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Jobs–Housing Balance/Spatial Mismatch

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The concept of spatial mismatch usually refers to the geographical distance between jobs and residences. The phenomenon is a feature of most North American cities, but it can also be observed in other dispersed or decentralized urban areas. Spatial mismatch is socially and politically relevant because it tends to affect disproportionately the employment prospects of individuals in low-income or ethnic minority communities. The problem is also important for transportation policy because job accessibility depends not only on distance to a job but also on the means of transportation available to the populations living in different parts of the city.

The hypothesis of spatial mismatch has been studied since the late 1960s, usually in the context of North American cities. A large body of evidence points to a high degree of spatial separation between jobs and residences of low-income individuals and ethnic minorities. This phenomenon arises due to a relative concentration of low-income and minority populations in central areas, while the jobs to which they are mostly qualified tend to be dispersed across the suburban landscape. The majority of the studies of this problem have focused on the case of black workers, although there is also significant evidence that other groups, such as the Hispanics, face similar problems.

The problem is relevant because it has been linked to high unemployment rates and low wages. Distance and travel costs dissuade individuals living in central areas from actively searching for and taking jobs in difficult-to-access suburban areas, reducing their employment choices. Although there is evidence that the same type of job pays lower wages in central areas than in the suburbs, the high commuting costs and time necessary to access suburban jobs offsets the higher pay.

The emergence of the spatial mismatch phenomenon is explained by the population and land use dynamics affecting North American cities since the 1950s, which are characterized by urban sprawl, suburbanization, and dispersion of jobs. The expansion and improvement of the road network and the growth in car ownership rates enabled workers to commute from longer distances. Meanwhile, employers often migrated to suburban areas, too, leading to commuting patterns that varied from the traditional model of commuting from the suburbs to a central location. As these changes have occurred, white people became more concentrated in the suburbs and minorities in central areas.

Abandoned public housing units in Buffalo, New York. In the United States, spatial mismatch tends to disproportionately affect the employment prospects of individuals in low-income or ethnic minority communities in urban centers, who may have limited access to suburban jobs. In some countries where residential mobility is controlled by government housing policies, spatial mismatch may instead affect workers living in suburban “new towns” who have limited access to jobs in the city center.



Spatial mismatch becomes a greater problem when it is compounded by a high degree of spatial segregation of ethnic groups, which is common in North American cities. Although overt discrimination in the housing market is not permitted by law, it does exist.

In addition, the higher costs of housing in suburbs prevents ethnic minorities and low-income people from moving. Households of the same ethnic groups are also concentrated in central urban areas for social and cultural reasons, because people often chose to live near friends and extended family. Evidence shows that minorities tend to have low degrees of residential mobility and are not as likely to move closer to jobs as whites.

Land use policies, such as zoning, may also have an indirect effect on racial and ethnic segregation, because they affect housing costs and the types of housing available in each neighborhood. The confluence of these factors leads to the stability of spatial segregation across time.

Transportation Availability

The problem of spatial mismatch between residences and jobs relates not only to geographic proximity, but also to the means of transportation available for the population in each neighborhood. For example, studies in many cities show that whites tend to commute longer distances, but blacks spend more time commuting. Realizing that transportation options play a role in job accessibility, some researchers have shifted their focus from the concept of spatial mismatch to that of modal mismatch. That is, they analyze the separation between jobs and residences in terms of access to suitable transportation.

Under this perspective, individuals are at a disadvantage if they do not have access to private transport or if the available public transportation options do not allow them to access areas with high concentrations of jobs at suitable times of the day. The provision of public transportation is, therefore, an important issue for policy-makers to address within the problem of spatial mismatch.

Spatial mismatch is increasingly a characteristic of many cities outside North America, which have gone through a steady process of decentralization and suburbanization, as well. In European cities, new employment centers are often located in suburban areas, near motorway junctions. At the same time, the historical city centers tend to lose population and to be increasingly inhabited by elderly people and racial minorities. However, the mechanisms of

spatial mismatch vary from country to country. In some countries, for example, access to transportation is less of a hindrance for workers than access to residential mobility, which is controlled by government housing policies. A different version of the problem of spatial mismatch has been identified in such cities as Singapore, where workers living in “new towns” in suburban areas have limited accessibility to jobs in the city center.

- commuting
- residential mobility
- suburban area
- housing costs
- low income
- transportation
- job centers

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See Also:

- [Accessibility and Mobility](#)
- [Employment Location](#)
- [Spatial Equity Analysis](#)
- [Transportation and the Disadvantaged](#)
- [Travel Patterns by Race/Ethnicity](#)
- [Urban Sprawl Versus Compact Development](#)

Further Readings

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