

## Chapter 14

### Urban and Rural Problems

#### 1. A Brief History of Urbanization

- Discuss the health problems that resulted when cities developed.
- Explain why urbanization grew in the United States during the nineteenth century.
- List the problems poor nations face as their cities grow even larger.

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#### Section Outline

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- **Global Urbanization:** Today, more than half the world's population lives in urban areas, and the number of cities over 1 million stands at more than four hundred. By 2030, almost two-thirds of the world's population is projected to live in urban areas. The number of megacities—cities with populations over 10 million—rose from three in 1975 to sixteen in 2000, and is expected to reach twenty-seven by 2025.
- Rapid urbanization poses both opportunities and challenges for poor nations. The opportunities are many. Jobs are more plentiful in cities than in rural areas and incomes are higher, and services such as health care and schooling are easier to deliver because people are living more closely together. In another advantage, women in poor nations generally fare better in cities than in rural areas in terms of education and employment possibilities.

#### Key Takeaways

- U.S. cities grew rapidly during the nineteenth century because of industrialization and immigration.

- The United States is now a heavily urbanized society, whereas it was largely a rural society just a century ago.
- Urbanization poses special challenges for poor nations, which are ill equipped to address the many problems associated with urbanization.

## For Your Review

1. Write an essay in which you discuss the advantages and disadvantages of urbanization.
2. If you had your preference, would you want to live in a large city, small city or town, or rural area? Explain your answer.

## Key Terms

- **Urban Area** -- Defined generally as an incorporated territory with a population of at least 2,500.
- **Urbanization** -- The rise and growth of cities.
- **Megacities** -- Cities with populations over 10 million.

### 2. Sociological Perspectives on Urbanization

- List the assumptions of the three major sociological perspectives concerning urbanization.

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### Section Outline

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- **Functionalism:** A basic debate within the functionalist perspective centers on the relative merits of cities and urbanization: In what ways and to what extent are cities useful (functional) for society, and in what ways and to what extent are cities disadvantageous and even harmful for society? Put more simply, are cities good or bad? In essence, there is no one answer to

this question, because cities are too complex for a simple answer. Cities are both good and bad. They are sites of creativity, high culture, population diversity, and excitement, but they are also sites of crime, impersonality, and other problems. Since sociologists began studying urbanization in the early years of the discipline, an important question has been the degree to which cities are impersonal and alienating for their residents.

- **Conflict Theory:** Conflict theory assumes a basic conflict between society's "haves" and "have-nots," or between the economic and political elites and the poor and people of color. This type of conflict, says conflict theory, manifests itself especially in the nation's cities, in which the "haves" and "have-nots" live very different lives. On the one hand, the rich in American cities live in luxurious apartments and work in high-rise corporate buildings, and they dine at the finest restaurants and shop at the most expensive stores. On the other hand, the poor and people of color live in dilapidated housing and can often barely make ends meet.
- **Symbolic Interactionism:** Scholars of the city who take this approach focus on the nature of urban residents' interaction with each other, the reasons for their patterns of interaction, and their perceptions of various aspects of urban life. Their work has yielded many rich, vivid descriptions of the urban life. Many and probably most of these accounts have concerned the lives of the poor and of people of color.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Functionalism offers both a positive and a negative view of urbanization. Functionalist sociologists differ on the degree of social solidarity that exists in cities.
- According to conflict theory, economic and political elites use their resources to develop cities in a way that benefits them. The diverse social backgrounds of urban residents also contribute to certain types of conflict.
- According to symbolic interactionism, social inequality based on social class, race/ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation affects the quality of urban experiences. In addition to differences in their sociodemographic profiles, city residents differ in other ways. Herbert Gans identified several types of urban dwellers: cosmopolites, unmarried and childless, ethnic villagers, deprived, and trapped.

## For Your Review

1. Write an essay that summarizes the assumptions of any two of the major sociological perspectives on urbanization.
2. Which of the three perspectives makes the most sense to you?  
Why?

## Key Terms

- **Gemeinschaft** -- According to Ferdinand Tönnies, traditional societies in which family, kin, and community ties are quite strong, with people caring for each other and looking out for one another.
- **Gesellschaft** -- According to Ferdinand Tönnies, the weakening of social

ties and personal relationships as societies grow and become industrialized.

- **Mechanical Solidarity** -- According to Émile Durkheim, the social bonds and community feeling characteristic of small, rural societies.
- **Organic Solidarity** -- According to Émile Durkheim, the social ties that still exist in larger, urban societies, which stem from the division of labor.
- **Political Economy** -- The interaction of political and economic institutions and processes.

### 3. Problems of Urban Life

- Discuss any three problems of urban life.
- Provide an example of a problem that specifically arises from the fact that cities consist, by definition, of large numbers of people living in a relatively small space.

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### Section Outline

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- **Fiscal Problems:** One evident problem is *fiscal*: Cities typically have serious difficulties in paying for basic services such as policing, public education, trash removal, street maintenance, and snow removal (at least in cold climates), and in providing certain services for their residents who are poor or disabled or who have other conditions.
- **Crowding:** Cities are crowded in at least two ways. The first involves *residential crowding*: large numbers of people living in a small amount of space. City streets are filled with apartment buildings, condominiums, row houses, and other types of housing, and many people live on any one city block. Residential crowding is perhaps the defining feature of any large

city. The second type of crowding is *household crowding*: Dwelling units in cities (apartments and houses) are typically small because of lack of space, and much smaller overall than houses in suburbs or rural areas. This forces many people to live in close quarters within a particular dwelling unit, especially if they are low-income individuals or families

- **Housing:** Much urban housing is *substandard*, as this chapter's opening news story illustrated, and characterized by such problems as broken windows, malfunctioning heating systems, peeling lead paint, and insect infestation. At the same time, adequate housing is *not affordable* for many city residents, as housing prices in cities can be very high, and usually higher than in rural areas, and the residents' incomes are typically very low. Cities thus have a great need for adequate, affordable housing. Low-income households that must spend more than this benchmark may be unable to afford clothing, food, health care, and transportation. Yet 12 million U.S. households pay more than half their annual incomes for housing. Another housing issue concerns *racial segregation*. Although federal law prohibits segregated housing, cities across the country are nonetheless highly segregated by race, with many neighborhoods all or mostly African American.
- **Homelessness:** In cities throughout the United States, men, women, and children live in the streets, abandoned vehicles or houses, cheap motels, or trailers, or living in someone else's home temporarily. In cities with cold climates, homelessness can be life threatening during the winter. But

regardless of climate, the homeless are in a dire situation. Some research finds that one-third of the homeless are victims of violence or theft during the year; this rate of victimization is four times higher than that in the general population. Homeless shelters provide some relief against crime, hunger, and the many other problems arising from homelessness.

- **Traffic and Transportation:** One manifestation of the traffic problem in cities is traffic *gridlock*, when traffic in all directions is barely moving or not moving at all. Gridlock occurs in urban areas, not rural ones, because of the sheer volume of traffic and the sheer number of intersections controlled by traffic lights or stop signs. Some cities have better public transportation than others, but congested traffic and time-consuming commuting are problems that urban residents experience every day
- **Air Pollution:** If urban residents in general suffer health consequences from air pollution, these consequences are particularly serious and more common among children. Air pollution increases their rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases. These health problems in turn affect their school performance and can have other lifelong consequences.
- **Crime:** Simply put, cities have much higher rates of violent and property crime than do small towns or rural areas. For example, the violent crime rate (number of crimes per 100,000 residents) in 2010 was almost four times higher in the nation's largest cities than in its rural counties, while the property crime rate was more than twice as high.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Major issues and problems confronting U.S. cities today include those involving fiscal difficulties, crowding, housing, traffic, pollution, public education, and crime.
- Several of these problems stem directly from the fact that cities involve large numbers of people living in a relatively small amount of space.

## For Your Review

1. If you were to work for a mayor of a large city to help address one specific problem in that city, which problem would you prefer to work on? Why?
2. Americans often seem to blame city residents for many of the problems affecting U.S. cities today, including low academic achievement and rundown conditions in city schools and crime in the streets. Do you think it is fair to blame city residents for these problems, or are there other reasons for them? Explain your answer.

## Key Term

- **Deviant Places** -- Sociologist Rodney Stark's term for neighborhoods that have severe crowding and other features that promote high crime rates.

### 4. Problems of Rural Life

- List three positive aspects of rural life in the United States.
- Describe two problems of rural life in the United States.

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### Section Outline

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- **Rural Health:** Urban areas have 134 physician specialists for every

100,000 residents, but rural areas have less than one-third this number.

Compounding these shortages are other problems. The first is that the small hospitals typical of rural areas generally lack high-quality care and equipment. A patient who needs heart bypass surgery, brain surgery, or other types of complex medical care is likely to have travel to an urban hospital far away. The second problem is the long distances that ambulances and patients must travel. Because ambulances and other emergency vehicles must travel so far, rural residents with emergencies receive medical attention more slowly than their urban counterparts.

- **Rural Poverty:** Although many U.S. cities have high poverty rates, the poverty rate is actually somewhat higher overall in rural areas than in urban areas. In 2010, 16.5 percent of rural residents were classified as officially poor, compared to 14.9 percent of urban residents. However, the poverty rate in the nation's largest cities was higher yet at 19.7 percent. Rural poverty is thought to be more persistent than urban poverty because of the factors that contribute to its high rate. These factors include the out-migration of young, highly skilled workers; the lack of industrial jobs that typically have been higher paying than agricultural jobs; and limited opportunities for the high-paying jobs of the information age.
- **Domestic Violence:** One of the sad facts of rural life is domestic violence. This form of violence is certainly common in urban areas, but the defining feature of rural areas—a relatively low number of people living in a relatively broad area—creates several problems for victims of domestic

violence, most of them women.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Like cities, rural areas also have their advantages and disadvantages. They can be beautiful, relaxing places in which to live, but they also lack many of the cultural advantages and other amenities that cities feature.
- Rural areas are characterized by sparse populations and long distances that people must travel. These conditions make it difficult to provide adequate public transportation and various kinds of human services. The poverty of many rural areas aggravates these problems.

## **For Your Review**

1. If you had your choice, would you want to live in a large city, medium-sized city, small town, or rural area? Explain your answer.
2. Americans often seem to blame city residents for many of the problems affecting U.S. cities today, including low academic achievement, rundown conditions in city schools, and crime in the streets. Do you think it is fair to blame city residents for these problems, or are there other reasons for them? Explain your answer.

### **5. Improving Urban and Rural Life**

- Explain the value of a sociological perspective for addressing urban housing and crowding problems.

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### **Section Outline**

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- Here again a sociological perspective offers some insight, as it reminds us

that these problems are intimately related to inequalities of social class, race and ethnicity, and gender. Although it is critical to provide adequate, affordable housing to city residents, it is also important to remember that these various social inequalities affect who is in most need of such housing. Ultimately, strategies aimed at providing affordable housing will not succeed unless they recognize the importance of these social inequalities and unless other efforts reduce or eliminate these inequalities. Racial residential segregation also remains a serious problem in our nation's urban centers, and sociologists have repeatedly shown that residential segregation contributes to many of the problems that urban African Americans experience. Reducing such segregation must be a fundamental goal of any strategy to help American cities.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Many of the problems of urban and rural life were addressed in earlier chapters. The strategies discussed in these chapters to address these problems thus also apply to the problems examined in this chapter.
- Many urban problems are associated with poverty and racial discrimination. Reducing these problems should help relieve urban problems.
- The characteristics of rural areas that often make them so appealing also lead to certain problems that are especially urgent in rural areas.

## **For Your Review**

1. How do you think American cities should try, if at all, to

reduce traffic congestion?

2. Are urban problems worse than rural problems, or are rural problems worse than urban problems? Explain your answer.