

BOOK REVIEW

Lewyn M *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl: The Case for Market Urbanism* (Palgrave MacMillan 2017)

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Abstract

The writer is of the opinion that government intervention is the probable cause of suburban sprawl in American cities. Two types of sprawl are discussed, namely, sprawl which results due to the creation of suburbs and sprawl arising from the inability to be mobile without the use of one's personal transport. The writer makes use of comparative tables and statistics to add credibility to the findings. The school system, the creation of highways, making jay-walking a crime and the legal obligation to provide huge parking lots for shopping centres are some of the unusual reasons why there has been excessive sprawl in American cities.

Solutions are suggested to counter government intervention. Although the study is USA based, book could have universal appeal. However, as acknowledged by the writer, the cost that will have to be incurred, may be a barrier.

Keywords

Sprawl; Government Intervention; suburbia; USA; Parking lots create sprawl; How the school system has created more sprawl; wider streets are not pedestrian friendly; jay-walking should not be punished; how laws have prevented children from walking in the streets; excessive use of motor vehicles adds to sprawl.

Review

This book deals with suburban sprawl in the United States of America in a novel way. Some critics of sprawl are of the opinion that suburban sprawl is the result of a free market which cannot be altered without massive government intervention, but the writer does not adopt this approach. Sprawl is seen as a consequence (perhaps a partial consequence) of government regulation, spending and intervention and the increased use of motor vehicles.

Despite the book's focussing of the American situation, it may be used internationally as a guide to identifying legislation that has the effect of creating suburban sprawl.

The writer makes it clear in the preface¹ that the book does not promote or discuss anti-sprawl policies (such as promoting land use regulations to reduce suburban development) as that would mean an even "more intrusive government", and states that these policies have been debated many times already and there is little the author has to add to the argument.

Government land-use policies have resulted in an increase in suburban living and total dependence on motor vehicles. Market-oriented reforms to such policies are suggested to reverse sprawl. There are some unusual suggestions for government spending and regulation² that would have an actual impact on sprawl.

The book commences by asking the questions "What is sprawl?" and "Why we should care about sprawl".³ It defines sprawl as "development that is suburban" (or far from a region's "historic core", forcing people to be

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¹ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* vii.

² Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* preface. These include designing wider streets that favour traffic rather than pedestrians.

³ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* ch 1.

dependent on motor vehicles for transport. Various examples of sprawl are given, such as low-density residential development beyond a city's limit, the use of the transitional area between rural and urban land, the low-density single-use development of the urban fringe, and the conversion of meadows and forests into shopping malls that "serve cars better than people."⁴

Sprawl is considered in two ways: firstly, sprawl that occurs at the fringe of a city, and secondly sprawl that is oriented towards cars or a lifestyle where car ownership is an absolute necessity.⁵ These two types of sprawl are dealt with separately.

The consequences of sprawl and why it should be avoided from various standpoints are highlighted. These considerations are not (but should be) on the list of priorities when new suburbs are created and should be taken into account by planners.

The disadvantages of creating sprawling suburbs, (regarded as one of the chief contributors of urban sprawl) rather than developing inner cities are stressed. These include, amongst other things, the lack of access to jobs by public transport from suburbs, and the absolute necessity for individual private transport, which actually worsens the situation. Shops in suburbs can usually be reached by residents only via private transport, and residents who live in suburbs have to travel everywhere by car - as nothing in suburbs is within walking distance of their homes. Large properties in the suburbs add to this problem, as nothing is compact. The result is increased pollution and an unhealthy lifestyle with wasted time spent in traffic on a daily basis.

It is argued that land is thought to be cheaper in the suburbs but that transport costs, petrol fumes and the resultant pollution negate this advantage. Interestingly, the writer uses statistics to show that the prices of

⁴ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* 2.

⁵ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* 3.

houses in cities have in fact become cheaper than in the suburbs in recent times, making the argument that property is cheaper in the suburbs untrue.

Two chapters⁶ explain how government policies and expenditure⁷ support the exodus of people from city centres to suburbs. Market oriented reforms that may reverse the trend and result in the city centres being popular again are suggested.

An argument advanced for the increase in sprawl has to do with parking regulations. By regulating that owners of shopping centres provide free parking to their customers, driving is encouraged, as opposed to walking. It is mooted that parking in shopping centres should actually be at a premium so as to discourage residents from using their cars. Large parking areas around shopping centres in the suburbs also mean that should pedestrians shop, they have to walk through massive parking lots to get to the shopping centre and the shops. Pedestrians need to dodge traffic driving in and out of the parking lots in shopping centres. Legislation could address this issue.

The issue of using parking areas more wisely in cities has recently been referred to by other writers,⁸ who also question the need for massive parking requirements in commercial and residential developments as cities gear towards easier mobility in cities through means other than individually owned motor vehicles.

Houston is cited as an example of a city that has reduced parking requirements to help make the city more compact. It is noteworthy that the midtown population of Houston has tripled since 1990.

⁶ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* chs 2 and 3.

⁷ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* 27. By creating highways, government encourages living in suburbs and thereby creates sprawl.

⁸ See Teale "How Cutting Parking Requirements Could Reduce Congestion in Cities", on how reducing parking requirements could reduce congestion in cities and how surface lots could be reused in new ways and help ease other problems.

Wider streets and highways are shown to cause more speed and more accidents, especially involving pedestrians. The wisdom of making roads with more than four lanes is also questioned, as is the use of *cul de sacs* in residential areas. The argument is that this has the effect of disconnecting a city and results in more dangerous areas to walk or drive in. Interconnected streets are proved to have less crime and fewer burglaries. The writer appreciates that it is not easy or cheap to alter existing roads and highways and suggests that to avoid sprawl no more of these should be permitted.

The schooling system is criticised, as it encourages middle class parents to use schools in suburbs rather than in city centres. This results in an exodus to suburbs when families have school-going children. Reforms are suggested, although it is admitted that changing the schooling system will mean additional costs.

The justice system, according to the author, discourages walking, and there is a dire need for pro-pedestrian reforms⁹ that will have the effect of reducing sprawl.

The situation in the USA, where harsh penalties are imposed for jay-walking, is compared with that in the UK, where jay-walking is not penalised. The UK has a greater pedestrian component but fewer pedestrian accidents, which means that penalising jaywalking is not productive. It has the effect of reducing the number of pedestrians.

Interestingly, the writer talks about how the laws and legislation in the USA discourage even children from walking in the streets. Parents are prosecuted if their children walk alone in the streets, and are blamed for neglecting their minor children. This too does not seem justified as the writer proves that violent crimes relating to children have decreased substantially in the USA. Not permitting children to walk in the streets is perceived by the

⁹ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* ch 5.

writer to be more dangerous, as it contributes to obesity and an unhealthy lifestyle for these children. One cannot help agreeing with these sentiments.

The last chapter¹⁰ is a summary of all the market-oriented solutions that were discussed and promoted in previous chapters.

The author has gone to great lengths to support her submissions by providing a list of tables as a section of the book. Some of the tables compare transportation costs in cities and suburbs¹¹ for most and least car-dependent cities, or compare transportation costs in cities with such costs in suburbs. There is even a table showing pedestrian deaths in car-dependent regions.

These tables and the statistics they set out help prove the writer's arguments and indicate that the theories proposed are not fanciful.¹²

The tables are not the sort of thing one expects to find in a book dealing with sprawl. At times they are a distraction. Perhaps, a better idea would have been for all of the tables to have been grouped together in a separate part of the book to make reading easier.

It seems unlikely that local authorities in the USA or internationally will change their legislation and by-laws in accordance with the suggestions made in the book, especially as this would involve the expenditure of money which most cities do not have. Many meaningful changes in terms of these guidelines may, regrettably, therefore never be realised.

Bibliography

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¹⁰ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* ch 6.

¹¹ Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* 13.

¹² Lewyn *Government Intervention and Suburban Sprawl* 13. These tables are an integral part of the book and appear throughout the book.

Teale C "How Cutting Parking Requirements Could Reduce Congestion in Cities" *SmartCitiesDive* (26 November 2018) accessible at <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/congestion-parking-requirements/542918/> Date of access 27 February 2019