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Title: The Origins of the Shrinking City

Abstract: In his landmark history of Detroit, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Thomas Sugrue argued that the city's decline "began, unheralded, in the 1950s" due to the interaction of deindustrialization and racist housing, employment, and planning practices. In this paper, I argue that Detroit's decline began earlier. Using Census data, real estate maps, HOLC ratings, planning reports, newspaper accounts, and photographs, I show that Detroit's inner city was already in decline by the end of the 1920s, and this decline spread citywide over the next two decades. In the 1930s, over half of the city's Census tracts lost population. Decline spread further in the 1940s, despite the economic boom of the war years. Like the "urban crisis" that would enervate the entire city after World War II, this earlier pattern of decline was driven by the loss of industrial employment and racist housing, employment, and planning practices. But while the story may be familiar, reframing the timeline and geography of decline is significant because it clarifies the nature of "shrinking cities" in the United States. The term shrinking city is usually applied to municipalities that have sustained multiple decades of population and job loss. Detroit is the most-cited example in the research literature, but dozens of cities in the United States have lost households for forty or more years. I argue, however, that shrinkage is best understood not as an *urban* crisis but as a metropolitan crisis. Detroit's decline began more than 90 years ago within the bounds of the Grand Boulevard, but the geography of decline has expanded over time to encompass not just the central city—parts of which are now gentrifying—but also most inner ring suburbs as well.

Keywords: shrinking cities, urban crisis, Detroit, deindustrialization, racialization

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