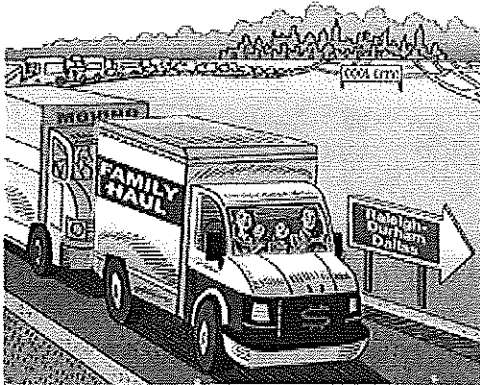




November 27, 2007

COMMENTARY



Martin Kozlowski

The Rise of Family-Friendly Cities

By JOEL KOTKIN

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For much of the past decade, business recruiters, cities and urban developers have focused on the "young and restless," the "creative class," and the so-called "yuspie" -- the young urban single professional. Cities, they've said, should capture this so-called "dream demographic" if they wish to

inhabit the top tiers of the economic food chain and enjoy the fastest and most sustained growth.

This focus -- epitomized by Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm's risible "Cool Cities" initiative -- is less successful than advertised. Cincinnati, Baltimore, Cleveland, Newark, Detroit and Memphis have danced to the tune of the hip and the cool, yet largely remain wallflowers in terms of economic and demographic growth. Instead, an analysis of migration data by my colleagues at the Praxis Strategy Group shows that the strongest job growth has consistently taken place in those regions -- such as Houston, Dallas, Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham -- with the largest net in-migration of young, educated families ranging from their mid-20s to mid-40s.

Urban centers that have been traditional favorites for young singles, such as Chicago, Boston, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, have experienced below-average job and population growth since 2000. San Francisco and Chicago lost population during that period; even immigrant-rich New York City and Los Angeles County have shown barely negligible population growth in the last two years, largely due to a major out-migration of middle class families.

Married people with children tend to be both successful and motivated, precisely the people who make economies go. They are twice as likely to be in the top 20% of income earners, according to the Census, and their incomes have been rising considerably faster than the national average.

Indeed, if you talk with recruiters and developers in the nation's fastest growing regions,

you find that the critical ability to lure skilled workers, long term, lies not with bright lights and nightclubs, but with ample economic opportunities, affordable housing and family friendly communities not too distant from work. "People who come here tend to be people who have long commutes elsewhere, and who have young children," notes Pat Riley, president of Alan Tate company, a large residential brokerage in Charlotte, N.C. "They want to be somewhere where they don't miss their kids growing up because there's no time."

There is a basic truth about the geography of young, educated people. They may first migrate to cities like New York, Los Angeles, Boston or San Francisco. But they tend to flee when they enter their child-rearing years. Family-friendly metropolitan regions have seen the biggest net gains of professionals, largely because they not only attract workers, but they also retain them through their 30s and 40s.

Advocates of the brew-latté-and-they-will-come approach often point to greater Portland, Ore., which has experienced consistent net gains of educated workers, including families. Yet most of that migration -- as well as at least three quarters of the region's population and job growth -- has been not to the increasingly childless city, but to the suburban periphery. This pattern holds true in virtually every major urban region.

Contrary to popular belief, moreover, the family is far from the brink of extinction. Most Americans, notes the Pew Research Center, still regard marriage as the ideal state. Upwards of 80% still marry, and the vast majority end up having children. Brookings demographer Bill Frey notes that the number of married couples with children has actually been on the rise after decades of decline. Mr. Frey traces this to changing attitudes among the native born, as well as the growth of a largely family-oriented immigrant population.

The rapidly increasing percentage of college educated women, a group that places a high value on marriage and children, are emerging as critical shapers of the future skilled workforce. Two decades ago, these women were less likely than other women to marry. Today, a single, 30-year-old woman with a graduate degree has about a 75% chance of getting married, compared with a single 30-year-old woman with less education, who has about a 66% chance. Overall, reports The Center for Economic and Policy Research, women in their late 20s and early 30s who are in the top 10% earning bracket are just as likely to be married as other women who work full-time.

True, today's American family does not mirror the narrowly defined unit of the 1950s, but it does reflect, ironically perhaps, aspects of our *earlier* social structures. As Stephanie Coontz at the Council on Contemporary Families has pointed out, the 1950s were an anomaly; a period of high birthrates, low divorce rates and remarkable social stability, with a preponderance of nuclear families. Earlier generations of American families tended to be more *ad hoc*, or as we would say today, "blended," with uncles, aunts, grandparents, stepparents and domestic employees often playing major roles in child-rearing. These patterns were reinforced by the dislocations of immigration and westward migration.

Today's families are similarly expansive. With a majority of wives now working, and more

having their children at a later age, child-raising roles have tended to extend beyond the biological parents. It may not take a "village," as Hillary Clinton has asserted, to raise a child, but families are becoming more complex. For example, many ostensibly single and childless households include "empty nesters," grandparents or divorced fathers, who, although not living with their progeny, are still deeply involved family members.

This web of relationships affects where people live and work. The presence of a familial network has long been known as one reason for immigrants to cluster. Similarly, grandparents tend to follow grandchildren, and sometimes vice-versa, since they offer the prospect for low-cost help with childcare.

The family's enduring supremacy is also apparent in the attitudes of young people, the so-called millennials. As Morley Winograd and Michael Hais suggest in their upcoming book, "Millennial Mainstream," this new generation is twice as numerous as Generation X, and far more family-oriented. They display markedly less proclivity for teen pregnancy, abortion and juvenile crime. They also tend to have more favorable relations with their parents, with half staying in daily touch and almost all in weekly contact.

The evidence thus suggests that the obsession with luring singles to cities is misplaced. Instead, suggests Paul Levy, president of Philadelphia's Center City district association, the emphasis should be on retaining young people as they grow up, marry, start families and continue to raise them.

Mr. Levy notes that the remarkable transformation of once sedate Center City -- the area's population has grown to over 90,000 -- has indeed been due primarily to young singles, childless couples and a few "empty nesters." The proliferation of clubs, restaurants and bars has created an almost Manhattan ambiance. But he suggests that the district is reaching the limits of its success. The flourishing singles-bar scene has not compensated for the continued movement of middle- and working-class families -- as well as jobs -- to the region's burgeoning suburbs. Amid a much-hyped boom, Philadelphia has lost population, and its share of the region's wealth has dropped to 17% from 22% since 1990.

Only 14% of Center City residents have children, Mr. Levy says, and roughly half its young people depart once they enter their mid-30s. "If you want to sustain the revival you have to deal with the fact that people with six year olds keep moving to the suburbs," Mr. Levy suggests. "Empty nesters and singles are not enough."

Boosters such as Mr. Levy look increasing towards reviving the traditional family neighborhoods which surround Center City. His organization has worked closely with local public and private schools, church and civic organizations to build up the support structures that might convince today's youthful inner city urbanites to remain as they start families. "Our agenda," Mr. Levy says, "has to change. We have to look at the parks, the playgrounds and the schools."

Such a shift in emphasis could mark a new beginning for many long-neglected urban neighborhoods across the country. It's time to recognize that today, as has been the case for

millennia, families provide the most reliable foundation for successful economies.

Mr. Kotkin, Presidential Fellow at Chapman University, is the author of "The City: A Global History" (Modern Library, 2006).

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