

**United States Urban Area Data: 2010 Census  
Major Urban Areas & Summary**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Urban Area</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Land Area (Square Miles)</b>	<b>Density</b>	<b>Density per Square KM</b>
1	New York--Newark, NY--NJ--CT	18,351,295	3,450	5,319	2,054
2	Los Angeles--Long Beach--Anaheim, CA	12,150,996	1,736	6,999	2,702
3	Chicago, IL--IN	8,608,208	2,443	3,524	1,361
4	Miami, FL	5,502,379	1,239	4,442	1,715
5	Philadelphia, PA--NJ--DE--MD	5,441,567	1,981	2,746	1,060
6	Dallas--Fort Worth--Arlington, TX	5,121,892	1,779	2,879	1,112
7	Houston, TX	4,944,332	1,660	2,979	1,150
8	Washington, DC--VA--MD	4,586,770	1,322	3,470	1,340
9	Atlanta, GA	4,515,419	2,645	1,707	659
10	Boston, MA--NH--RI	4,181,019	1,873	2,232	862
11	Detroit, MI	3,734,090	1,337	2,793	1,078
12	Phoenix--Mesa, AZ	3,629,114	1,147	3,165	1,222
13	San Francisco--Oakland, CA	3,281,212	524	6,266	2,419
14	Seattle, WA	3,059,393	1,010	3,028	1,169
15	San Diego, CA	2,956,746	732	4,037	1,559
16	Minneapolis--St. Paul, MN--WI	2,650,890	1,022	2,594	1,002
17	Tampa--St. Petersburg, FL	2,441,770	957	2,552	985
18	Denver--Aurora, CO	2,374,203	668	3,554	1,372
19	Baltimore, MD	2,203,663	717	3,073	1,187
20	St. Louis, MO--IL	2,150,706	924	2,329	899
21	Riverside--San Bernardino, CA	1,932,666	545	3,546	1,369
22	Las Vegas--Henderson, NV	1,886,011	417	4,525	1,747
23	Portland, OR--WA	1,849,898	524	3,528	1,362
24	Cleveland, OH	1,780,673	772	2,307	891
25	San Antonio, TX	1,758,210	597	2,945	1,137
26	Pittsburgh, PA	1,733,853	905	1,916	740
27	Sacramento, CA	1,723,634	471	3,660	1,413
28	San Jose, CA	1,664,496	286	5,820	2,247
29	Cincinnati, OH--KY--IN	1,624,827	788	2,063	796
30	Kansas City, MO--KS	1,519,417	678	2,242	865
31	Orlando, FL	1,510,516	598	2,527	976
32	Indianapolis, IN	1,487,483	706	2,108	814
33	Virginia Beach, VA	1,439,666	515	2,793	1,078
34	Milwaukee, WI	1,376,476	546	2,523	974
35	Columbus, OH	1,368,035	510	2,680	1,035

36	Austin, TX	1,362,416	523	2,605	1,006
37	Charlotte, NC--SC	1,249,442	741	1,685	651
38	Providence, RI--MA	1,190,956	545	2,185	844
39	Jacksonville, FL	1,065,219	530	2,009	775
40	Memphis, TN--MS--AR	1,060,061	497	2,132	823
41	Salt Lake City--West Valley City, UT	1,021,243	278	3,675	1,419
	<b>Total</b>	<b>133,490,862</b>	<b>41,139</b>	<b>3,245</b>	<b>1,253</b>
	Other Urban Areas	115,762,409	65,247	1,774	685
	Total Urban	249,253,271	106,386	2,343	905
	Rural	59,492,267	3,431,052	17	7
	Total Population	308,745,538	3,537,439	87	34
	Share Urban	80.7%	3.0%		