

# ATLANTA'S

# SPRAWL

# PROBLEM

# Solving Sprawl



## Solving Atlanta's Car Dependency Problem

SAM BASKIN, creative director

Atlanta is a poster child for urban sprawl. In fact, it's number one on the list of greatest sprawl for any large metropolitan area in the country, according to a 2014 study by Smart Growth America. Atlanta's suburban population vastly outnumbers its urban core. Less than 500,000 people live in the City of Atlanta, while over 5.5 million people live in the surrounding metro area as of 2019. But how did Atlanta get to this point?

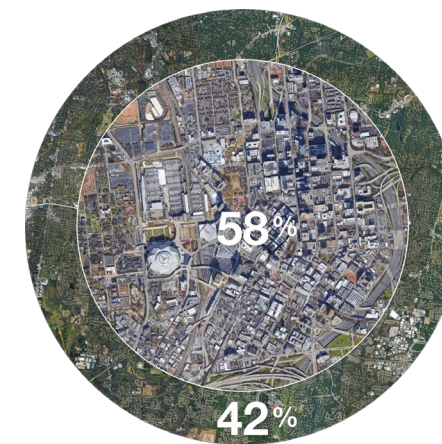
Before World War II, Atlanta was much less suburban. The city had walkable streets and a large streetcar network. Atlanta's streetcar and bus network connected the city, creating a walkable environment. The streetcar network even had lines running to Marietta, Stone Mountain, and Brookhaven. However, more people began to move to the suburbs after World War II, which was made easier by new interstates and highways.

“Atlanta is the number one most sprawling metropolitan area in the country”

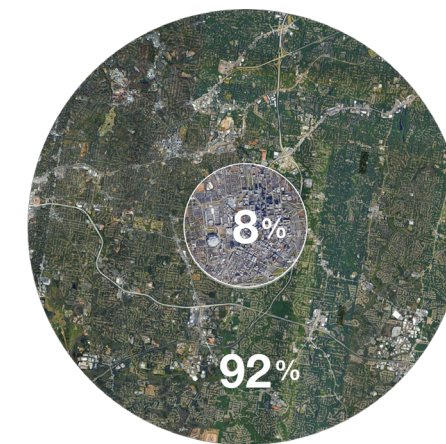
Ellen Dunham-Jones is the director of Georgia Tech's Masters in Urban Design and the author of *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*. She discusses the start of sprawl, saying, “Early on, suburbanization starts in a massive way right after World War II, and then accelerated, certainly for Atlanta, with white flight in the 60s and 70s.” White flight describes the migration of many white residents from newly desegregated cities to more racially homogenous suburbs.

The 1952 “Up Ahead” plan was created by the Metropolitan Planning Commission, an early urban planning organization in Atlanta. The document outlined plans to suburbanize Atlanta. The commission expected many benefits of increasing suburbs, writing, “These trends point to a future Metropolitan Atlanta of great comfort, beauty and efficiency. That is, we can have such an area if we set out to get it. The future pattern can include 30 or more large ‘communities’ separated by free-flowing

### Share of metro population in Atlanta vs. the suburbs



1940  
pop 500,000



2019  
pop 6 Million

arterial highways. ... Each community and neighborhood can have an independence of its own—combining the benefits of small-town living with the advantages offered by a great metropolis. Population density can be low.” Planners envisioned a balanced city, offering a rural experience that was still near the opportunities of a city. Darin Givens, founder of the urbanism advocacy group ThreadATL, states, “The original design in the ... plan did call for putting some [commercial development] somewhat close to these sprawling areas of detached homes on cul-de-sacs, but that did not happen.”

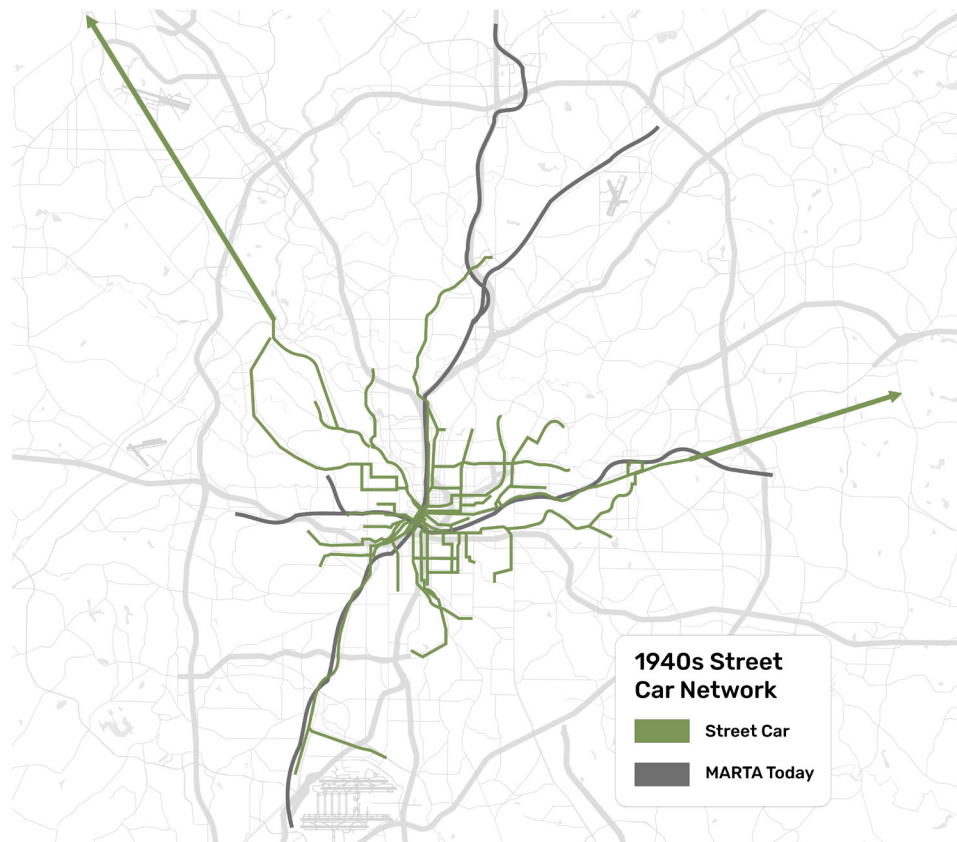
Another surprising reason for sprawl is nuclear war. The “Up Ahead” plan states, “Our target value to a potential enemy— and our chances of survival if we do get bombed - can depend on how well we scatter our plants and facilities. Defense policy and urban trends point in the same direction - outward.” The plan argued that sprawled cities would be more difficult for enemies to bomb, as key industrial sites would not be clustered together.

Across the country, suburbs began to grow. However, compared to other American cities, Atlanta's sprawl was amplified. According to Givens, Atlanta's sprawl increased due to a lack of geographic boundaries and the city's economy. Atlanta has no ocean or severe mountain ranges that would limit development.

Additionally, Givens states, “Atlanta did not experience the recession of the 1970s, like a lot of other cities did. We ended up having a lot of jobs here that other cities didn't have and we also completed interstate 75. And that combination of the economy here being a little better than it was in other cities, together with the completion of Interstate 75 really amped up sprawl - it just made for type economic infrastructure and physical infrastructure that helped propel that kind of car-based sprawl in the region.” One of Atlanta's biggest periods of growth was during a time of interstates and suburbanization.

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This timeline explains why Atlanta has a more sprawled pattern when compared to other large cities, which grew during a time when urban spaces were designed to be more walkable.



Map of Atlanta's former street car network in the 1940s

As Atlanta continued to sprawl, its urban core began to wither. Wealth moved from the city to the suburbs. Dunham-Jones describes suburbanization as “a story of migration of wealth.”

**“As Atlanta continued to sprawl, its urban core began to wither. Wealth moved from the city to the suburbs.”**

Not only did wealth go out of the urban core, it specifically tended to go north. Dunham-Jones continues, saying, “It’s not the only divide between rich and poor, but it’s a predominant divide both racially and in class for metro Atlanta.”

The urban core of Atlanta was declining and was pushed to become more friendly for suburbanites coming into town for work. Dunham-Jones states that Atlanta “was still basically feeling that the only way the city could compete with

the suburbs was to become more and more suburban. ... The streets are designed to help suburbanites drive in, fly down the street and get into a parking deck to go to work.” Downtown Atlanta is filled with one-way streets and parking decks that aim to serve downtown office workers commuting from the suburbs. Even MARTA’s rail system is designed to help suburban workers get to jobs downtown.

The effects of urban sprawl have a large negative impact on a city. The largest problems are economic mobility, climate change, public health, and affordability.

According to a 2014 study conducted by researchers at UC Berkeley, an average suburban household produces up to four times as many carbon emissions as an average urban household. Suburbanization has increased the distance that Americans drive, which leads to more carbon emissions. From a public health standpoint, suburban lifestyles are linked to sedentary lifestyles, which can lead to obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Additionally, urban sprawl tends to create car-centric cities. It becomes a necessity for almost every citizen to own a car, which isn’t always affordable. Car-centric cities are especially harmful for poor people, as finding work becomes significantly harder without a car, which can contribute to income inequality. Atlanta is not only number one in urban sprawl, but also has the highest levels of inequality in any

American city according to “Atlanta: Scarcity and Abundance”.

It is not only an affordability problem in terms of owning a car. Sprawl is also costly to taxpayers. Suburban infrastructure is starting to require serious maintenance. Dunham-Jones describes this issue, stating, “We’re seeing a lot more maintenance issues with infrastructure that a lot of cities really can’t afford anymore. Suddenly, you’ve got all these miles of road and pipe and wire that needs maintenance after about fifty to sixty years.”

However, there are some benefits of suburbanization and urban sprawl. For example, it provides access to a middle-class lifestyle, and has also resulted in many people making money off of the increased accrued value of suburban homes. However, these benefits were not shared for all residents. Dunham-Jones states, “The benefits of sprawl and suburbia in general, tend to apply to private individuals - often really quite well, but the negatives of sprawl tend to be borne by the larger public.”

**“An average suburban household produces up to four times as much carbon emissions as an average urban household”**

However, recently that trend has started to change. Atlanta’s urban core has started to regain population. Dunham-Jones describes this shift by saying, “The tide definitely turned to where suddenly the city became the model instead of the city trying to become more suburban.” Suburbs began to try to include urban design elements such as walkable downtowns and new multi-use paths.

Even though there has been a shift towards urbanization, sprawl is still rampant in the Atlanta area. According to Givens, solving urban sprawl starts with creating good examples of urbanism in suburban areas which can then be used to gain public support. After that, zoning ordinances can be put in place that allow for more significant change. Givens states, “Most of the region is zoned for the kind of classic sprawl that we know of: detached houses on cul-de-sacs and no businesses next to them. You would have to do a major rezoning effort in counties to be able to even build something wonderful and

more walkable and compact.”

So far, the metro area does have several examples of urbanization or suburban retrofitting. One common way to create urbanism is to focus on a town’s downtown. Duluth, GA is an example of a suburban downtown that was revitalized. As the Gwinnett Place Mall started to die, the city created a new amphitheater and new shops and restaurants opened. Overall, the city created more reasons to be downtown interacting with the community. Other suburban downtowns that have had similar redevelopments throughout the metro area include Powder Springs, Sandy Springs, and Woodstock.

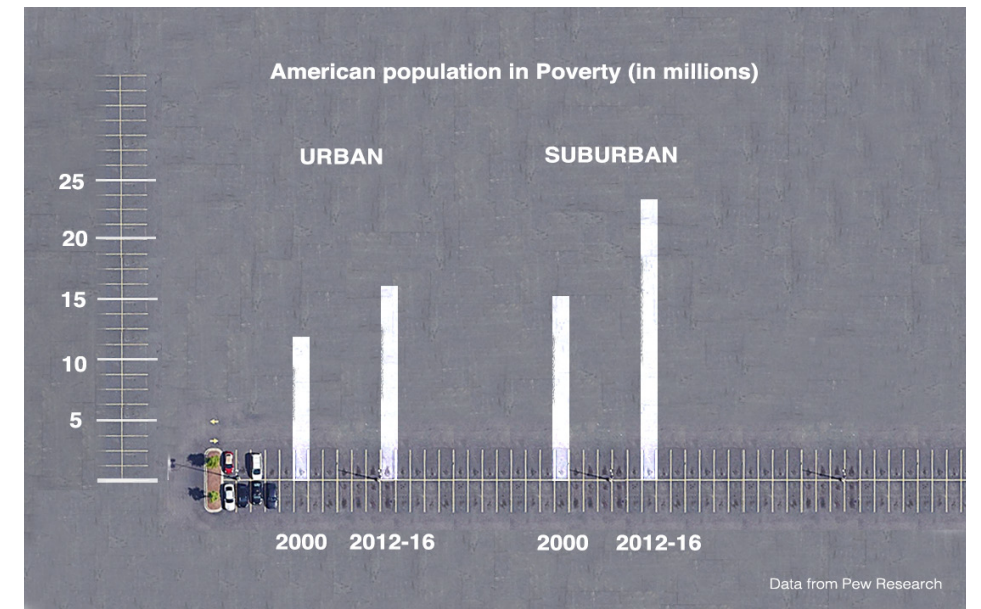
Even expansive office parks can be retrofitted. One example is Peachtree Corners, a planned community in Gwinnett county which contained a large office park with expansive parking lots and winding roads. In order to attract younger employees to the office park, Peachtree Corners became more urban. They created a new downtown area, new apartments, as well as multi-use trails which allowed employees to bike to work, reducing auto dependency.

A mall on Buford Highway was converted to Plaza Fiesta, which has become a community center for the Latino community. A former department store was converted to a 140-stall market inspired by Mexican mercados.

**“The policies ‘target structures of racism and discrimination that have limited housing affordability and exacerbated inequality in Atlanta.’”**

Additionally, it serves as a community gathering spot, with the parking lot hosting rallies to oppose anti-immigration bills proposed in Georgia.

Currently, there is an effort in the city of Atlanta to rewrite the city’s zoning code, putting an end to exclusionary zoning. Exclusionary zoning causes developers to only be able to create single family houses throughout much of the city. Mayor Bottoms issued a press release in December 2020 announcing an initiative to change zoning laws in the city. Bottoms states, “For too long, housing policies have excluded those who are most vulnerable, particularly



Suburban poverty is growing faster than urban poverty

communities of color. We are taking bold actions to reverse these policies and close the homeownership gap and rental affordability for legacy residents of Atlanta.”

The proposed policies address Atlanta’s long history of racist and discriminatory systems that increase inequality in the city. Mayor Bottoms states that the policies “target structures of racism and discrimination that have limited housing affordability and exacerbated inequality in Atlanta.”

According to the Atlanta City Design Housing Initiative’s website, “The plan calls for bold zoning reform to allow more affordable housing types and stronger neighborhoods to address issues of inequality exacerbated by the City’s zoning code.” While the city of Atlanta is making some progress, the proposed solutions do not apply to suburbs outside of city boundaries.

It is important to note that while a shift in urbanism does have benefits, suburbs are growing poorer across the nation. Increasing poverty means that cars are becoming more difficult to afford in the suburbs, and with urban housing prices skyrocketing in Atlanta, it is becoming difficult for low-income citizens in Atlanta to live in a walkable community or a community well-served by transit.

In an interview on displacement, Dr. Calinda Lee, Head of Programs and Exhibitions at the Center for Civil and Human Rights, states, “Families are getting displaced outside of the central city and they tend to get displaced south if [they] don’t have money.” She goes on to describe southern suburban areas, stating, “Those are areas where you have less access to public transportation and there are fewer jobs centered there so you don’t have what we call edge cities. If you go north to Alpharetta or Sandy Springs

or Norcross you have these edge center nodes ... where there’s actually quite a lot of commerce happening. If you can get a job there you can not only move, but also at least have relatively easy access to a lot of work options. But if you get displaced south where the rental costs are cheaper, then you also are farther removed from work and you’re also farther removed from public transportation to get to a job.” Poverty mixes very poorly with the suburbs, a place where being able to afford a car is very important.

It’s important to note that many of the mentioned suburban retrofitting solutions are primarily in wealthier northern suburbs. Less wealthy suburbs are in even greater need of urbanization projects to reduce car-dependence. Givens states, “It’s an environment that was very intentionally built at a car scale, that is hostile to walking, and that is hostile to transit. - There’s economic danger of people just not being able to access jobs if they can’t afford a car, if they’re trapped in these suburban places, and it’s a very serious problem.

“That’s one of the reasons why it is so important to think in terms of rewriting zoning codes and getting people on board with infill developments that are more focused on walking and transit, she adds.” In order to ensure that more people do not get trapped in a cycle of poverty, communities can shift away from car-dependence. By gaining public support through smaller examples of urbanism, zoning codes can be rewritten to promote greater change throughout Atlanta’s suburbs.