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# Debunking the top myths about our suburbs

## Bigger, less expensive housing options, shorter commute times, urban amenities drive shift toward suburbia

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Summer in the city? No, downtown Naperville. Urban-style downtowns are a draw for new residents, experts say.

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By [Jamie Sotonoff](#)

While Chicago's population shrank by 200,000 people this past decade, the suburban population grew by 425,000 people, according to new U.S. Census numbers released last week.

Two-thirds of them moved into Kane and Will counties.

**ADVERTISEMENT** The suburbs, it seems, are the hot place to live.

In fact, more than half of all American households are in the suburbs, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

What's the big attraction?

The suburbs' appeal has always been — and continues to be — good schools, big backyards and open space. But in the past decade, the suburbs have been able to offer more, urban planners say.

While Chicago sees an influx of chain stores and cookie-cutter housing developments, many suburbs are creating urban-styled downtown areas with condos, restaurants and nightclubs. In the past decade, the suburbs have become more diverse, both economically

and ethnically, and added activities like minor league sporting events, concerts, theaters and cultural offerings.

"There are many things going on in the suburbs that weren't going on 10 years ago," said Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which is currently studying the pros and cons of suburban population growth.

"The suburbs are making an effort to bring tomorrow's workers and families what they want. Now they can live in the suburbs and get some of the urban amenities," he said.

In other words, the stereotype that the suburbs are boring, homogeneous, white, middle- and upper-class, culture-free zones — is all wrong.

The census numbers don't necessarily show people are moving from the city to the suburbs, just that the suburbs are more desirable as a place to live.

The reasons people move here are often economic: jobs and housing.

Plus, in our busy world where time has become so precious, experts note a trend against long commutes. So people who work in the suburbs — as 68 percent of the workers in the Chicago metropolitan area do — might be more inclined to live in the suburbs.

Housing costs aren't necessarily lower in the suburbs, but you can get more bang for your housing buck the farther outside the city you go, local Realtors say.

Compared to Chicago's average home price of \$285,365 in 2010, Cook (which includes Chicago), Kane, McHenry and Will counties were less expensive, with average home prices of \$260,849, \$198,273, \$195,922 and \$207,698, respectively. Average prices were \$288,545 in Lake County and \$299,660 in DuPage County, according to the Illinois Association of Realtors.

Michael Parent, the managing broker at Coldwell Banker in St. Charles, said the trend among housing developers is to continue building urban-type developments in the suburbs, with trains to the city nearby.

He agreed there's an anti-commuting sentiment brewing, and people are choosing to live near their workplace rather than waste precious time going back and forth.

"They don't want to spend two hours in the car each day," Parent said.

Where the jobs are, the population follows.

Between March 2009 and March 2010, employment levels declined 3 percent in Chicago and dropped between 3 and 6 percent in most suburban counties. But the suburbs trump Chicago in sheer numbers of jobs, and there are bright spots — like Will County, where jobs increased by 0.8 percent, according to the Illinois Department of Employment Security's "Where Workers Work" report.

Not only did Will County's population grow by 35 percent, but its health care and social assistance jobs grew by 6.6 percent, finance and insurance jobs by 19.1 percent, and administrative and support jobs in waste management and remediation services by 8 percent, the report stated.

Even the suburbs with overall losses saw employment grow in specific areas. For example, health care and social assistance jobs rose 8.3 percent in Lake County; wholesale trade jobs grew 3.2 percent in Kane County; and educational services grew 14.4 percent in DuPage County, the report showed.

"One of the driving factors for where people select their home is where the jobs are," said Bob Dohn, president of the Realtor Association of Northwest Chicagoland.