

Demystifying shrinking cities

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University at Buffalo geography professor Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen (right) and SUNY Buffalo State assistant professor of geography and planning are among four co-authors of a new book on shrinking cities. Credit: Douglas Levere

A new book by geography and planning experts examines several decades worth of data to provide an analysis of the state of shrinking cities across the United States.

Among the questions addressed: Which areas of America are declining in population today? Is [population loss](#) stabilizing in these regions? And how does shrinkage influence the quality of life for the residents who remain?

"We hear about shrinkage all the time—people remember the heyday of a city and talk about how everything is going downhill, but what does that really mean?" says Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen, PhD, a professor of geography in the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences. "We wanted to explore what shrinkage is, and how it affects the people who live in a place that is shrinking."

The book, published in August by Routledge, is titled, "Shrinking Cities: Understanding urban decline in the United States." Bagchi-Sen co-authored it with three former doctoral students at UB: Russell Weaver, PhD, an assistant professor of geography at Texas State University; Jason Knight, PhD, an assistant professor of geography and planning at SUNY Buffalo State; and Amy E. Frazier, PhD, an assistant professor of geography at Oklahoma State University.

Not just an urban, Northeast phenomenon

The book's first chapters use national census data to identify "shrinking" census tracts that experienced severe and persistent population loss during the four decade period from 1970 to 2010. Utilizing additional methodologies, the authors then identified tracts that have had more recent experiences with severe population loss, and are on pace to be classified as "shrinking" in the coming decades should these patterns of population loss prove to be persistent.

Some key observations:

- Shrinkage is not just a Rust Belt phenomenon. Though

population decline was most prevalent and severe in this region from 1970 to 2010, shrinking census tracts were found across the U.S., notably in the South and Southwest.

- Shrinkage is becoming an increasingly Western phenomenon. The "center of gravity" for shrinkage is moving west, with the geographic center of shrinkage located west of the Mississippi for census tracts "on pace to be shrinking" between 1990 and 2030.
- Shrinkage is not just urban. Increasingly, areas outside of central cities are shrinking. From 1970 to 2010, 83.7 percent of tracts that shrank and declined economically were in central cities. That percentage fell to 72 percent from 2000 to 2010. (Economic decline refers to a decrease in per capita and overall annual income in a census tract.)
- In cities that shrank, the pace of shrinkage may be slowing. From 1970 to 2010, more than 70 percent of census tracts within shrinking places (metropolitan areas of more than 50,000 people) shrank. This rate is on track to fall to under 60 percent by 2040.
- Across America, communities were most distressed in areas that experienced shrinkage and [economic decline](#) simultaneously. The book examined 13 measures of distress—ranging from unemployment and childhood poverty to vacant homes and a lack of plumbing—and found that 11 of these were significantly more severe in census tracts facing both shrinkage and decline, compared with tracts that exhibited shrinkage or decline only, or neither.

How to revive a shrinking city

Given the close ties between shrinkage and economic distress, the authors devote the latter chapters of the book to a discussion of how shrinking places can stem economic decline.

"Almost invariably, the general response has been, 'We have to reverse the [population decline](#) and grow out of this problem,'" Knight says. "So you get pro-growth strategies across the board: Build a stadium. Develop the waterfront. But the reality is that in most cases, this has not worked."

"Attractions can create the illusion of a booming city, but in fact, people are driving in from other places to enjoy a city, and then leaving afterward," Bagchi-Sen says. "It's not having the desired effect in surrounding areas: Within shrinking tracts, the economic distress continues."

So what are alternative strategies?

One emerging idea is right-sizing—accepting that a city's population will remain at a smaller size, and implementing policies that benefit this smaller society, the authors say. Youngstown, Ohio, is a prominent example of a place that is experimenting with this concept, which can include actions such as tearing down vacant homes; creating land banks to rehabilitate such houses; or reusing vacant property in productive ways, such as for urban agriculture.

While it's too soon to gauge the impact of this relatively new strategy, the authors point to it as one to watch.

Another potentially important trend that the book identifies is the value of social capital, loosely defined as relationships among people that help a neighborhood function well. Shrinking tracts that withstood severe decline tended to have stronger social capital, displaying qualities such as stable homeownership rates, a relatively high number of civic organizations and government offices, a greater disposition to trust others in transactions characterized by asymmetric information, and more.

Such information can help guide governments and planners as they map out the future of shrinking places, but the most important advice, perhaps is this: The desire for a one-size-fits-all solution is and may always remain elusive.

"There is a desire for a solution where we can say, 'Do A, and B will happen; build a museum, and things will turn around,'" Bagchi-Sen says. "But it's not so straightforward. Every shrinking city is distinct, with different infrastructure, different transportation needs, different housing stock, and different groups of people coming and leaving. To begin to address the problem of decline, we need to understand the nuances of their city and region and the people who live there."

More information: www.routledge.com/Shrinking-Cities/p/book/9781138796867

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