

## Population Growth Drives Unsustainable Urban Sprawl

An Atlanta-based developer has a contract to build 2,300 houses on a 1,015-acre horse farm in Frederick, Maryland, fifty miles from Washington, DC. People who commute to the District will likely purchase most of the homes, as they are pushed farther from the city because of overcrowding and exorbitant real estate prices. Local environmentalists claim that the horse farm sits on some of the most fertile land in the county and that the development will foster the merging of Frederick and nearby Walkersville, creating a sprawling suburban extension of DC.

In the vast metropolis that encircles Tijuana, conservationists are responding to animals' needs by building corridors for wildlife to travel back and forth to San Diego County. Many species in the area have been cut off from their natural habitats by the housing developments and industrial parks that have followed massive population growth.

### What is Sprawl?

Urban sprawl is the expansion of cities over a wide geographical area, usually into undeveloped land. Sprawl causes deforestation, land conversion from agriculture, air and water pollution, and an inefficient transportation infrastructure reliant on individual vehicles. Rural land is lost as people migrate *en masse* into cities for work opportunities.

The rate of sprawl has been increasing over the past half-century. The global urban population rose from 732 million in 1950 (29% of the population) to 3.3 billion in 2008 (50% of the population).

Sprawl has not occurred evenly around the world. Urban populations are expanding at a faster rate in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than they are in developed regions. Demographers expect this pattern to continue into the near future—cities in low and medium income coun-



The great Indian adjutant stork looks helplessly on the destruction of its habitat in Guwahati City, India. Seasonally dependent on wetlands for foraging, and tall trees for roosting and nesting, the species suffers from the ongoing destruction of wetlands by unplanned drainage, encroachment, over-fishing, siltation, and removal of nesting and roosting trees. Photo: Ritu Raj Konwar, Courtesy of Photoshare

tries will have an urban population of around 3.4 billion in the year 2030.

The causes of urbanization are twofold: people migrate from rural areas to cities for employment opportunities, and in cities in developing countries, fertility rates of the people already living there are high. Responding to the food crisis in 2008, Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki said that over the next two decades the urban population of Africa will rise to 60% of the total. As agricultural land is further degraded by soil erosion and succumbs to drought, people will leave farming livelihoods and try to scrape by in cities. This will put pressure on an inefficient farming system to produce more food with fewer hands, and crowd cities that are already bursting at the seams with new arrivals.

Fertility reductions in rural areas can help prevent the need to migrate to cities because villagers are less likely to outstrip their resources (ruining livelihoods in the process) if their populations are stable.

Anna Tibaijuka, head of the UN Human Settlements Program, said at a meeting of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Nairobi, "If we do not secure the African farming system, all these people will be heading to urban areas. Where are the hungry? Where are the rioters? You will find most of them in urban areas."

Throughout human history, cities have expanded with population growth. As agriculture developed, permanent settlements replaced the nomadic lifestyles of hunters and gatherers. During the Industrial Revolution in northwestern Europe, agriculture was advanced enough that only a small group of people were needed to feed many others. This meant that more people could work in cities. As technology in factories improved, there were more work opportunities in industry than in agriculture. And technology, especially in agriculture, continued the acceleration of population growth.

## Health Consequences

According to the UN, 98% of population growth in the future will be in low and medium income countries. There are already around one billion people living in slums within urban areas, lacking access to secure housing, clean water, and sanitation. People's quality of life is negatively affected as steady streams of immigrants crowd into cities and compete with one another for resources and livelihoods.

Natural areas provide many valuable resources that humans need to survive. Trees and wetlands are critical in protecting cities from floods, while also cleaning city air and water by filtering out contaminants. Air pollution can cause serious health effects, including asthma and lung cancer.

## Sprawl in the United States

Despite having replacement level fertility, the United States' population is still growing by about three million people a year. Two-thirds of that increase is natural—it results from more births than deaths. We reached a milestone population of 300 million in 2006 and are hurtling toward a population of over 400 million by 2050. Many facets of our everyday life will be affected if this demographic projection comes to pass. Traffic and related air pollution will worsen, housing prices will continue to rise out of reach of the working middle class, and wildlife habitats will shrink and degrade further.

Between 1970 and 1990, Los Angeles sprawled an additional 394 square miles, during which time the population increased by 3.1 million residents. Because of smart growth efforts, density increased by 8% and LA now has the smallest land consumption per person of any American city. Identifying the single greatest factor in LA's sprawl, the creators of [sprawlcity.com](http://sprawlcity.com) definitively say, "Population growth, pure and simple."

During that same period, 1970-1990, per capita land consumption in the United States was related to 49.1% of overall sprawl, and population growth was related to 50.9%. Cities like LA and Dallas can attribute 100% of their sprawl to population growth. Many other cities can blame population as the main driver of sprawl.

## Did You Know?

- Americans spend an average of 55 workdays in traffic every year.
- Environmental destruction largely due to growing populations aided in the fall of ancient civilizations such as the Mayans and the Sumerians.
- Urbanization has created megacities, urban areas that are home to over 10 million people.
- Just over a century ago, natural population growth in urban populations was negative because of the prevalence of disease; however, immigration helped cities to grow or at least remain stable.
- In the U.S., from 1960-1990, western cities doubled in population and southern, midwest, and northeast cities grew by 70%, 25%, and 12.5%, respectively.

## Sprawl in the Developing World

Megacities are developing in poor countries around the world. Manila, the capitol city of the Philippines, is really a conglomeration of ten distinct districts, home to 11 million people. The population of the Philippines has grown rapidly since the 1960s due largely to its Catholic identity. The Pope condemns family planning and Filipino officials tend to agree. Much of this growth has been absorbed by a spreading belt of land around Manila. Housing developments have replaced rice paddies and squatter settlements have cropped up along the fringes of the city.

This encroachment into undeveloped land has hindered agricultural productivity and has increased the incidence and severity of floods. Traffic is infamous and air quality horrendous.

Urban sprawl in Dakar, Senegal has forced people to live on marginal lands, where homesteading is risky. Floods have terrorized inhabitants of these areas. Development onto these lands has converted the land from agriculture, meaning that urban residents must now import food from greater distances.

Urban sprawl is a problem that must be addressed both by smart growth and by population stabilization. As we've seen in LA, despite city planners' best efforts, if population continues to grow unchecked,

sprawl will only worsen.

To learn about what you can do to support population stabilization efforts, please visit our newly redesigned website at [www.populationconnection.org](http://www.populationconnection.org).

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*Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.*