



Smart Growth America

Making Neighborhoods Great Together

City versus suburban growth in small metro areas

Analysis of U.S. Census data
in Metropolitan Statistical Areas
under one million people

December 2012

Summary

Cities are growing faster than their suburbs for the first time in recent history, and this new trend applies to some of the country's smallest metro areas as well as the biggest.

Earlier this year, the Brookings Institution released new research which revealed cities in the country's 51 largest metropolitan areas were, on average, growing faster than their suburbs for the first time in decades.¹

Smart Growth America wondered if this was true in smaller metro areas as well. Following a methodology similar to that used by Brookings, we calculated population growth between 2010 and 2011 in 171 of the nation's smaller metropolitan areas.

This analysis looked at U.S. Census-designated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) with populations between 150,000 and 1 million that also have at least one primary city of at least 50,000 people, based on 2010 Census figures and 2011 Census estimates. These "small metro areas" are the focus of our examination.

Some of the biggest gains were made in the smallest metro areas.

Overall, 22% of the U.S. population lives in small metro areas – more than 69 million people. Of these, 39.7%, or 27 million people, lived in cities in 2011. Between 2010 and 2011 small metro area cities grew in population by 0.89%, whereas their suburban counterparts grew by 0.67%. These growth rates may seem trivial, but in small towns and cities

they can make a big difference.

Our findings reveal that some of the biggest population gains were made in the smallest metro areas. Our analysis examined absolute increase in population, the rate of growth, and how small metro areas compared to large ones. We found that not only are small metro areas part of the larger national trend, many are leading the way.

At the end of this report we discuss why this might be happening. We take a brief look at 5 of the 171 cities included in this study, and examine the new projects, policies and initiatives that could be contributing to these new population gains.

Methodology

“City” and its boundaries are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. One primary city and up to two additional cities were used to calculate the “city” population of each MSA; the suburban population was found by subtracting the city population from the total population of the MSA. Population data for cities smaller than 50,000 was not available from the Census for 2011. The Census Bureau's methodology for allocating the population change between cities and suburbs from 2010 to 2011 within metropolitan areas is based on past trends.

Findings

The research revealed four clear trends about small metro areas: (1) city populations grew from 2010 to 2011; (2) city populations grew at a faster rate than their suburbs; (3) the smaller the metro area, the greater the city population growth; and (4) small metro areas in the Heartland grew fastest.

1. In small metro areas, city populations grew from 2010 to 2011.

Between 2010 and 2011, population increased in 86.5% of cities in small metro areas.² El Paso, Texas saw the largest growth in city population, gaining a total of 13,687 residents (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Small metro areas with largest city population gains, 2010–2011

Metropolitan Statistical Area	2010 MSA population	2011 MSA population	2010 city population	2011 city population	2010–2011 city growth
1. El Paso, TX	803,995	820,790	651,881	665,568	+13,687
2. Colorado Springs, CO	650,609	660,319	419,745	426,388	+6,643
3. McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	780,030	797,810	285,805	292,257	+6,452
4. Albuquerque, NM	889,972	898,642	547,392	552,804	+5,412
5. Fresno, CA	933,168	942,904	496,181	501,362	+5,181
6. Omaha-Council Bluffs, NE-IA	868,097	877,110	472,547	477,534	+4,987
7. Boise City-Nampa, ID	618,053	627,664	288,026	292,900	+4,874
8. Durham-Chapel Hill, NC	505,862	512,979	286,416	291,263	+4,847
9. Lexington-Fayette, KY	473,568	479,244	296,792	301,569	+4,777
10. Laredo, TX	251,527	256,496	237,252	241,935	+4,683

These numbers are good news for these cities. In at least some cases, population gains may be a result of new economic opportunities and civic efforts to attract and retain new residents.

The metro areas with the highest city population gains were also among the biggest (with populations between 750,000 and 1 million people). Overall, however, the smallest metro areas (150,000–250,000 people) had the largest number of cities gain population (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

Percent of metro areas that gained city population, by metro size, 2010–2011

	150,000– 250,000	250,000– 500,000	500,000– 750,000	750,000– 1 million	Total
Total metro areas	54	69	30	18	171
Number of metro areas with gain in city population	49	59	24	16	148
Number of metro areas with no change or decrease in city population	5	10	6	2	23
Percent of metro areas with gain in city population	90.7%	85.5%	80.0%	88.9%	86.5%

2. In small metros areas, city populations grew at a faster rate than their suburbs.

Between 2010 and 2011 small metro area cities grew, in total by 0.89%, whereas their suburban counterparts grew in total by only 0.67%. Table 3 shows the top ten small metros where cities added population at a greater rate than their suburbs.

TABLE 3

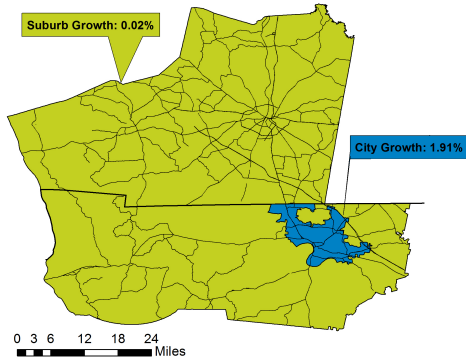
Fastest-growing small metro area cities compared with their suburbs, 2010–2011

Metropolitan Statistical Area	Suburb population growth rate	City population growth rate
1. Clarksville, TN-KY	0.02%	1.91%
2. Lexington-Fayette, KY	0.51%	1.61%
3. Fort Smith, AR-OK	0.13%	1.01%
4. Lynchburg, VA	0.20%	1.04%
5. Athens-Clarke County, GA	-0.18%	0.55%
6. Lincoln, NE	0.57%	1.27%
7. Davenport-Moline-Rock Island, IA-IL	0.11%	0.80%
8. Greensboro-High Point, NC	0.45%	1.12%
9. Bloomington, IN	0.21%	0.88%
10. Durham-Chapel Hill, NC	1.03%	1.69%

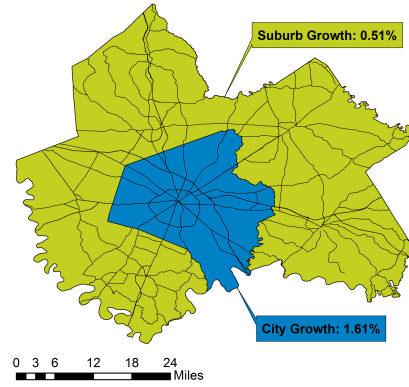
The maps in Figure 1 show the areas these growth rates represent.

FIGURE 1
Fastest-growing small metro area cities compared with their suburbs, 2010–2011

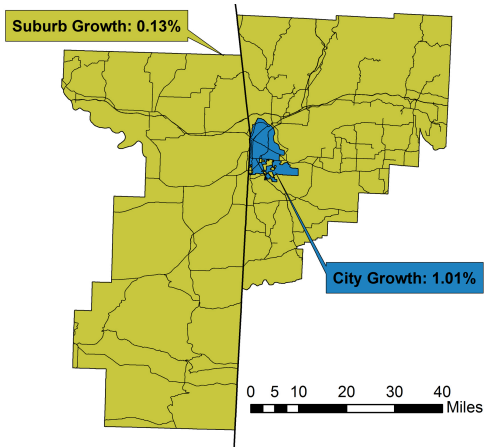
1. Clarksville, TN-KY



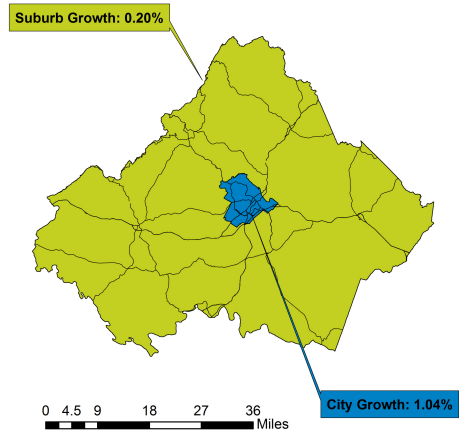
2. Lexington-Fayette, KY



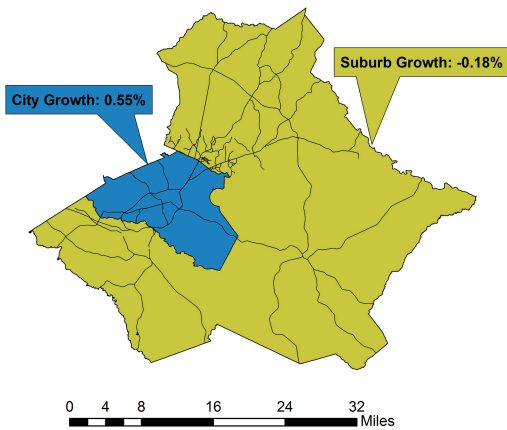
3. Fort Smith, AR-OK



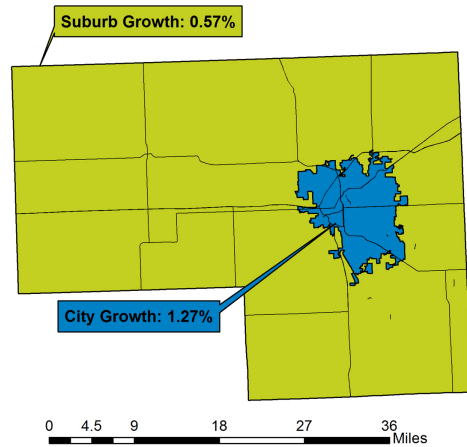
4. Lynchburg, VA



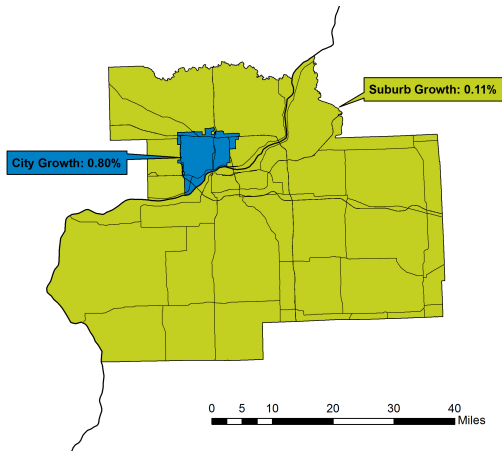
5. Athens-Clarke County, GA



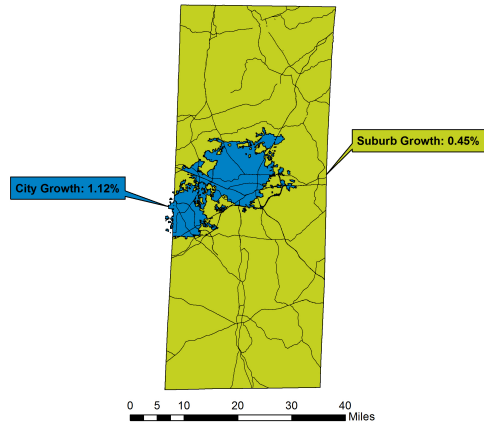
6. Lincoln, NE



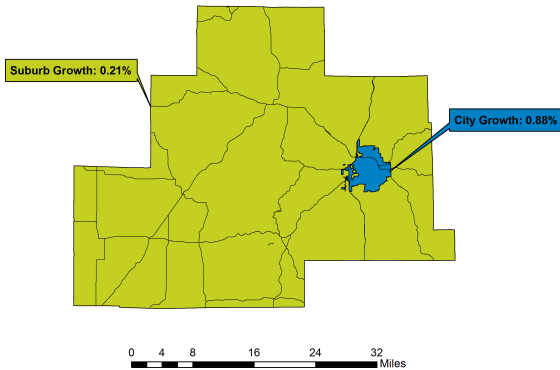
7. Davenport-Moline-Rock Island, IA-IL



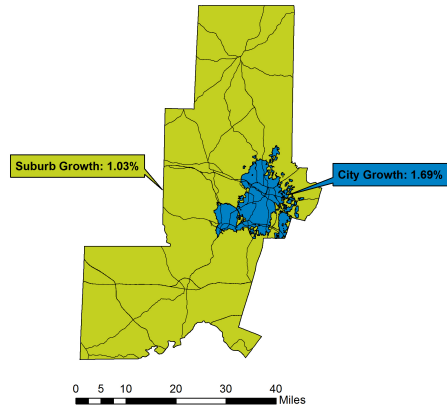
8. Greensboro-High Point, NC



9. Bloomington, IN



10. Durham-Chapel Hill, NC



All of these cities grew at least 60% faster than their suburbs. In the cases of Clarksville and Lexington, the city population grew by more than double the rate of the suburban population.

This data indicates that people are increasingly choosing to live in cities in small metro areas. Notably, this trend is even stronger in small metro areas than large ones: 55.0% of cities in small metro areas added population between 2010 and 2011; 52.9% of cities in large metro areas did so in the same period.³

Overall, the smallest metro areas had the highest share of cities growing faster than their suburbs, at 63.0%.

TABLE 4

City vs. suburb population growth rates in small metro areas, by metro size, 2010–2011

	150,000– 250,000	250,000– 500,000	500,000– 750,000	750,000– 1 million	Total
Total metro areas	54	69	30	18	171
Number of metro areas with city growing at faster rate than suburbs	34	38	11	11	94
Number of metro areas with no change, or suburbs growing at faster rate than city	20	31	19	7	77
Percent of metro areas with city growing faster than suburbs	63.0%	55.1%	36.7%	61.1%	55.0%

These figures suggest that cities are gaining popularity in small metro areas. In fact, cities in small metro areas may be gaining popularity faster than large metro area cities. In small metro areas, 45.6% of cities added more residents (in absolute numbers) than did their suburban counterparts. This is more than double the number of large metro areas, where only 21.6% of cities gained more residents than the suburbs.

3. The smaller the metro area, the greater the city population growth.

Not only did the smallest metro areas – ranging from 150,000 to 250,000 people – have the most cities where population increased (see Table 2 on page 3) and the most cities growing at a faster rate than suburbs (see Table 4 above), they also had the most cities that added more population (in absolute numbers) than their suburbs (see Table 5 below).

TABLE 5

Absolute city vs. suburban growth in small metro areas by metro size, 2010–2011

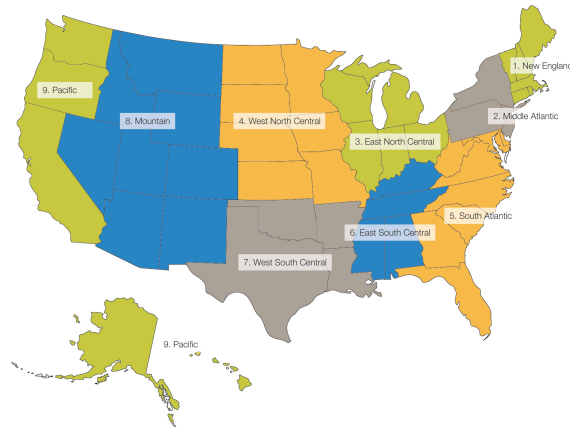
	150,000- 250,000	250,000- 500,000	500,000- 750,000	750,000- 1 million	Total
Total metro areas	54	69	30	18	171
Number of metro areas where city added more people than suburbs	29	33	10	6	78
Number of metro areas where suburb added more people than city, or no change	25	36	20	12	93
Percent of metro areas with cities adding more population than suburbs	53.7%	47.8%	33.3%	33.3%	45.6%

4. Small metro areas in the Heartland grew fastest.

Census Division 4 – consisting of Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota (see Figure 2) – showed the strongest growth of small metro areas across the country. All small metro cities in this division saw population increases between 2010 and 2011.

In addition, 66.7% of cities in the division added more people than in their suburbs – the highest percentage nationally. This division also had the second highest percentage of small metro area cities growing at a faster rate than suburbs (77.8%). Finally, population rose in a greater number of small metro area cities than large metro area cities in this division.

FIGURE 2
U.S. Census Divisions



A closer look at city growth

Why are so many cities in small metro areas growing? Every place has different reasons, but many share common traits. We looked at five examples from across the country.

Abilene, Texas

Population: 166,416

Abilene, Texas, was the first city in the state to create a downtown reinvestment zone through tax increment financing. The goal of this innovative strategy was to create the kind of downtown that would attract people and businesses alike. The city is also committed to preserving historic buildings that contribute to the character of Abilene. There are over 700 businesses and 6,000 employees downtown and the city boasts more arts and cultural institutions per capita than any city in Texas besides Houston – and 95% of these attractions are located downtown.

Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Population: 221,553

Tuscaloosa, Alabama, has won awards for the quality of life it affords residents and businesses alike. Tuscaloosa has been listed among the top 100 best cities for young people by America’s Promise Alliance, named the most livable city in America by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and one of the best places to launch a small business by CNN’s *Money*. Tuscaloosa is deeply engaged in making the city a cultural and artistic destination, and its Culture Builds initiative supports downtown development projects like a new amphitheater on the Black Warrior River and an outdoor market.

Clarksville, Tennessee

Population: 277,701

Clarksville, Tennessee, is deeply proud of its historic downtown, which is home to locally owned shops, restaurants, the Downtown Clarksville Association and an artist co-operative founded in 2001 to bring creative vibrancy to the area. In 2010, the City of Clarksville adopted a city plan entitled Smart Growth 2030, dedicated to making Clarksville a “model for economic growth, alternative energy strategies, recreational facilities, aesthetic appeal, cultural experiences and

environmental stewardship” as the city grows to exceed a projected 250,000 people within the next two decades.

Lincoln, Nebraska

Population: 306,503

Lincoln, Nebraska, is working hard to make its downtown a destination for visitors and new residents. The area is home to several universities and an extensive park system. Lincoln has a robust primary transit authority, StarTran, and together with its city-wide Complete Streets policy, it's no surprise that Lincoln households have a 30% shorter commute time than the national average. Lincoln is also home to an extensive park system throughout the city, demonstrating its commitment to creating a great place for its residents.

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Population: 779,604

Grand Rapids, Michigan, is known for its thriving arts culture, including numerous festivals anchored around downtown's Calder and Vandenberg plazas and the Grand Rapids Art Museum. The Downtown Development Authority has partnered with local businesses in the Downtown Alliance to host events in downtown Grand Rapids and provides financial assistance in small grants through an initiative called "Let's Go. Out." In 2002, the city adopted a master plan focusing on creating a broader range of housing types, more balanced transportation choices and concentrated business activity.

Conclusion

Similar to their large urban counterparts, many small cities across the country are seeing populations increase – and increase faster than their suburban counterparts.

Nowhere is the trend more clear than in the country's smallest metro areas of 150,000–250,000 people. These areas have the most cities with population increases, the most cities growing at a faster rate than their suburbs, and the most cities that added more population than their suburbs.

Cities in metro areas between 250,000 and 1 million residents saw similar gains. This trend mirrors what's happening in large metropolitan areas, where cities are gaining population faster than the suburbs for the first time in recent history.

Small metro area cities, like their larger counterparts, are working hard to attract new residents and new businesses. And many are using smart growth strategies to achieve these goals. Great neighborhoods attract new residents, who in turn help to make those places even better. These city population increases stand to benefit municipal budgets and local economies – great news as our country's metro areas continue to rebound from the recession.

Endnotes

- 1 Frey, W. (2012, #56). "Demographic reversal: Cities thrive, suburbs sputter." Brookings Institution. *State of Metropolitan America*. Retrieved December 7, 2012, from: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/06/29-cities-suburbs-frey>.
- 2 Using a threshold of ≥ 1 . It should be noted that a small number of cities experienced very little growth.
- 3 Using a threshold of $\geq .001\%$. It should be noted that a small number of cities experienced very little growth.