Growth on the Fringe: Commerter Links in the Twin Cities and Beyond

by Elvin K. Wyly and John S. Adams

On the last day of 1992, an obscure note buried in the pages of a federal report announced that Sherburne County, Minnesota was to be incorporated into the newly expanded Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), since more than 45 percent of Sherburne's workers commuted to the Twin Cities. The designation was a matter of routine in Washington, where MSAs are revised every ten years with data on county-to-county commuting, but the new classification did not go unnoticed in Minnesota, where a Sherburne County commissioner quipped, "I'm one of those who moved up here to get away from the metro area." By stripping the three-county St. Cloud MSA of a third of its population, the new census designation has created the bizarre situation in which the southeastern portion of the city of St. Cloud is now grouped together with Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The reclassification of Sherburne County is only the most recent consequence of trends underway for several decades in American cities. As population, housing, and employment disperse beyond central cities, our metropolitan areas continue to spread out across the landscape at lower and lower densities, engulfing communities that once lay far beyond the urban fringe. In the process, the paths traced out by people leaving for work each morning create ever more intricate overlaps in the places that straddle metropolitan boundaries.

How have these commuting patterns changed in recent years around the Twin Cities, a metropolitan area with its share of suburban sprawl? This article is a review of the changing journey to work in Minnesota, based on a study of county-to-county
commuting data from the United States Census of Population and Housing. As the Twin Cities continue to spread outward from their turn-of-the-century urban cores, the boundaries between the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota become increasingly blurred, and the widening gap between federal definitions and state definitions of the metropolitan area raises important questions about the jurisdiction of the Twin Cities' regional planning body, the Metropolitan Council.

Suburban Growth Around the Twin Cities

If there is a single distinguishing characteristic of the North American city, it is the predominantly low density of residential growth. In the Twin Cities this pattern has been especially pronounced. Rapid urban growth in the late nineteenth century fostered a wildly optimistic outlook on the part of streetcar company owners, leading them to overbuild the network in anticipation of continued urban expansion. When urban growth proved more modest than expected, the vast surplus of accessible sites lowered land prices and encouraged large lot sizes, producing some of the lowest residential densities among midwestern cities.

After World War II, the automobile permitted residential development at even lower densities. By making huge tracts of suburban land accessible to city job centers, the automobile allowed average families to leave the crowded housing of the urban core for new homes on the fringe. The pint-up housing demand of the 1930s and 1940s created additional pressures to expand the urban fabric, while federal legislation provided funding for roads and home mortgages. New housing construction responded to the twin demands for more housing units and more space, resulting in the suburban scene so common in American cities today: hundreds of square miles of single-family homes, each on a private lot with easy access to the growing network of roads and highways.

Decentralized growth brought a variety of planning problems to places like the Twin Cities, which eventually expanded to contain more than 200 independent municipalities. Local services duplicated in small, adjacent municipalities were eventually seen as inefficient, sometimes in conflict with one another, and also unfair. The costs of extending and maintaining extensive road, sewer, and water networks for new homes were often subsidized by residents in fully developed areas who received little benefit from the investments. In response to these problems, the state legislature created the Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities, a metropolitan planning organization that soon became a national model of regional government and cooperation. When established in 1967, the council was given jurisdiction over a seven-county area encompassing most of the functioning urban system around Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Population and economic activity have continued to disperse in the twenty-seven years since the Metropolitan Council was established, and the problems of suburban sprawl of the 1960s have remained issues of local government to the present day. Compared with many cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul have achieved enviable success in maintaining central-city viability, but the balance continues to favor the developing suburban rings. Together, the central cities lost 100,000 people between 1970 and 1990, and the proportion of the metro area's population outside the central cities increased from 63 percent to 74 percent. Of the 255,000 new jobs created in the metropolitan area in the 1980s, the central cities garnered only 5,000.*

The continued dispersal of population and employment has expanded the sphere of the Twin Cities region, creating a growing gap between definitions of the metro

Cover photo: Afternoon traffic begins to build as commuters exit Interstate 94 heading toward Wright and Sherburne Counties. While these counties are within the census-defined Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), they are beyond the Metropolitan Council's planning jurisdiction, the seven-county Twin Cities Metropolitan Area (TCMA). Wright and Sherburne sent a combined total of almost 23,000 commuters into the TCMA in 1990, according to census estimates.

area. In contrast to the Metropolitan Council's seven-county jurisdiction, the United States Census now includes eleven Minnesota counties and two Wisconsin counties in the Twin Cities MSA. Many of the outlying counties are now within reach of the growing job base of second- and third-ring suburbs, creating incentives for new development to leapfrog the Metropolitan Council's seven-county planning jurisdiction. Uncoordinated dispersal of jobs and housing places additional demands on the transportation network as both ends of the work journey realign from the suburb-to-central-city focus of the 1950s, to a complex and overlapping web of suburb-to-suburb commuting.

These familiar aspects of urban history and local geography have been studied for many years, and the phenomenon of suburban sprawl became the subject of serious criticism almost as soon as it was observed. Yet even in the Twin Cities, touted for its aggressive regional planning, the main incentives for low density suburban development continue to push the urbanized area farther outward from the central cores. The result is a growing gap between the seven-county jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Council and the much larger metropolitan reality—more than a dozen counties integrated in the metropolitan economy by the daily flow of people, goods, and information. To sketch an outline of this broader metropolitan area, and to see how the Twin Cities has evolved in relation to other cities in the state, we analyzed commuter flows for the period 1950 to 1980 in a study area including Minnesota and counties in adjacent states (Figure 1).

The Increasing Complexity of Urban Commuting Fields

Low-density suburban and exurban growth has effectively reorganized the geography of home and work in Minnesota's urban systems. Overall, the share of Minnesota's commuters crossing a county boundary on their way to work has tripled in the last thirty years, to 29 percent in 1990. The growth in inter-county commuting slowed down in the 1980s, but the absolute number of commuters is considerable, and underscores the importance of the links between the Twin Cities and surrounding communities in Greater Minnesota (Figure 2). By 1990 more than 70,000 people living outside the Metropolitan Council's jurisdiction worked in the Twin Cities.

The complexity of these commuter flows makes it difficult to define today's sprawling metropolitan areas. The conventional approach defines a metro area as the set of counties sending a certain share of their workers to a central, core county that includes the area's largest city. As the metro area expands, commuter flows to counties outside the core are also considered, along with the population densities of sending and receiving areas. This definition is known as the daily urban system, and with some revisions it has been used by the Census Bureau since 1950 to define metropolitan areas for the purpose of data collection and federal fund allocations.

The daily urban system is well suited to the traditional urban model—a high-density downtown, surrounded by predominantly residential suburbs. Yet the continued dispersal of population and purchasing power has brought most of the metropolitan economy's job growth out into the suburbs, and in today's multi-centered metropolitan areas

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Figure 2. Number of Workers Commuting to Each Zone From Other Zones, 1960 to 1990

Source: special tabulations of decennial U.S. Census journey-to-work frequency tables and Bureau of Economic Analysis data.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This project was part of a year-long research program funded jointly by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the University of Minnesota's Center for Transportation Studies. Related research funded by Mn/DOT includes a series of papers analyzing several aspects of transportation use in Minnesota:

- Long-Distance Commuting in Minnesota (Report No. 94-24) presents a socioeconomic profile of the quarter of the state's commuters who spend more than thirty minutes in the daily work journey.

- Transportation-Based Classifications of Minnesota's Counties and Metropolitan Statistical Area Tracts (Nu. 94-25) groups the state's counties and urban neighborhoods according to several demographic and journey-to-work variables.

- Data Sources for Travel Behavior Research: A Case Study of Reverse Commuting Among Low-Income Residents of Minneapolis (No. 94-26) uses census data and travel surveys to sketch a profile of Minneapolis residents who work in the suburbs.


- Transportation Use in Minnesota: An Analysis of the 1990 Census of Population and Housing: Project Summary, (No. 94-28) summarizes the preceding reports.

These reports will be available from Mn/DOT sometime in November. Copies may be obtained by phone at 612/282-2274 or by writing Mn/DOT, Office of Research Administration, Mail Stop 330, 117 University Ave., St. Paul, MN 55155.
the daily urban system concept often yields contradictory results. While 45 percent of Sherburne County's workers commuted to the Twin Cities metro area in 1990, for instance, slightly more than half worked in the St. Cloud metro area. One criterion used by the Census Bureau mandates that Sherburne be added to the Twin Cities, while another required that it remain part of the St. Cloud MSA.

Can alternatives to the daily urban system provide better definitions of urban commuting fields? We used a statistical procedure known as factor analysis to explore this question, defining Minnesota's commuting fields according to the distribution of each county's work journeys. Each county sends some of its workers to each of many job centers in other counties, while attracting a certain share of workers from nearby residential areas. Factor analysis allows us to compare counties on the basis of their interaction with all the other places in the study area, grouping those with statistically similar commuter flows. Each county is grouped, as far as possible, with only one commuting field, but places with extremely complex flows will be associated with more than one field.

Statistically-defined commuter fields serve only to illustrate further the growing complexity of Minnesota's labor markets, and underscore the growing interdependence of outlying suburbs and exurban areas. While the Twin Cities field was relatively compact and focused in 1960, one could see, even then, an early overlap developing in Wright and Sherburne Counties to the west and in Rice County to the south (Figure 3). Broader regional mobility came with highway improvements and the completion of the interstate system in the 1970s. By 1980 overlapping commuter fields had increased—with a growing number of commutes to the north, west and south. By 1990, ten counties surrounding the Twin Cities were linked to adjacent commuting fields, and rigorous statistical methods provide little help in distinguishing separate urban systems. In short, places on the metropolitan fringe are being drawn into diffuse, overlapping labor markets that are too complex to be described with simple classification schemes.

### Demographic and Economic Change Within Urban Commuting Fields

The incorporation of exurban communities into the Twin Cities economy is only one symptom of a broader transformation of Minnesota's labor markets. As metropolitan population, jobs, and purchasing power have suburbanized, the state's network of trade centers has experienced a gradual reorganization. Cities and towns close to metropolitan areas have moved up the urban hierarchy, becoming larger trade centers with rapid growth in local employment. These places now attract workers from counties more distant from the metropolitan economy, and in turn send some of their residents to the Twin Cities (Figure 4).

Some towns north and east of the Twin Cities have capitalized on the exurban growth that brought relatively affluent new residents and visitors. The string of small towns along U.S. Highway 8 in Chisago County have attracted a growing tourist traffic, and Stillwater and other towns on the St. Croix River have traded their nineteenth century lumbering economy for the specialty retail jobs of the tourist trade.

In addition to drawing trade functions not commonly found on the main streets of small-town Minnesota, these communities have also attracted a growing number of new residents who maintain their ties to the Twin Cities economy. Long commutes are most common among upper-income, white-collar professionals who drive to jobs in the Twin Cities area.

Communities on the northwest fringe of the Twin Cities are also tightly integrated into the metropolitan economy, but these places have a distinctly different character. In a case study of five counties straddling the boundaries between the Twin Cities and St. Cloud, we found that more than a third of the workers commute longer than thirty minutes. Yet in a reversal of conventional patterns, the longest work journeys were reported by the group with the lowest average household income. Blue-collar employees who have moved into their homes within the last five years report an average travel time of twenty-nine minutes.

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*McLeod County, to the west of Carver, also appears early as part of the Twin Cities field, but alternately disappears between 1970 and 1990. This is partly a result of the method used to classify counties, which considers all work journey flows simultaneously. McLeod County has sent a relatively stable stream of commuters to the Twin Cities since the late 1960s (at least 500 to Hennepin County since 1970), but growing interaction with places west of the Twin Cities resulted in its classification with a different urban system in 1990.*

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* A recent study by the University of Wisconsin's Applied Population Laboratory reported that among Wisconsin residents commuting to Minnesota, more than 40 percent have graduate degrees (compared to 3 percent among those working in Wisconsin) and about 13 percent have salaries between $50,000 and $75,000 (compared to 1 percent among Wisconsin workers). See "Twin Cities commuters change face of Wisconsin," by D. Cassano. *Star Tribune*, 31 October 1993, p. 1A. 
suggesting that some workers of modest means are willing to trade more time on the road for the additional space and inexpensive housing of exurbia.

Beyond the metropolitan economy, commuter flows have strengthened the interdependence of labor markets in Greater Minnesota. Manufacturing has decentralized outward from the central cities to the suburbs and beyond, and in many rural areas economic activity has concentrated into a small number of regional centers. The result is an increase in the number of workers traveling between rural counties to widely-spaced regional employment opportunities, particularly in north-central Minnesota (Figure 4).

Conclusions and Implications

The past three decades have brought profound changes in the fabric of Minnesota’s labor markets. The result is a remarkably complicated set of geographical relationships between home and work, blurring the boundaries between urban, suburban, and exurban communities. The share of workers crossing a county boundary on the way to work has tripled since 1960, and by 1990 more than 70,000 workers drove to the Twin Cities from communities beyond the seven-county metropolitan area.

This increasing interdependence is at odds with traditional ways of studying the city. While we are accustomed to thinking of urban places as consisting of one or many centers and edges, we also know from everyday experience that one place’s center may be another’s edge. In the last several decades, Minnesota’s largest urban region has evolved into a complex, multicentered system integrated by the daily flow of people, goods, and information. The new form challenges us to explore new and innovative ways of planning for its complexity.

The growing interdependence of metro and exurban communities is often portrayed as an inevitable consequence of the suburbanization trends underway for nearly a century in most American cities. Yet not all of the consequences of decentralized growth are inevitable, and metropolitan and regional planning can play an important role in balancing the costs and benefits of growth and decline. Indeed, suburban growth presented serious problems in many urban areas simply because the scale of municipal planning did not expand to keep pace with metropolitan growth. In Minnesota, the Metropolitan Council was created to get out in front of the problems, superseding individual cities to encompass the entire urbanized area. Now, at the county level, we see the same mismatch emerging—but at a much broader scale—yet the council lacks the power to annex adjacent counties and it yields insufficient clout even in its present jurisdiction. As metropolitan problems have worsened, the public, the legislature, and the governor have voiced extravagant expectations for the council while limiting its power and resources. Only with forceful, supportive attitudes in the governor’s office and in the legislature will the Metropolitan Council be able to plan for continued changes in the spatial structure of the Twin Cities region.

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The authors wish to thank several people who helped at various stages of their project. Linda McCarthy, doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Minnesota, and Jae-Keon Choi, currently Visiting Assistant Professor at Macalester College, performed initial tabulations of the journey-to-work data. Steven D. Barstad, Patricia C. Bland, Yi Chin, James D. Fitzsimmons, Gloria Swiecikowski, and Wendy Treadwell provided technical and advisory assistance with the journey-to-work calculations. Computing resources were provided by a grant from the University’s Computer and Information Services.