



BOXES

A LEGACY OF DEEP DIVIDES: URBAN INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES



New New York City has one of the highest degrees of black segregation. ©Andrew F. Kazmierski/Shutterstock.

For many people in the United States, moving up from the lowest economic ranks to the middle class, and from the middle class to the top income echelons, is becoming increasingly difficult. The richest 1 per cent of households now earns more than 72 times the average income of the poorest fifth of the population, and 23 times that of the middle fifth. In just one year, between 2005 and 2006, the richest 1 per cent of the U.S. population increased their earnings by US \$95,700, while the bottom fifth took home only US \$600 more than the previous year, and the middle fifth stagnated, earning only US \$300, or 0.6 per cent, more than they had in 2005.

The United States has more cities with a Gini coefficient of 0.50, or higher than any other wealthy country. Gini coefficients based on 2006 data for 247 American cities with populations over 100,000 range from 0.35 to 0.57. Forty cities feature Gini coefficients above 0.50, indicating high income inequality due to poverty and racial segregation, post-industrial economic restructuring and combinations of inner-city decline and suburban sprawl.

In "the other America", poor black families and the chronically unemployed are clustered in ghettos, lacking access to quality education, secure tenure, lucrative employment and political power. Higher inequality often corresponds with greater segregation, especially for black residents. The most unequal city, Atlanta, Georgia, has the third-highest degree of black segregation, followed by New York City, Washington, D.C., Fort Lauderdale, and Miami (all with Gini coefficients above 0.52).

In Chicago, discriminatory mortgage lending and public housing development from the 1960s onward conspired to isolate many low-income black families in the central city. Lack of affordable housing outside the city centre, coupled with high unemployment and poor education, has further undermined social mobility and economic advancement. In Washington, D.C., the vast majority of black residents live on the eastern side of the metropolitan area, far from the economic prosperity, wealth, job growth, and quality schools now concentrated in the west.

Earning power and income prospects depend on a geography of opportunity, i.e., access to good-quality institutions, decent housing and amenities that foster good health and prosperity. Even where standards of living are high, the marginalization and spatial segregation of specific groups creates cities within a city: distinctly deprived areas that further reinforce unequal opportunities and the distance between abject poverty and affluence.

Sources: Gini data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey; index of dissimilarity data from CensusScope, based on 2000 U.S. Census data

Sources: Beauregard, 2008; CensusScope, n.d.; Katz, 2002; Kneebone & Berube, 2008; Massey & Fischer, 2000; Massey & Fischer, 2003; McCarthy, 1999; OECD, 2008; Schill & Wachter, 1995; Sherman, 2009; Steffel Johnson, 2006; Von Hoffman, 2009

6
5
4
3
2
1
0
(World Population in Billions)

1200

HIGH URBAN GROWTH RATES, BUT EASTERN AFRICA REMAINS PREDOMINANTLY RURAL

Although they can boast some of the highest urban growth rates, East African countries remain the least urbanized in the world and will only begin to experience an urban transition by the middle of this century. Only 22.7 per cent of the region's population was classified as "urban" in 2007, with some countries featuring significantly lower proportions. The least urbanized countries include Burundi (10.1 per cent), Ethiopia (16.6 per cent), Rwanda (18.2 per cent) and Uganda (12.8 per cent). It is worth noting here that countries with similar income levels and human development indicators, such as Benin in Western Africa and Angola in Central Africa, feature higher rates of urbanization – 40.8 per cent and 55.8 per cent, respectively.

In East Africa between 2005 and 2010 (estimate), annual urban growth rates range from a high of 6.8 per cent in Burundi to a low of 1.4 per cent in the Seychelles. Countries with relatively high annual urban growth rates over 4 per cent include Eritrea, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda. It must be noted that while most East African countries are expected to see a deceleration in the growth of their urban population rates in the next decade, a few may instead experience a surge. For instance, having featured an annual rate of 3.9 per cent between 2005 and 2010 (estimate), Kenya's urban population growth is expected to accelerate to 4.2 per cent between 2015 and 2020. Similarly, projections suggest that Uganda's urban growth rates are bound for a significant rise, from the current 4.4 per cent to over 5 per cent in the next decade.

However, high urban growth rates in East Africa are not anywhere near the "tipping point" where a national population becomes predominantly urban. United Nations projections indicate that by 2030, only 33.7 per cent of the region's total population will be urban. For most countries – except those already highly urbanized, such as Djibouti, Mauritius, Reunion and Seychelles – the transition will only occur after 2040, with the exception of Mozambique, Somalia and Zimbabwe, where it is expected by 2030.

The low rates of urbanization in East Africa result from a variety of factors, including low industrialization, over-dependence on subsistence agriculture, inadequate or outdated land policies, lack of prourban development strategies, insufficient investment in secondary and small cities, past colonial policies that discouraged rural-to-urban migration, and apparent lack of political will to address the "urban question" and turn cities and towns into engines of national growth.

Another particular aspect of the urbanization process in the least urbanized East African countries is that of "divided loyalties" – conflicts between communal loyalty and obligations to ancestral rural land, or to clan and family ties, on the one hand, and the need to adapt to and participate in a modern, urbanizing world, on the other hand. This phenomenon prevents many rural migrants from fully embracing the city as their home or engaging with local authorities to demand better services and rights. Consequently, many cities in the region can be described as hosting "transplanted villagers" who are yet to be turned into truly urban citizens whose loyalties, investments, livelihoods and future prospects are intimately linked with the cities where they live.

Sources: UN DESA, 2008b; Warah, 1999.