

Metropolitan Growth Counties

Robert E. Lang
Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century, the nation’s settlement pattern shifted strongly toward decentralized growth. Suburbs across America boomed, as did the Sunbelt, which includes much of the South and West. Most of this growth occurred in large metropolitan areas, especially in what the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech terms “Growth Counties.” These counties grew at double-digit rates in each decade since 1950 and are found in the nation’s 50 largest regions, which range from New York (at over 21 million people) to Richmond, VA (with just under 1 million).

The Metropolitan Institute identifies 124 Growth Counties in the United States. Together, these places now contain over 62 million residents, or about 1 in 5 Americans. In 1950, the same Growth Counties had just over 12 million people, which represented less than 1 in 12 Americans. The Metropolitan Institute, along with its partners the Fannie Mae Foundation and The Brookings Institution, will issue a series of reports over the next several months that detail the nature and dynamic of Growth Counties. This article previews the upcoming research.

Three Types of Growth Counties

As table 1 shows, there are three types of Growth Counties based on population size. The largest are “MEGA Counties,” or Massively Enlarged, Growth-Accelerated Counties. These are followed by “Edge Counties,” and finally “New Metropolis Counties.” There are 23 MEGA Counties, 54 Edge Counties, and 47 New Metropolis Counties. Their respective total populations are 37 million, 20.8 million, and 4.7 million.

*Table 1. Metropolitan Growth Counties**

County Types/ Attributes	MEGA** Counties	Edge Counties	New Metropolis Counties	United States
Population Range	Above 800,000	200,000 to 800,000	Below 200,000
Total Counties	23	54	47	3,141
No. of Metro Areas	17	26	26	276
Total Population	37.0 Million	20.8 Million	4.7 Million	281.4 Million
Location in Metro	Near the Core	Middle to Edge	At the Fringe
US Distribution	Mostly in Sunbelt	National	Mostly in East
Tag Line	New Metro Heartlands	Metro Growth Engines	Suburbs of Suburbs
What's Unique?	High-Tech Centers	In Slow-Growth Metros	Added to Metro Since 1971
Example	Clark (NV)	Lake (IL)	Loudoun (VA)
<i>Demographics***</i>				
% Non-Hisp. White	55	76	84	69
% Married with Kids	25	28	30	24
% Homeowners	63	72	79	66
% SF Detached Units	56	66	74	60
% Three or More Cars	16	20	25	17
Avg. Travel to Work	27.0 min.	27.4 min.	31.2 min.	25.5 min.

* Growth Counties grew at double-digit rates for each census since 1950.

** MEGA = Massively Enlarged, Growth-Accelerated.

*** Demographics are based on the averages for individual counties, not on the aggregate county total.

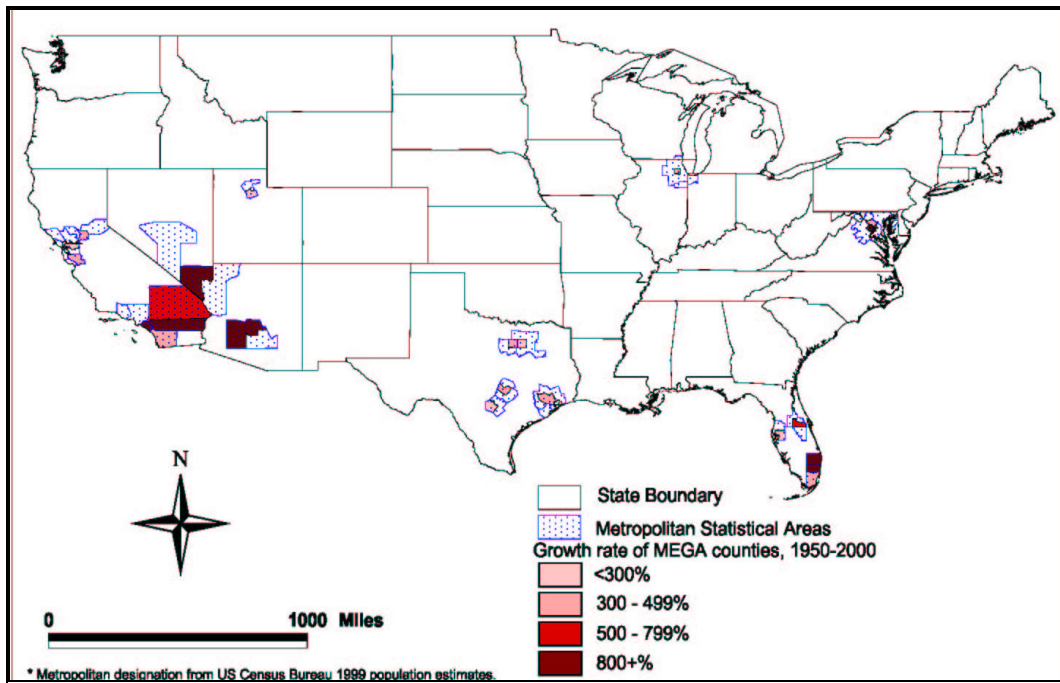
Source: Analysis by the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech of 2000 U.S. census data from top 50 metropolitan areas (excluding San Juan, PR).

MEGA Counties are concentrated in three states: California has seven; Texas and Florida have five each. Edge Counties, on the other hand, are distributed throughout the country and are found in both high-growth and slower-growing areas, but are generally located at or near the edge of their region. New Metropolis Counties are a new type of “bedroom” suburb, located at the regional fringe and lacking large clusters of commerce.

MEGA Counties

MEGA Counties are found mostly in booming regions of the Sunbelt (map 1). They can be big suburban counties outside the nation’s largest cities, such as Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, or the core urban counties of fast-growth metropolitan areas such as Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, and Las Vegas.

Map 1. MEGA Counties: Locations and Growth Rates



MEGA Counties range in size from Harris County, TX (which contains the city of Houston) with a population of 3,400,578 to Travis County, TX (which contains the city of Austin) with 812,280 people. Two counties exceed 3 million, four surpass 2 million, and nine contain more than 1 million people.

MEGA Counties are home to many of America’s most important tourist areas, high-tech belts, and business centers. Both Disneyland (Orange County, CA) and Disney World (Orange County, FL) are in MEGA Counties, as is the adult Disneyland of the Las Vegas Strip (Clark County, NV). They also feature the vast retirement and golfing areas of South Florida (Palm Beach, Broward County, and Miami–Dade County) and Central Arizona (Maricopa County).

MEGA Counties contain the Silicon Valley of California (Santa Clara County), the Silicon Prairie of Texas (Travis County), and the Silicon Dominion of Virginia (Fairfax County). In addition, MEGA Counties are home to 9 of the top 10 office centers in the nation that lie outside of a central business district (what journalist Joel Garreau calls Edge Cities), including Post Oak (Harris County, TX), South Coast (Orange County, CA), and Tysons Corner (Fairfax County, VA). Each of these centers ranks among the nation’s top 25 downtowns.

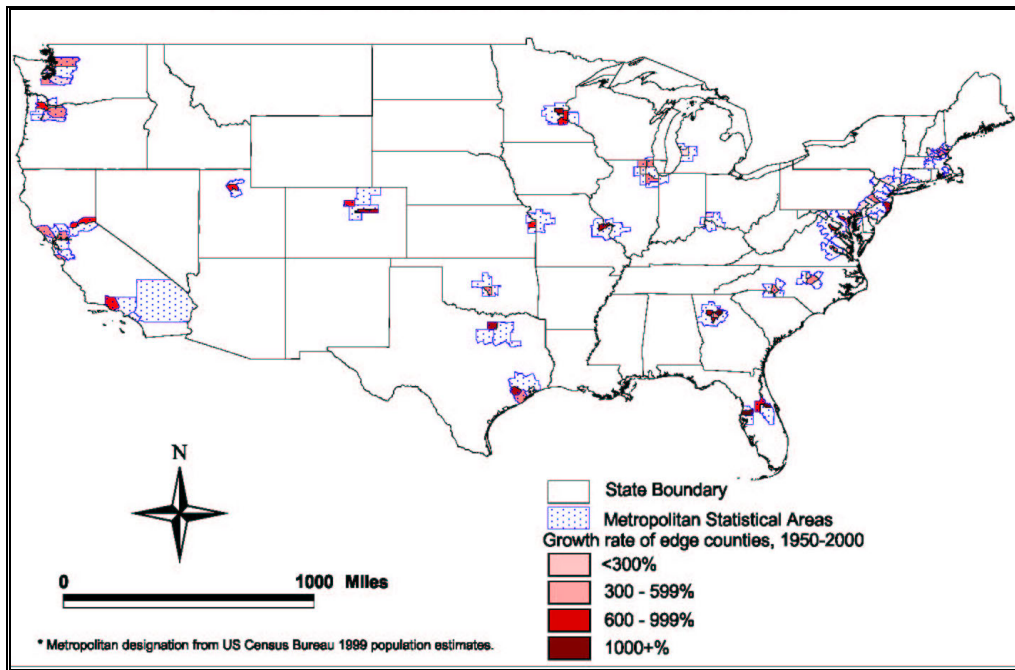
The big downtowns of Dallas (Dallas County), Houston (Harris County), San Jose (Santa Clara County), Phoenix (Maricopa County), Miami (Miami–Dade County), and Austin (Travis County) also lie within MEGA Counties.

Thus, MEGA Counties are now perhaps as important to the nation’s commerce as any of its large traditional cities. In many ways, MEGA Counties form America’s new metropolitan heartlands.

Edge Counties

Unlike MEGA Counties, Edge Counties are found throughout the United States—from New England to Florida, and from Southern California to the Pacific Northwest (map 2). They also exist in a mix of metropolitan areas, including high-growth regions such as Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Orlando, and slow growing ones such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia. Many regions have multiple Edge Counties. Atlanta, Chicago, Seattle, and Washington each have four Edge Counties. Denver, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and Portland have three each.

Map 2. Edge Counties: Locations and Growth Rates



The name “Edge County” refers to the fact that these counties are mostly at or near the edge of their regions. In addition, Edge Counties are often at the leading edge of metropolitan growth. The label also plays on Garreau’s popular term, “Edge City.”

The presence of Edge Counties in so many of the nation’s largest metropolitan areas indicates that rapid population growth, to at least some extent, impacts most regions. There are places where fast growth sweeps an entire region, as in the case of Atlanta or Denver. But even older and slower growing metropolitan areas, such as St. Louis, Kansas City, and Cincinnati, have their booming parts. In all three places, population growth is mostly concentrated in a single Edge County.

During the past 50 years, the fastest population growth in the nation occurred in the Sunbelt. Most of this growth was in the form of what many critics label “sprawl”—that is low-density, leap-frog development, complete with mix-and-match subdivisions, low-slung and shiny-glass cube office parks, big-box retail centers, and endless shopping strips. This characterization also describes most development in Edge Counties.

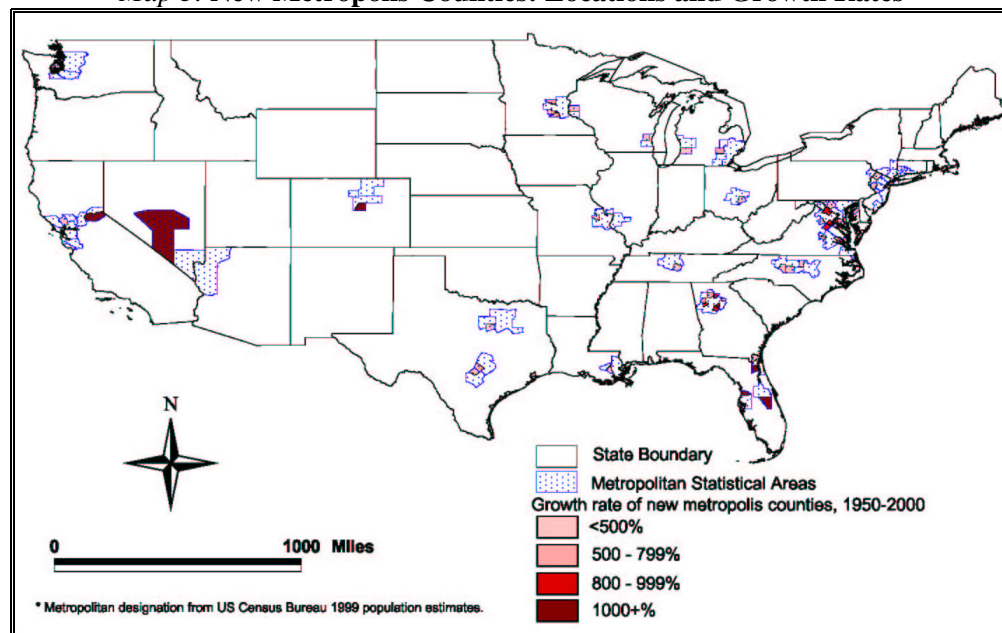
Edge Counties typically contain what Lang (2002) refers to as “Edgeless Cities,” which are a form of sprawling office development that never reaches the densities or cohesiveness of Edge Cities. Edgeless Cities feature mostly isolated office buildings at varying densities over vast swaths of metropolitan space.

While older metropolitan areas have high-density traditional cores and rings of older, pedestrian-oriented suburbs, they also feature new, so-called sprawling growth, which is often found in Edge Counties. In a way, Edge Counties in places such as Minneapolis and Boston are those regions’ Sunbelts, or what one could jokingly refer to as the “Low-SPF (sun protection factor) Sunbelt.” Edge Counties are growth engines because in many of these older regions they account for a majority of new people added despite often containing just a small share of the total metropolitan population.

New Metropolis Counties

The New Metropolis Counties lie mostly at the regional fringe (map 3). Unlike other Growth Counties, New Metropolis Counties generally do not contain large concentrations of commerce. They are updated versions of bedroom suburbs. New Metropolis Counties are where the traditional suburbs retreated to as other parts of the region, including many mature suburbs, grew more diverse and crowded over the past few decades.

Map 3. New Metropolis Counties: Locations and Growth Rates



The New Metropolis Counties may be Edge Counties in formation. Residents of New Metropolis Counties often work in Edge Counties, which means that more commutes are originating in what were once rural areas. Thus commercial development in Edge Counties fuels the emergence of New Metropolis Counties, which in turn promotes even more population growth further and further from the regional core. New Metropolis Counties are the new suburbs of suburbs, which in the future may spawn even more distant suburbs.

The name “New Metropolis County” refers to the fact that these places are new to their regions—having been added to the official metropolitan statistical area after 1971. Second, these counties reflect the new metropolitan growth pattern—they are all low-density, centerless, and sprawling. Yet ironically, New Metropolis Counties maintain the most traditional demographic profile—white families who own a single-family home and have several cars—of all Growth Counties in the United States. They are new-style places in form, but often old-style in composition.

Two regions, Atlanta and Washington, have seven and eight New Metropolis Counties respectively. Minneapolis has four of them. The other metropolitan areas have just one or two New Metropolis counties. Interestingly, the fast-growing Southwest contains only two New Metropolis Counties—Douglas, outside of Denver, and Nye, outside of Las Vegas. The Southwest remains underrepresented in this category because its metropolitan counties

are mostly too large to qualify. In total, 39 New Metropolis Counties lie in the eastern half of the country, while only eight are found in the western half.

Comparing Growth Counties Demographics

Table 1 shows the comparative demographics for Growth Counties. Note the clear distinctions between the county types in the several dimensions illustrated here. There is a progression of difference between MEGA and New Metropolis Counties, with Edge Counties occupying a middle tier.

For example, the MEGA Counties are the most diverse, followed by Edge and then New Metropolis Counties. The same holds true for the percent of married-with-children households, the percent of homeowners and detached single-family homes, and the percent of households with three or more cars. In all cases, there is a big contrast between MEGA Counties, which are more urban in character, and New Metropolis Counties, which are more classically suburban.

New Metropolis Counties are largely white, have a greater than the national average share of traditional families, have high homeownership rates, have mostly single-family homes, and have lots of cars. Conversely, MEGA Counties are diverse, have less traditional families, have below-average homeownership, have fewer single-family homes, and have fewer households with three or more cars. Edge Counties fall roughly halfway between MEGA and New Metropolis Counties on all these qualities.

The only measure for which there is not a clear line of progression is average travel time to work. MEGA and Edge Counties maintain essentially the same figure, while New Metropolis residents have somewhat longer commutes. This indicates that while many jobs have followed people to the edges of regions, most have not quite made the jump into the quasi-rural fringe of the New Metropolis Counties.

As the analysis proceeds over the next year, more distinctions will emerge between Growth Counties. But even at this preliminary stage it appears that metropolitan growth during the past half century has been occurring in a variety of county types. Future research will more fully explore these differences.

Robert E. Lang is director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, in Alexandria, VA, an associate professor in the university's College of Architecture and Urban Studies, and a consultant to Fannie Mae Foundation.

References

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Note: A slightly revised version of this article will be published next month (August 2002) in Fannie Mae Foundation's newsletter *Housing Facts & Findings*, along with preliminary results of a survey, commissioned by Fannie Mae Foundation, of Edge County officials to learn how they are coping with rapid growth. NACo is collaborating with Fannie Mae Foundation on publication of that newsletter issue.

Fannie Mae Foundation: www.fanniemaefoundation.org · www.knowledgeplex.org
Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech: www.mi.vt.edu

Table 2. Growth Counties (MEGA, Edge, and New Metropolis)

MEGA County	State	Edge County	State	New Metropolis County	State
Maricopa County	AZ	Ventura County	CA	El Dorado County	CA
Orange County	CA	Santa Cruz County	CA	Napa County	CA
Riverside County	CA	Solano County	CA	Douglas County	CO
San Bernardino Coun	CA	Sonoma County	CA	Clay County	FL
Sacramento County	CA	Placer County	CA	Hernando County	FL
San Diego County	CA	Boulder County	CO	Nassau County	FL
Contra Costa County	CA	Jefferson County	CO	Osceola County	FL
Santa Clara County	CA	Arapahoe County	CO	Barrow County	GA
Broward County	FL	Seminole County	FL	Cherokee County	GA
Miami-Dade County	FL	Pasco County	FL	Douglas County	GA
Orange County	FL	Lake County	FL	Forsyth County	GA
Palm Beach County	FL	Clayton County	GA	Henry County	GA
Hillsborough County	FL	Cobb County	GA	Paulding County	GA
DuPage County	IL	DeKalb County	GA	Rockdale County	GA
Montgomery County	MD	Gwinnett County	GA	St. Charles Parish	LA
Clark County	NV	Lake County	IL	Calvert County	MD
Travis County	TX	McHenry County	IL	Charles County	MD
Dallas County	TX	Will County	IL	Frederick County	MD
Tarrant County	TX	Kane County	IL	Queen Anne's County	MD
Harris County	TX	Johnson County	KS	Allegan County	MI
Bexar County	TX	Anne Arundel County	MD	Livingston County	MI
Salt Lake County	UT	Harford County	MD	Carver County	MN
Fairfax County	VA	Howard County	MD	Scott County	MN
		Ottawa County	MI	Sherburne County	MN
		Anoka County	MN	Warren County	MO
		Dakota County	MN	Davidson County	NC
		Washington County	MN	Orange County	NC
		St. Charles County	MO	Randolph County	NC
		Mecklenburg County	NC	Hunterdon County	NJ
		Durham County	NC	Sussex County	NJ
		Wake County	NC	Nye County	NV
		Hillsborough County	NH	Fairfield County	OH
		Rockingham County	NH	Rutherford County	TN
		Ocean County	NJ	Comal County	TX
		Gloucester County	NJ	Hays County	TX
		Orange	NY	Johnson County	TX
		Butler County	OH	Culpeper County	VA
		Cleveland County	OK	Gloucester County	VA
		Marion County	OR	James City County	VA
		Washington County	OR	Loudoun County	VA
		Clackamas County	OR	New Kent County	VA
		Bucks County	PA	Powhatan County	VA
		Chester County	PA	Spotsylvania County	VA
		Denton County	TX	Stafford County	VA
		Brazoria County	TX	Island County	WA
		Fort Bend County	TX	St. Croix County	WI
		Galveston County	TX	Washington County	WI
		Davis County	UT		
		Henrico County	VA		
		Prince William County	VA		
		Kitsap County	WA		
		Snohomish County	WA		
		Thurston County	WA		
		Pierce County	WA		