Urbanization is the concentration of populations in a city. The Industrial Revolution (begun in the 18th century) expedited the process of urbanization. The development of factories led to a concentration of workers who moved from rural areas into the city to be within reach of the workplace. High-rise structures were built to meet the demand for housing where people lived in densely packed areas among strangers who did not share their backgrounds. This led to a faster-paced and more complex social life than people had experienced in their rural communities.

A metropolitan area is a large population center with adjoining cities. One of the cities usually serves as the hub for the neighboring cities, which are collectively called by that city’s name. For example, Pasadena, California is part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area but is a separate city. In the United States, many people who live in metropolitan areas live in surrounding suburbs (sometimes as much as 50 miles from the major city’s center).

A nonmetropolitan area is an area that is not linked to a major city. Here, people live in small towns or rural, farming communities.

**Figures**

In 1990, in developed countries 73% of the population lived in urban areas. Sociologists estimate that by 2025, this figure will be 84%. In less-developed countries, the figures were 34% in 1990 and will be 57% in 2025. The consequences for the less-developed countries are serious, such as the following (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega, & Weitz, 2009): stress on city services; growing urban populations of unskilled workers; few middle-class jobs; and growth in the "informal economy" of artisans, peddlers, bicycle renters, laundrywomen, and beggars.

**Urbanization in the United States**

The Civil War (1861–1865) contributed to urbanization in the United States. Factories sprang up to produce weapons and military goods. People deserted their war-torn towns and moved to the cities in search of jobs. In the mid- to late-1800s, millions of immigrants, mostly from Europe, poured into American cities. This process of growth did not end until the 1950s when a new trend emerged, urban decentralization, which was a movement away from cities into the suburbs. The development of transportation technologies (faster railways), expansion of roads and highways, the growth of the automobile industry, and government policies contributed to this shift (Macionis, 2007).
Problems

Urban growth brings many problems. Chief among these are the following (Urban Issues, 1999):

- toxic emissions from vehicles, industries, and homes degrading the air quality
- loss of agricultural, rural land, and with it the destruction of animal habitats
- stress on municipal services such as water, sanitation, transportation, education, and utilities
- changes in diet and nutrition
- high-density living contributing to poverty in deprived areas
- a general rise in street violence, crime, and aggressive behavior

Urbanization Mosaic

Louis Wirth (German, 1897–1952) was an influential sociologist in the 1930s. He wrote that, in urban settings, personal relations (with shopkeepers, with others in crowded elevators, etc.) are superficial and transitory, marked by utilitarianism and efficiency. People live in clusters that become tiny worlds unto themselves where they find all the services they need within a few streets in their neighborhoods. Urban life also provides a population large enough from which to draw others whose interests match one’s own—facilitating the creation of subcultures and specialized associations. He called it a "mosaic of social worlds" within the city (Louis Wirth, 2007).

Suburbanization

Suburbanization is the growth of areas built away from urban, city neighborhoods, usually reached by freeways and highways and often requiring workers to commute to and from their workplace.

Suburbanization in the U.S.

According to Kenney (2008):
The suburbanization of United States was a central part of the campaign to create the ideal American family, and the federal government played a direct role in the mass migration from the cities. Suburbia personified the American Dream for every young couple in postwar America as a place where they could own their own home and raise their children away from the horrors of city life.
Suburbanization: Changes

The classic picture of the suburbs in America with its lack of amenities, few shops, daily commute to work, and isolation from neighbors has changed since the suburbs developed 50 years ago. "The suburbs are no longer bedroom communities that daily send all their adults elsewhere to work. They are increasingly major manufacturing and retail trade centers" (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega, & Weitz, 2008, p. 356).

The style of building has changed. There are condos and townhouses with amenities such as bike paths, neighborhood parks, and front porches. Planners and activists are attempting to bring a sense of community to the suburbs through redesigning them.

Suburbanization Problems

Despite changes and improvements, suburban living still has many problems. Dependence on a vehicle is still so essential that people without one cannot live there. Individuals still experience long commutes, and those who wished to escape crowds by moving to the suburbs find their suburban freeways congested. Zoning laws in different counties create problems for startup businesses. People still experience isolation and alienation because of the way homes are designed—with high walls separating neighbors.

Alternatives

Small town and rural living provide many of the advantages and disadvantages of suburban life. They offer affordable housing, space, low taxes, strong community ties, and closeness to nature. With these come the stresses of low wages, underemployment, and unemployment. There are fewer medical and entertainment amenities, and the rates of alcohol and methamphetamine abuse are on the rise (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega, & Weitz, 2008).

References


Urbanization and Suburbanization

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