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THE HIGHWAYS CAUSE URBAN DECLINE MYTH: WHEN THEORY AND DATA COLLIDE

By Wendell Cox

Freeways Cause Urban Decline? Dr. Patrick Condon at the University of British Columbia released a paper in March entitled: “Canadian Cities, American Cities, Our Differences are the Same.” The paper suggests that freeways were a prime cause of US central city decline. The principal example Dr. Condon used was St. Louis, which has lost more of its population than any other major city (more than 60 percent since 1950). Coincidentally, in 2000, St. Louis had among the most lane miles of freeway per capita of any US urban area with more than 1,000,000 population. But it takes more than a single case to prove a theory.

Population and Freeways: Condon dismisses crime and racial tensions, noting that other cities where the same problems occurred did not have the same population loss. True enough. But for Condon’s theory to hold up would require that other urban areas building similarly intense freeway networks to also show similar core population losses. They did not.

Freeway Building Atlanta and Seattle Did Much Better: Take for example, Atlanta, which lost only 13 percent of its population since 1960, yet ranked second in freeway lane miles per capita among the 21 large urbanized areas with core cities that did not substantially expand their boundaries since 1960. Or consider Seattle and Cleveland, which ranked high, building almost identical mileage per capita. The city of Cleveland lost 47 percent of its population, while the city of Seattle gained. Clearly, there is more going on here than highway construction.

San Francisco Built More Freeways and Earlier: A review of earlier data strengthens the case. The first comprehensive urban lane mile data was issued in 1982. By that time, most of the urban population decline had occurred and virtually all of the core city freeway building had been completed. Yet, in lane miles per capita, St. Louis ranked *behind* Seattle and San Francisco, hardly prime examples of urban decline.

The Theory and the Data are Strangers: This is not about isolated cases. The data simply does not confirm the “Condon Thesis”. A linear regression analysis shows no statistical significant association between freeway lane miles per capita and the share of population lost in the core. The data is virtually “all over the map” (Figure 1).

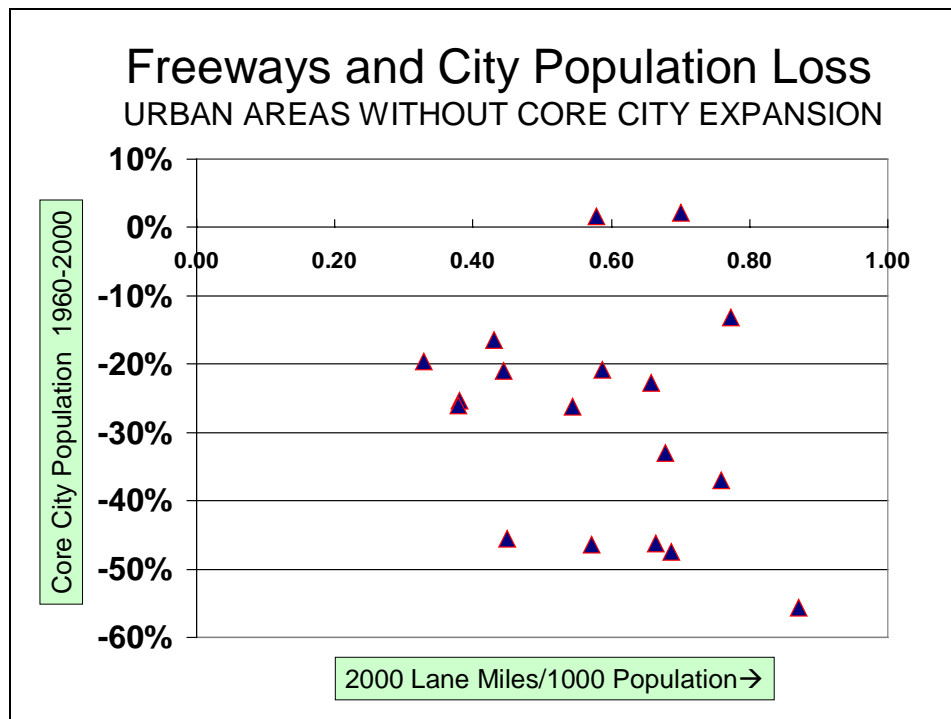


Figure 1

Cities Decline Without Freeways: There are many reasons why American core cities have declined. If it were highways, then why did Copenhagen, which built little by American standards, lose more than one-third of its population, without an American freeway system? Why did Paris, which has jealously guarded its core from freeways, lose a quarter of its population? The list could go on and on.

The Role of Transportation: Busing: This is not to suggest that transportation did not play a role in the more severe population losses generally sustained by American cities. But the transportation mode most responsible for emptying the city was not the freeway; it was the school bus --- forced busing. This decimated neighborhood after neighborhood, as people voted with their feet for what they perceived to be the best interests of their kids. And who wouldn't have? Canadian cities did not suffer anything like this extreme form of social engineering. During the 1970s, when forced busing (and its threat) was at its peak, nearly 60 percent of the core city population loss occurred (1950-2000). And since 1980, only three percent of the loss has occurred. But the renaissance is less than whole. The central city systems of non-education are ensuring that where urban renaissance occurs school children and their parents are absent. Of course, forced busing is not all to blame. But no further discussion is required to show the unsustainability of the Condon Theory.

Lines on a Map do Not Make Freeways: Coincidentally, there are even problems with the basic data used in the analysis. An example is the St. Louis 1960 freeway system shown on a map on page 11 (Figure 2). Much of the purported system simply did not exist in 1960. For example, the two bridges shown crossing the Mississippi River were not opened until 1967. The fact that there were no Interstate highway bridges didn't matter much, however, since parts of the freeway system shown to the east of downtown were also not open in 1960. The northern and

western beltway (I-270) was not opened until the late 1960s. Nor was Interstate 55 shown leaving downtown toward the south.

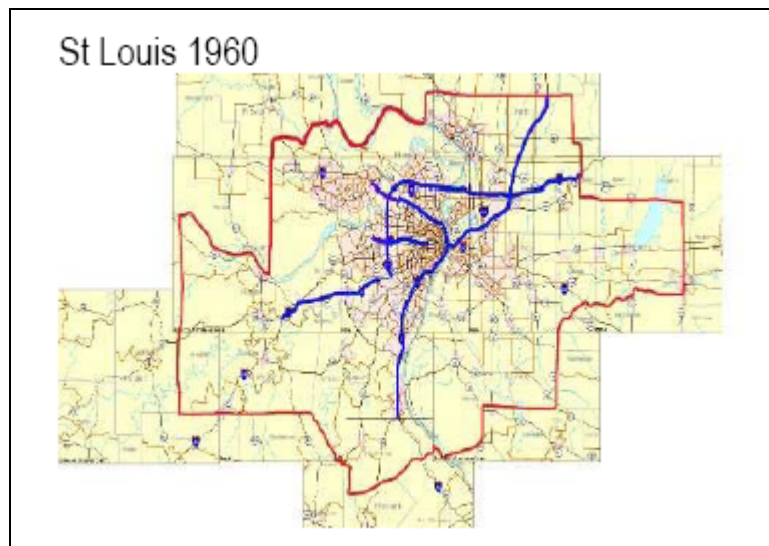


Figure 2

Accessed July 6, 2004

The 1950s: Sprawl Without Freeways: Yet, despite the fact that much of the map above shows freeways that were not yet open, St. Louis had managed to lose more than 100,000 residents between 1950 and 1960. This illustrates one of the difficulties faced by theorists who are inclined to blame central city losses on freeways. Population loss was the rule, not the exception in built-out central cities during the 1950s (Figure 3). Most urban freeways were not opened until after 1960s (Los Angeles is a notable exception).

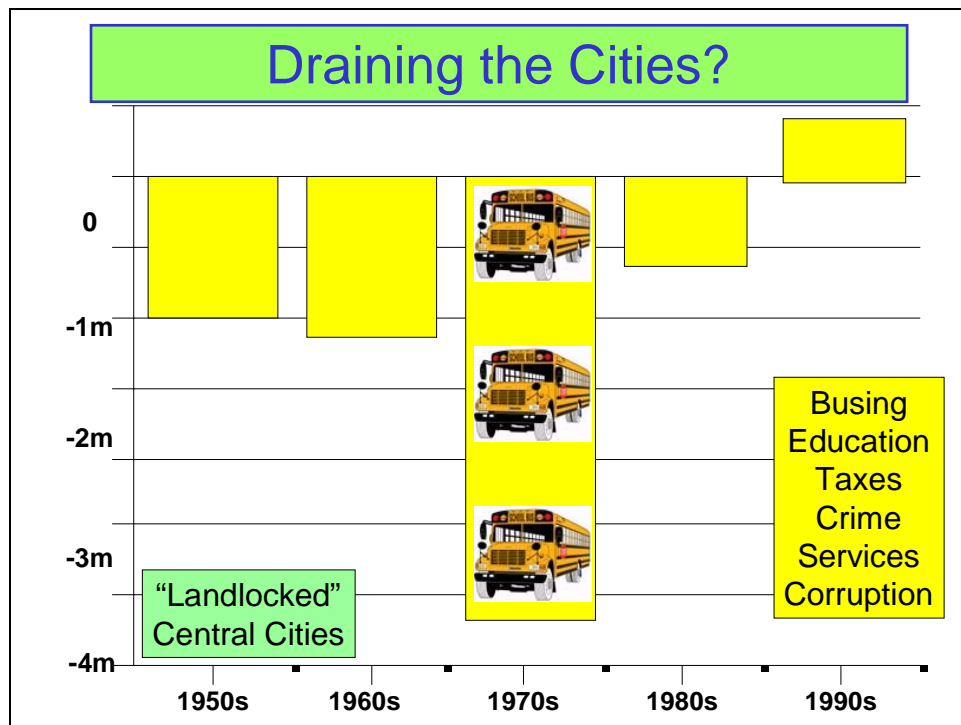


Figure 3

From Andres Duany v. W. Cox Debate, American Dream Conference 2003

Australia: More of the Same: Melbourne and Sydney, which are only now getting around to building meager freeway networks illustrate the same thing. Urban sprawl happens, freeways or no.

At Odds with the Data: The anti-sprawl movement has long said that freeways are a principal cause of sprawl. The Condon Theory would seek to confirm that view. The data says otherwise.



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