

Jobs continue shift to suburbs from downtowns

By Laura Petrecca, USA TODAY

Opportunity-seeking urban dwellers, get ready to start padding that commuting budget. Private sector jobs are continually moving out of city centers to further-flung suburban areas, according to a report out today from the Brookings Institution, an independent public policy institute.

All but three of the 98 major metro areas studied showed a drop in the share of jobs located within 3 miles of downtown, even though the overall number of jobs in those areas increased slightly during the 1998- to-2006 study period.

Detroit, Chicago and Dallas had the most so-called job sprawl, which occurs when companies set up shop away from the city center. More than half of the 98 areas examined had "rapid" job sprawl.

While the study didn't take the recession into account, the trend has continued despite the higher jobless rate and economic woes, says Elizabeth Kneebone, author of the report.

"This is something that doesn't move in lock step with the economy," she says, adding that the report shows that job sprawl continued during the downturn after the dot-com bubble burst.

"The job losses that we're facing right now might slow these trends, but ... it's not likely to reverse these trends."

The rise in job sprawl should be expected, says Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Real estate is often cheaper outside the city core, he says. And workers in suburban areas are less likely to belong to a union, which means lower labor costs, he says.

Kneebone says it's vital that policymakers keep an eye on this trend, because it could lead to long-term problems. For instance, as jobs move to more suburban areas, more cars will be on the road, aggravating traffic congestion and adding auto emissions to the environment, she says. "Growing jobs is important, but it also matters where they are," Kneebone says.

"The more disconnected jobs are from people, the more challenges you face," Kneebone adds. "If you have this outward sprawl and it's not connected to housing and transportation ... it will affect (a region's) economic health moving forward."

New jobs are appearing in places that aren't accessible by public transportation, says Tim Evans, who has studied the trend on a local level for New Jersey Future, a research group. "If you're looking to bring highway traffic under control, this is the last thing that you want to do."

Kneebone also says that there may not be "affordable housing opportunities" for those who don't want to commute and would rather relocate to a suburban area.

She says policymakers should work on ways to reverse the trend, such as using tax incentives to encourage more job creation at a city core.

But Moss suggests a different approach. He says government and business should work together to come up with solutions to efficiently get urban residents to the areas where the new jobs are springing up.

For example, Moss says, urban governments could work with ailing automakers to provide cars — possibly hybrids — to people who need to commute to far-flung jobs.

"The flow of people and businesses to low-cost areas is not easily reversed," he says.