

# Contemporary Urban America

Problems, Issues,  
and Alternatives

edited by

Marvel Lang

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS OF  
AMERICA



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Center for Urban Affairs  
Michigan State University

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## PREFACE

This book has been written with two objectives in mind: (a) to serve as a basic reader for those desiring a comprehensive view of the contemporary scene in urban America, and (b) to stimulate further investigation of the issues facing urban America by providing an overview of significant problems, issues, and alternatives. In a sense it is a review of current thinking and understanding about the urban condition in America, highlighting some of the most pertinent issues.

The intent of the volume is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the crucial aspects of modern American urban society and to shed some light on alternatives to address pertinent urban problems. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach and integrative perspective seemed the most appropriate to achieve this purpose. The results are an assemblage of contributors from various disciplines who bring the wealth of their research experiences and previous knowledge to the particular subjects they deal with. Although the title of the volume suggests an all-encompassing treatment, it will be apparent to the reader that the topics and contributions were chosen selectively.

The content of the volume is divided under five headings: (a) The Social and Demographic Contexts of Urban America; (b) Aspects of Urban Systems Management; (c) The Urban Social Environment; (d) Community Economic Development and Revitalization; and (e) Technological and Economic Developments and Disparity. The first section revisits the conceptual framework and connotations of urbanism and urbanization with implications for revising urban theory to reflect current realities of population distribution and settlement patterns, and sociocultural lifestyles. It also presents an analysis of recent and projected demographic characteristics and trends of the American population.

The second section--"Aspects of Urban Systems Management"--investigates the political, operational, and criminal justice systems in cities. The first paper, by Persons, presents an in-depth overview and review of recent changes in urban politics and political participation. The second paper, by Patriarche, a long-term city manager and officer of the national organizations of municipal administrators, is an essay on the everyday practical problems of administering municipal governments. This piece gives a rare, firsthand perspective on the nuts and bolts of operating the contemporary American city and the problems that these cities face. Hawkins, likewise, provides a comprehensive assessment of one of the most crucial aspects of contemporary American society--crime and the criminal justice system. He gives a brief statistical summary of recent trends in crime, and compares these trends for blacks and whites. He further sheds some light on the operations of the criminal justice system and the problems of social justice in urban America.

The third section--"The Urban Social Environment"--examines several crucial and diverse problems that have recently gained renewed prominence in contemporary American society and among scholars and researchers. McAdoo provides considerable enlightenment on the problems of African-American males in particular and youth in general. He also provides a synopsis of recent programming efforts. Darden summarizes the present trends of racial residential segregation as the result of years of persistent racial discrimination in the housing marketing industry and negligent public policy enforcement, and makes some future projections considering past and present trends. Ford discusses the educational dilemma from a systems perspective linking the socioeconomic circumstances of groups to the political disparities of education systems delivery.

Section four--"Community and Economic Development and Revitalization"--includes several varied perspectives on urban community development and revitalization. Thomas presents an historical narrative on the national self-help community development initiatives in black communities. He illustrates the vast extent of these initiatives both in time and space, and their importance as an organizing and sustaining force within urban black communities.

LaMore presents a discussion of the conceptual and practical frameworks of the community economic development movement in the U.S. both from the historical development and practical perspectives. Bobby Wilson and Patrick Cowles summarize urban revitalization from a social movement perspective with an interesting case study analysis, and Mark Wilson discusses the recent rise and importance of nonprofit community based organizations in urban revitalization and community development.

The final section--"Technological and Economic Developments and Disparity"--examines the current impacts of technological developments, deindustrialization, and uneven economic development on contemporary urban Americans. Clinkscales' and Steele's paper discusses the impacts of recent communications technology on business locations and operations, and their impacts on employment trends and urban development patterns and processes. Hill and Negrey present a regional analysis of the impacts of deindustrialization on economic development in recent years in the Great Lakes region with national implications. The final paper, by Hurst, uses the case study of one of the most economically devastated industrial cities in the country, Benton Harbor, Michigan, to show at the micro level how deindustrialization, demographic transition, and racial politics can impact the local economy of cities.

This volume is intended as an introductory reading series for undergraduate urban studies and public affairs courses. The contributions have thus been written with this level of students in mind. It should prove fruitful for stimulating their greater interest and more in-depth exploration of the topics presented here.

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## **INTRODUCTION: A SYNOPSIS OF CONTEMPORARY URBAN AMERICA**

John E. Melcher

Contemporary urban America is under great stress and in many cases is in great distress. The problems are many and the solutions are few. We as citizens, policymakers, and scholars strive to understand the conditions of urban America and the factors that led us to our current situation. It is the intention of this collection of readings to make a contribution toward increasing that understanding.

The problems threatening American society are perhaps most obvious in our cities where physical and social deterioration, unemployment, drugs, and crime are most prevalent. There is a great need for public and private cooperation to meet the challenges we face in the 1990s and beyond. Corporations, government agencies, and community-based organizations all share common concerns and are involving themselves in the tasks of promoting understanding and solutions to our urban problems. The issues of education, child care, family welfare, illiteracy, care for the elderly, homelessness and poverty, broken homes, teen pregnancies, and drug abuse all affect the productivity and future of our society.

Some projections related to the future work force, education, and health care underscore the need to take action today. The work force is expected to decline by 1% per year in the 1990s as compared to the 2.9% annual growth rate in the 1970s. Nearly two-thirds or 66% of the new workers are expected to be women while 20% will be non-white immigrant men, and only 15% will be native-born males.



The implications of more women working outside the home mean the needs of businesses and families are coming closer together, and that social issues and corporate success are becoming unavoidably more closely linked. Drug abuse, health care, and education are issues that American society must address in order to maintain its competitive productivity, posture, and viability in the coming years.

Challenges in education are underscored by the fact that 25% of high school students drop out of school annually, while another 25% graduate unprepared for anything above unskilled menial work. It is expected that by the year 2000, one-third of the available jobs will require college degrees, and one-half of all new workers will be minorities. This suggests that America's economic well-being will be heavily dependent on those segments of our population who are currently the most poorly served by our educational systems, namely blacks and Hispanics.

Issues of health and health care will put added stress on an already stressed economy. By the year 2000 medical costs are expected to account for 15% of the Gross National Product as compared to 11.5% today. AIDS, national health insurance, and drug abuse will account for much of this increase. Our inner-city health care providers are already being stressed by the violence of the drug wars, and "crack babies," if they survive premature birth, will require continued care for years into the future.

Our central cities are older and in decline while suburbs sprawl into the countryside. Although redevelopment is taking place in many central cities, this is most often found on waterfront property and is being targeted toward upper middle-class people, tourists, and conventioners. This kind of redevelopment occurs while most other parts of our cities suffer from dilapidation and abandonment, run-down housing, cluttered vacant lots, abandoned junk cars, boarded-up commercial strips, and deteriorated city services and infrastructures. People living in neighborhoods that are riddled by crime and violence related to drugs complain about the lack of police protection and the maintenance of other vital services. Many of our urban residents no longer feel safe in their own homes, especially the elderly. These conditions are no

longer only prevalent in our inner-cities, but can also be found in our older close-in suburbs as well.

Local governments are finding it increasingly difficult to manage our aging cities. City infrastructures are deteriorating and need replacement; homes, businesses, and industries are in need of modernization; and many of our cities are locked in by suburban developments making expansion virtually impossible.

The resolution of these problems requires a strong commitment and support from state and federal governments, yet current policy-making trends are leaving our municipalities to fend for themselves. New federal tax laws penalize cities who raise revenues through sales taxes and impose a federal tax on the interest of public purpose bonds, and state governments have restricted the use of property tax by expanding exemptions and by lowering property values against which taxes can be levied.

To further confound local efforts, most states and the federal government mandate numerous regulations that many cities can not afford to comply with. Clean water standards, waste water standards, and solid waste management regulations are imposed on local governments with inadequate state and federal dollars to help offset the costs.

The population structure of urban America has changed considerably since the 1950s. The population is becoming older and dominated by elderly women. Family structures are changing and homelessness is on the rise. Racial segregation and migration patterns of the black underclass have many implications for urban policymakers. Drugs and crime are on the increase and urban America is becoming more violent while the criminal justice system is increasingly unable to stem this trend.

Many of these problems are linked to issues of our economy. Deindustrialization and uneven economic development have significant impacts on urban America. Similarly, new technologies and requirements for new work force skills tend to fuel social and economic disparity.

The well-being of urban America, however, is not solely the responsibility of government. The private sector and nonprofit organizations are increasingly playing meaningful roles in addressing urban issues. Community action is nothing new to Americans who have always been active and are now addressing such issues as crime, neighborhood stabilization, housing rehabilitation, improved community services, small business development, employment, and work force training. To encourage this level of activism public policy must accommodate and support the needs and interests of the community organizations working to make a difference.

The following collection of readings will discuss many of these issues. It is clear, however, that the problems facing urban America have been with us for many years and in most cases are getting worse. We as citizens, policymakers, and scholars must continue to strive to better understand the nature of these problems and redouble our efforts to mobilize appropriate resources to address them. The need for progressive and creative thinking and sound public policy to address these concerns is a challenge contemporary urban America can ill afford to ignore.

Every so often there needs to be a comprehensive assessment of the scope and range of problems, issues, and alternatives facing urban America. For some time there has been a need for a comprehensive volume that presents a broad spectrum of ideas, perspectives, and critical thinking on the circumstances of our urban areas. Too often teachers and students in introductory and advanced level college courses have to assimilate materials from numerous and varied sources to grasp the breadth and depth of the crucial situations of contemporary urban America. This volume of reading aims toward addressing this need for a comprehensive assessment of the current thinking and understanding of the urban situation in the United States in a format suitable for introductory college level courses.

The circumstances of contemporary urban America are interdisciplinary approaches to their analysis and understanding. Thus, in this volume a group of scholars from a broad range of social science disciplines were invited to share their collective wisdom and insights

from numerous years of research and study of conditions in urban America. The readings included were each developed to provide historical perspectives on the particular issue; some conceptual background and underpinnings; an overview of recent developments and research perspectives; and some implications for policy-making, programmatic strategies, and recommendations for alternative solutions.

In developing this volume, it was intended to cover the gamut of problems and issues most seriously affecting urban America in recent years. It will become obvious to the reader that this, like most volumes, has not achieved this lofty goal. For example, several crucial issues are not covered: housing and the homeless, unemployment and joblessness, and the growing underclass. Although there is not a reading on poverty per se, much is said in many of the readings about the impacts and implications of poverty. The other omitted topics have been extensively written about in recent years. Thus, there is an abundance of recent research and literature available to the interested reader.

The ultimate purpose of this collection of readings is to invite critical thinking about the crucial conditions of urban America as well as to stimulate further research on its pressing problems. Therefore, every attempt has been made to keep the perspectives of these readings straightforward and practically oriented. If we have accomplished this purpose, then our goal has been achieved.

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**PART I**

**THE SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC  
CONTEXTS OF  
URBAN AMERICA**



