



Living Large in Exurbia

Posted by [Dave Cohen](#) on March 19, 2006 - 10:32pm

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Love him or hate him, I doubt many Peak Oil adherents think that [Jim Kunstler](#) is wrong about the unsustainability and gloomy future of America's sprawl culture.



View It And Weep -- Figure 1

It started for me this week when National Public Radio did a series of stories about [Phoenix Grows and Grows](#) (audio) which according to the latest US Census Bureau statistics, is now the fifth largest city in America. But we're not talking about suburban sprawl. The hottest new demographic is the growth of [Exurbia](#), the suburbs beyond the suburbs.

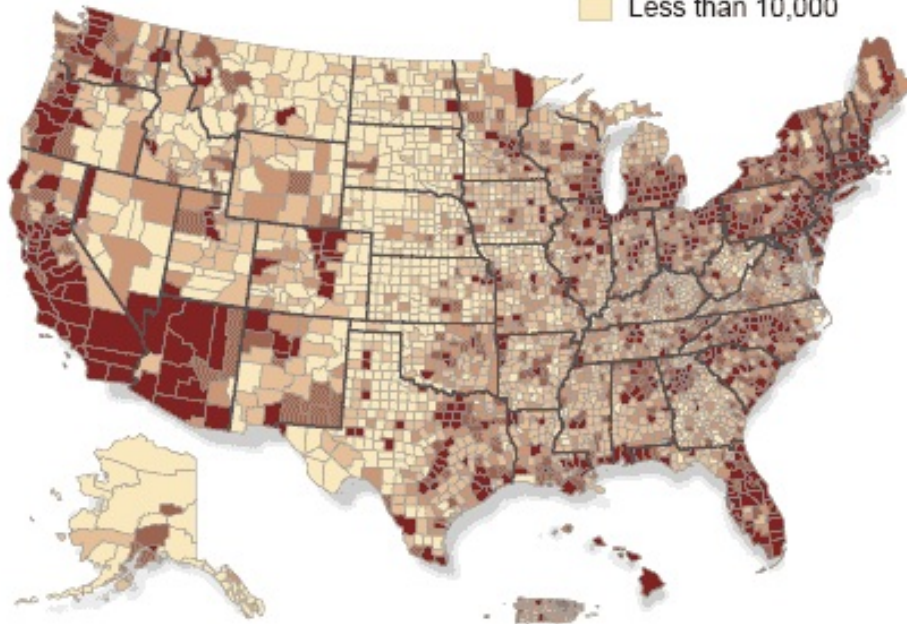
Before engaging in some analysis of this deplorable trend, I thought I'd give you the **Big Picture** from [Fastest-growing counties suburban, rural](#) from MSNBC.

Population growth in the West and South

Many Americans are moving West and South, according to the Census Bureau's annual population estimates.

Population size, July 1, 2005

- 100,000 and more
- 70,000 to 99,999
- 50,000 to 69,999
- 30,000 to 49,999
- 10,000 to 29,999
- Less than 10,000



SOURCE: Census Bureau

AP

Development & Population in the US - Figure 2

This recent [press release](#) from the census bureau has been the source of a spate of news stories from the MSM. But the data they provide does not tell the most *pertinent fact* about this exurbia boom. We can get that from [Metro area 'fringes' are booming](#) from USA Today.

Where the growth is		
The USA's fastest-growing counties with populations greater than 10,000 in 2004-05, with their percentage of growth and the driving distance from the county seat to the nearest major city:		
Rank/county	Growth	Distance
1. Flagler, Fla.	10.7%	25 miles to Daytona Beach
2. Lyon, Nev.	9.6%	80 miles to Reno
3. Kendall, Ill.	9.4%	50 miles to Chicago
4. Rockwall, Texas	7.7%	20 miles to Dallas
5. Washington, Utah	7.7%	120 miles to Las Vegas
6. Nye, Nev.	7.4%	210 miles to Las Vegas
7. Pinal, Ariz.	6.9%	60 miles to Phoenix
8. Loudoun, Va.	6.8%	35 miles to Washington
9. King George, Va.	6.7%	60 miles to Richmond
10. Caroline, Va.	6.5%	40 miles to Richmond
Sources: Census Bureau, USA TODAY research		

Stuart has done a long series of [posts](#) on the correlation between GDP growth and vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

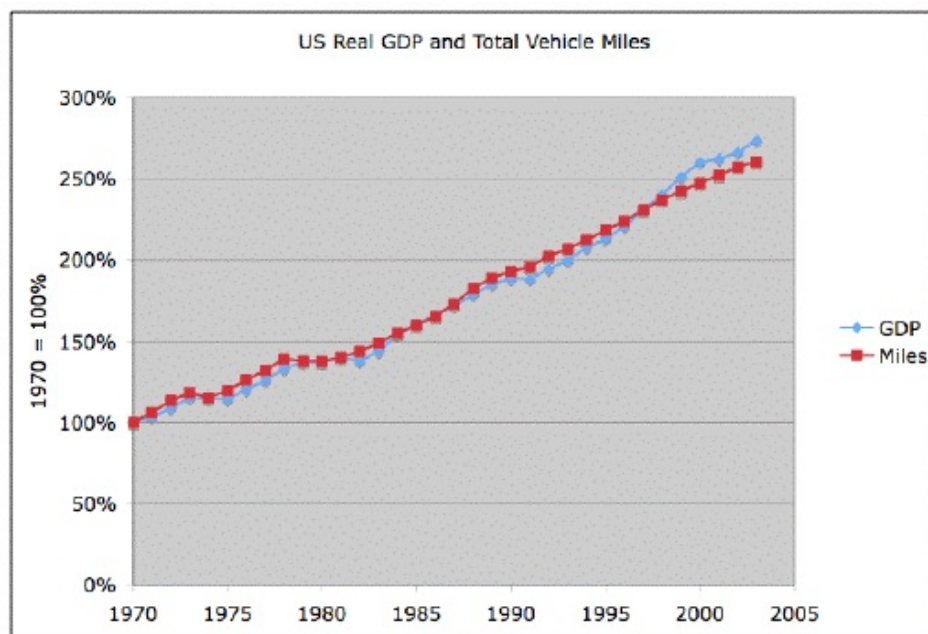
Some of the fastest-growing counties in 2005 lie on the farthest edges of large metropolitan areas, stretching the definition of "exurbs" to the limit....

"It's not just the decade of the exurbs but the decade of the exurbs of the exurbs," says William Frey, demographer at the Brookings Institution. "People are leaving expensive cores and going as far out as they can to get a big house and a big yard. Suburbia is moving much further out."

Rising gas prices do not seem to have steered Americans away from this outward push. Skyrocketing housing prices in major markets are a major contributor to growth in far-flung areas, Frey says.

Virginia's King George County, for example, is attracting people who commute 90 miles to Washington. The spillover began along Interstate 95 south of the capital and then moved east toward King George. The county grew 6.7% to 20,637 from 2004 to 2005.

More vehicle miles traveled! When you live in the Exurbs, you can't walk, you can't ride your bike, there's no buses, there's rarely a train service to get you to the city where your job is. Carpooling is impractical. You are completely dependent on your car and you spend a lot of time in it. You have no choice. Zero choice. That's the simple truth of it. It's a 90 mile commute to Washington, DC. from King George County in Virginia and 60 miles to Richmond, the 9th fastest growing county in the US.



Stuart's Correlation of GDP and VMT - Figure 3

So does this mean, perverting Stuart's analysis altogether, that now that we are developing more and more of America's rural lands to build Exurban communities with a concomitant rise in VMT, that this will cause US GDP growth to rise? Exurbia is really a *good thing* for America. Just kidding! 😊

But maybe I should take this more seriously. As far as US GDP growth is concerned, it seems to be all about new home building, buying SUVs and cars, high-tech gadgets and pharmaceuticals. As Peak Oil arrives, increasingly all we'll have left are the toys (blackberries, ipods, cellphones) and the drugs. There seems to be some [poetic justice](#) in that. *If the truth doesn't save us, what does that say about us?* -- from [Lois McMaster Bujold](#). Sigh.

OK, let's do some analysis of the Exurban boom. First its important to know that there is a set of huge land development companies behind the trek to Exurbia. One of these is [KB Home](#) and they've got it down to a science. From this NY Times article [Living Large, by Design, in the Middle of Nowhere](#), we learn

More than three dozen other communities in Pasco County [outside Tampa, Florida], some bigger than New River, are in the works, promising 100,000 new homes in the next five years. A megamall is coming. And the first of the big-box stores, a Home Depot and a Sam's Club, had their gala openings not long ago.

In the case of New River [Pasco County], that developer is KB Home, one of the nation's biggest and most profitable builders with \$7 billion in sales last year, which helped make it sixth among all Standard & Poor's 500 companies in total revenues.

KB Home has 483 communities under development in 13 states and expects to complete more than 40,000 new homes this year. Yet it is just one of about two dozen such corporate giants fiercely competing for land and customers at the edge of America's suburban expanse....

Poring over elaborate market research, these corporations divine what young families want, addressing things like carpet texture and kitchen placement and determining how many streetlights and cul-de-sacs will evoke a soothing sense of safety.

They know almost to the dollar how much buyers are willing to pay to exchange a longer commute for more space, a sense of higher status and the feeling of security....

But if there were no demand for these exurban communities, nobody would build them. Give the people what they want.

In its most recent survey of Tampa home buyers, KB asked people what they valued the most in their home and community. They wanted more space and a greater sense of security. Safety always ranks second, even in communities where there is virtually no crime.

Asked what they wanted in a home, 88 percent said a home security system, 93 percent said they preferred neighborhoods with "more streetlights" and 96 percent insisted on deadbolt locks or security doors.

But the chief driving force is *affordability*. Now that we've had inflation in housing prices, the housing bubble, for some years now--which you know as well as I do is *going to burst*--the tradeoff between commuting time and the cheaper prices in exurbia are still well worth it to these prospective home buyers, Particularly, they want all that *space*. These are McMansions, 4000

square feet or up. And apparently, they want more *security*. "Paranoia runs deep in the heartland" as a band from the 1960's once sang. Presumably, Al-Qaeda is expected to show little interest in Kendall County 50 miles outside of Chicago.

Let's finish up by revisiting Arizona. Phoenix is not so much a *city* per se, it is a conglomeration of exurban communities like Tempe, Mesa, Scottsdale, et. al.

Phoenix Metropolitan Area - Figure 4

It's a desert and it gets very hot out there. Daytime temperatures are well over 100° for several months of the year. Our audio from NPR (cited above) notes that it is a *heat island* and in last few decades night time temperatures have risen 11° fahrenheit. In addition, it is expected that soon night time temperatures will fail to get below 100° during the warmest months. You can not live there without air conditioning--it is simply impossible. Where's all this electricity going to come from? And where's the water going to come from? Currently, it's from the [Salt River](#) described in this bizarre "no need to worry" FAQ document entitled "Phoenix in Drought". This is not what I would call an infinite supply source. Finally, this [Greater Phoenix Economic Council](#) document describes the projected population there out to 2020.

Phoenix Expected Population Growth - Figure 5

That would be 5,210,000 people in 2020. And what about the price of oil and gasoline in 2020 in an Exurban Paradise bigger than Los Angeles County that is entirely dependent on cars and trucks? \$15/gallon? \$140/barrel? And the NPR story quotes that the population is expected to be over 7 million some 35 years from now! It was at this point, listening to the story that I just burst out laughing. My immediate facetious thought was that the Phoenix Metro area would be able to comfortably support about 70 or 80 people at that point.

Real Estate developers can entice these consumers but most of the time people just fool ourselves. They are not aware of energy and other resource issues (eg. water). Impossible, unsustainable exponential growth issues simply do not exist for them. The post-World War II American Dream lives on and on for now until at some point in the fairly near future, it doesn't. For a few more years, these upwardly mobile Exurbanites will have what they consider the "good life". But nothing lasts forever. As John Maynard Keynes could have said about Phoenix, "In the long-run we are all dead".



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