

This article analyzes the changing relationship between the aggregate demographic characteristics of cities, their investment in policing, and officially reported rates of crime. The data are for the nation's 32 largest cities, for the years 1946-1970. Analysis reveals that 1970 data support Louis Wirth's contention that crime rates are highest in large, dense, heterogeneous places; however, data from earlier years indicate that this overlap is a relatively recent phenomenon. I suggest that this reflects the process of suburbanization. Since World War II, white migration out of certain central cities has encouraged social changes which have led to the current stratification of communities. This process resembles that which led to the formation of stratified neighborhoods *within* cities during an earlier era; the current covariation between demography and crime thus resembles that found at the subcommunity level 25 years ago.

THE CHANGING DISTRIBUTION OF BIG-CITY CRIME A Multi-City Time-Series Analysis

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The growth of the crime rate is one of the major political realities of our time. Opinion surveys indicate that lawlessness and the fear of crime top the list of "most important issues" concerning residents of large cities (Washington Post, 1975). The concentration of crime in poor and minority neighborhoods further in-

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creases the volatility of the issue, for it pyramids one fear upon others. The concentration of violent crime in major cities is widely heralded as an indicator of the breakdown of urban systems, and fear of crime and its correlates may lie behind the emergence of urban law-and-order political movements and the widespread adoption of tough anticrime stances by civic leaders in recent years.

This paper reports some evidence that the geographical distribution of crime is an evolving phenomenon. While the convergence of urban demography, high crime rates, and high expenditures for social control characterizes the present, this has not always been the pattern in American cities. Since World War II we have witnessed a transformation of the ecology of large cities. The relationship between crime and three key characteristics of urban systems—their size, density, and racial heterogeneity—has become strongly positive over time. This covariance was not apparent in the immediate postwar period. Before the early 1950s, the correlation between the crime rate and measures of the level of urbanization of American communities was low or negative; crime was not clearly concentrated in the most urban places. However, inspection of time series data on the evolution of a sample of cities indicates that a steady change took place in the distribution of crime among them. By the mid-1960s, the overlap of crime and urbanization was high; official figures on crime support a pessimism about the plight of our largest cities which earlier they could not.

The significance of this finding for urban research becomes clear when data on cities are used to test one of the best-known statements on social organization, Louis Wirth's (1938) theory of urbanism.¹ Wirth has presented an elaborate rationale for the empirical hypothesis that crime rates and consequent expenditures on policing should be highest in the most urbanized communities. Because it is a manifestation of fundamental urban processes, crime should appear in conjunction with the forces which shape city life: size, density, and heterogeneity.

When contemporary data on the sample of American cities are used to test this hypothesis, it is strongly supported. The changing distribution of crime sharply bounds the generalizability of

this finding, however. Data for the same group of cities from earlier points in time do not support Wirth's hypotheses, although his theory purports to describe enduring social processes. There are several competing explanations for this quite unexpected finding: it may be an artifact of flaws in the data, it may presage true changes in patterns of individual behavior in cities, or it may reflect changes in the ecology of urban systems. Only the latter appears to be fully consistent with what we know about cities. Social ecology is the relationship between the distribution of people and resources and consequent social and cultural patterns. During the postwar era those relationships have been altered drastically by suburbanization, which has sorted metropolitan populations and activities in such a way that urban areas are now stratified in the same fashion as center-city neighborhoods of an earlier era. There are both theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that changes in the distribution of crime can be numbered among the consequences of this process of suburban growth and metropolitan stratification.

THE NORMAL MODEL OF CRIME AND CONTROL

Decades of empirical social research have generated a large body of knowledge about the etiology and ecology of crime. This research literature (which will not be reviewed again here) supports a host of empirical propositions which link crime rates and criminality to the social structure. At the individual level, criminality (measured by arrest, imprisonment, or self-reports on questionnaires) is clearly a function of poverty, ignorance, a repressive environment, and the disruption of the interpersonal networks which bind families and neighborhoods. At the community level, crime and delinquency rates are related to indicators of population turnover, physical deterioration, and economic dislocation, as well as to the strength of official and voluntary institutions which inculcate and reinforce conforming behavior.

The implicit or explicit theory which underlies the empirical work on which a number of these generalizations are based

reflects an enduring theme in American social thought, that the Growth of the City spells the End of Eden. This perspective has been seconded by social research, for studies of criminality have uncovered nettlesome anomalies: ignorance and poverty are often as common (or more) in rural areas as in cities, but reported crime rates in the former are substantially lower. Further, the crime rate among immigrants to America who finally settled in cities often was higher than in their home country, where poverty and repression were more extreme, and it was much higher than among their fellows who continued their migration into the hinterlands (Wilks, 1967). What critics of the city have in common with the social sciences is a jaundiced opinion of what Wirth called "the urban way of life."

Wirth (1938) defined urbanism along three dimensions: size, density, and heterogeneity. In his analysis, each of these characteristics of communities affected crucial aspects of social life within them. At the urban end of each continuum, individual insecurity and anomie should be high, the strength of traditional mechanisms for social control attenuated, and the potential for instability and conflict enhanced. Large size lends an impersonal, anonymous, transitory, and utilitarian flavor to relationships among members of a system. Density demands and facilitates the evolution of specialized and segregated economic and social roles, a complex community structure which demands increased formal coordination and regulation. The heterogeneous populations assembled in urban areas share few common understandings, and friction generated in the competitive hubbub of daily life should find outlet in "aggrandizement and mutual exploitation," "nervous tension," and violent collective behavior. As a result,

Personal disorganization, mental breakdown, suicide, delinquency, crime, corruption, and disorder might be expected under these circumstances to be more prevalent in the urban than in the rural community. [Wirth, 1938: 23]

Given this pattern, it should not be surprising that most of society's investment in formal social control is concentrated in large cities. There individual disabilities are more easily trans-

lated into frustrated, anonymous violence, and disposable property is more easily available for expropriation. It is in cities that law-abiding citizens and the major institutions of property are most vulnerable, while informal personal relationships there often fail to affect the subtle yet powerful control which suppresses conflict and inhibits change in small communities.

To counteract irresponsibility and potential disorder, formal controls tend to be resorted to. Without rigid adherence to predictable routines a large compact society would scarcely be able to maintain itself. [Wirth, 1938: 15-16]

Wirth suggested that urban systems demand more in the way of *formal* control and tolerate less deviation from already fragile norms about behavior.

This "normal model" of crime and social control underlies most aggregate or ecological research on the problem. The empirical work of the Chicago School linked crime rates (and delinquency, vice, and mental disorder) to life in "zones" which more or less varied along Wirth's three dimensions (Shaw et al., 1929; Reckless, 1933; Faris and Dunham, 1939). The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967: 25) attributed more than one-half of the increase in reported crime during the early 1960s to changes in the level of similar variables. Current data also strongly support the normal paradigm.

In order to test the utility of Wirth's model in explaining the distribution of crime and investments in policing among American cities, data were collected for indicators of each of his key concepts for the 32 largest cities in the United States in 1970.² Size and density measures used to evaluate the model were based on 1970 population and area figures; heterogeneity was measured as percent nonwhite (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972). The formal control effort of cities was measured by the number of sworn police officers per capita in 1970 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1971: 166-170). The 1970 crime rate in each of the cities was measured by the simple sum of murders,

robberies, and automobile thefts known to the police, per capita (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1971: 185-187). These particular incidents were chosen in order to construct a crime index of some significance. They represent the principal domains of crime monitored by the FBI: murder is an interpersonal crime of passion, robbery a violent crime of economic desperation, and auto theft a property crime which (more than others) hits the middle class. Rates for the three are strongly correlated among these cities. While crime figures are undependable, "easily the most suspect statistics published under the imprimatur of the United States government" (Graham, 1970: 75), these particular indicators are also better than most. Survey studies of citizen behavior indicate that events in these categories are relatively well reported to the police (Skogan, 1975). Observations of police activity indicate that crimes of this type are those for which formal reports are most often written (Black, 1970). While there is some pressure on police officers to suppress citizen reports, cheating appears to be more widespread in other crime categories, especially among high-volume property crimes with lower solution rates.

Figure 1 presents a multivariate path-analytic test of Wirth's model using this cross-sectional data for 1970. The normal paradigm explains a substantial proportion of the variance in the measure of the dependent variables, crime and police strength. Size, density, and heterogeneity each contribute to the statistical prediction of crime (R^2 of .51), and together they explain 70% of the variance in police strength. The signs of the relationships are in the expected direction. Crime does not emerge as a statistically significant independent predictor of police strength due to its high collinearity with density in 1970, itself a relationship that Wirth's model would predict. The utility of the model is surprising in light of the limited variance of many of these measures. While the sample cities vary on the size dimension, for example, even the smallest of them (Newark) is a very large place. These 32 communities housed only 16% of the population of the United States in 1970, yet they reported 46% of the auto theft, 45% of the murder, and 67% of the robbery known to the police in that year.³ The inclusion of other, smaller cities and suburban

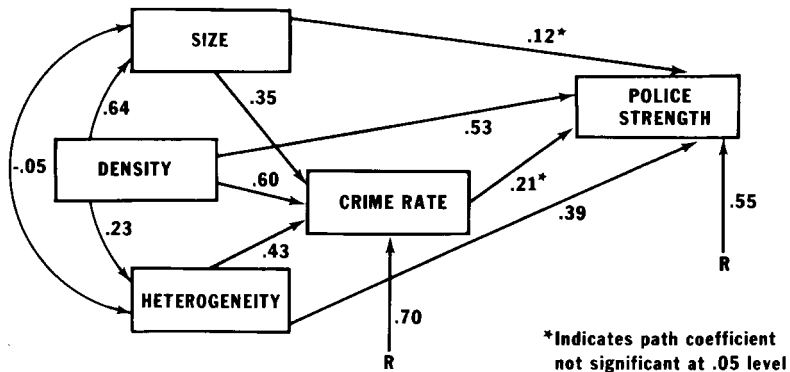


Figure 1: The Normal Model in 1970

communities in the sample would certainly enhance the statistical impact of city size upon crime.

While the 1970 data generally support the model, that conclusion is not invariant across time. In this particular cross-sectional test, the relationships hypothesized by the normal model are consistent with those observed in the sample of cities; all of the coefficients take the predicted sign, and most are significant even in a small sample. The longitudinal, developmental inferences we would ordinarily make appear obvious: as cities grow larger or denser they experience more crime per capita; as cities grow more heterogeneous, they spend proportionally more on formal control.

Such inferences would be particularly inappropriate in the case of crime, however, for data gathered for the same cities at other points in time would not support them. In the same causal model, the relationships between the measures differ in size and in strength relative to one another over time. There are also reversals in the *signs* of many of the causal arrows—measures that were positively correlated in 1970 were negatively correlated in earlier years.

Inspection of the data for all 32 cities across the 25-year period 1946-1970 reveals substantial, orderly changes in the relationships between many of the variables in the normal model of crime and control.⁴ The relationship between density and crime and size and crime shifts from negative to substantial and

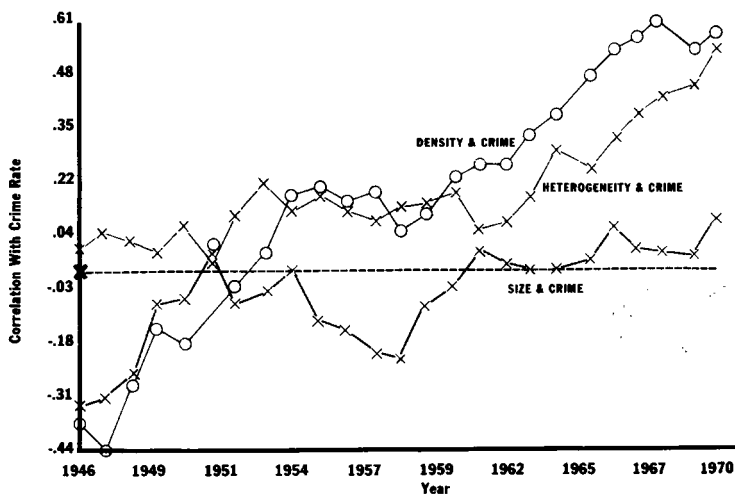


Figure 2: The Changing Correlation Between Urbanization and Crime

positive (density) and very weakly positive (size). In 1947, the correlation between density and the crime rate was $-.44$ for these cities; in 1968, the same correlation was $+61$. Heterogeneity, here measured as percent nonwhite, drifts from a very weakly positive relationship ($.03$) to a strongly positive one (as high as $.58$) during the postwar era. Figure 2 plots these correlations, illustrating systematic changes over time. Each point in Figure 2 describes the correlation between attributes of the 32 cities and their crime index for each year between 1946 and 1970. As Figure 2 makes clear, the acceptance or rejection of the normal model of criminogenesis depends greatly upon the time period from which data are drawn to test it.

Similar temporal complexities characterize the distribution of investments in policing among these cities. Correlations between population, density, and police strength remained virtually unchanged over the 26-year period under examination. Both were strong and positive (population averaged $+40$ and density averaged $+75$), as the normal paradigm hypothesizes. But population and land area also are aspects of the rule-of-thumb decisional standards by which public administrators traditionally budget policing. Following their own or Federal

Bureau of Investigation guidelines, increases in police department strength usually follow population increases. Unlike population or density, correlations between the crime rate and police strength and between heterogeneity and police strength drifted in a positive direction across time. Both were negative ($-.21$ and $-.15$) in 1946; by 1970, the correlation between police strength and heterogeneity was $+.63$ and the police-crime rate correlation was $+.68$.

EXPLAINING THE CHANGING DISTRIBUTION OF CRIME

Time-series data for these 32 large cities suggest that the relative concentration of crime and investments in social control has shifted dramatically during the postwar era. The dominant framework for thinking about crime and its distribution at the community level is consistent with these data only during the most recent period, when the highest levels of crime are found in larger, dense, and racially heterogeneous places. There are at least three reasons why we may have observed this dramatic shift in the data: they may be flawed in ways which mislead us, the changing relationships they reveal may reflect changes in the individual behavior of city residents, or they may presage fundamental changes in the structure of urban systems. While it is impossible to choose unambiguously between these competing explanations, the latter appears to be the most reasonable interpretation of the observed patterns.

The large number of cities and long time span involved in calculating the correlations described in Figure 2 invites the suspicion that changes in the collection and reporting of crime figures may have contributed to their apparent instability. The three categories of crime utilized here were selected in part because of the stability of their definitions over time. "Joy-riding" was removed from the definition of automobile theft in 1960, a change which did not appear to cause any unusual perturbations in over-time plots of the aggregate measure of crime. A more serious problem is that the data may have improved between 1946 and 1970. Improved internal management, police professionalization, changes in citizens' reporting habits, and better

FBI monitoring of local procedures and reported totals all may have conspired to reduce the error in crime statistics. Such a reduction could account for the apparent *strengthening* of the correlations; it would not, however, explain steady changes in the *signs* of the correlations unless the data improved only in cities which were larger, denser, and so on. Major official changes in record keeping (presumably for the better) took place in several of these cities during the 1946-1970 period, including Baltimore (1965), Buffalo (1962 and 1963), Chicago (1960 and 1961), Indianapolis (1963 and 1964), Kansas City (1961 and 1962), and Memphis and Nashville (both in 1963 and 1964).⁵ This list does not support the hypothesis that only more "urban" cities in the group began to record more voluminous crime totals. Only if changes in crime measurement procedures took place selectively, correlated with the components of Wirth's theory of urbanism, could the apparent shift in the distribution of crime (and, along the same line of reasoning, policing) be discounted.⁶

More plausible are explanations which could be advanced at the individual level for changes in these city-level correlations. For example, the increasingly positive correlation between race and the crime rate may reflect continued interracial disparities in income, education, and life changes, coupled with increasing alienation and hostility among urban minorities. Declining legitimacy of the authority and institutions of white society, leading to conflict with the police and aggressive police patrolling of minority neighborhoods, could produce the pattern observed here. This interpretation is supported by official figures on the changing racial distribution of arrestees and prisoners.⁷ However, other correlations plotted in Figure 2 remind us of the aggregate nature of the data. We are observing changes in *geographical covariation*, a shift from the concentration of crime in places where population and density often were low to the concentration of relatively high levels of crime in areas where the population is now dense and more often large. These changing patterns are difficult to explain at the individual level: we would have to assume that cities now resemble "behavioral sinks" while similar environments previously were benign, or that living in large cities led their residents in the past to avoid breaking the

law, but that this facet of their environment now does not affect their behavior. More plausible is the assumption that we are observing a problem in spurious correlation, and that size, density, heterogeneity, and crime are mutually related through some common process which has altered these cities as systems since World War II.

A parsimonious interpretation of the data, and one which lies closer to these aggregate-level correlations, is that a fundamental shift is occurring in the social ecology of urban systems. The underlying process must be an extremely powerful one to induce such a dramatic change in structure. One such realignment process, perhaps the single most important force in American life since World War II, is *suburbanization*. The selective movement of people and jobs from the central city to the suburban fringe, and the impact of that movement on those left behind, may have produced the changes observed in this sample of communities.

The ecology of American society has been altered drastically by the process of suburbanization (Greer, 1962; Taeuber and Taeuber, 1964; Pinkerton, 1969). It has sorted the population along race and class lines, concentrating in large cities the poor and the unemployed. It has left large, dense central cities, a deteriorated physical plant which is cheaper to abandon than to repair, peopled by working class whites and blacks and Latins of various classes who are unable to escape. The middle class, reacting rationally to the availability of cheap, safe housing with handy connections to freeways, has acted to escape the taxes, politics, and litter which plague them. The opening of new ring highways plus the movement of white collar and skilled workers to the suburban fringe has pulled industrial and commercial development in the same direction. As the central city's black, Latin, and Southern white population has grown, transportation and technology have made industry less dependent on the labor supply immediately at hand. This has undermined the economic rationale for teeming workers' quarters in otherwise undesirable sections of the city. The growing social overhead needs of the city are unmatched by the tax base, which itself has been threatened by the lure of labor, cheap land, and good transportation at the edge of the metropolitan area.

The growth of the suburban fringe is a "push" as well as a "pull" phenomenon. Economic and demographic changes, the deteriorating housing stock, and simple fear make it undesirable for many to remain in the central city. White and upper income residents find it easier than others to emigrate, increasing the frustration and hostility of those who remain behind. Suburbanization reflects the social stratification system.

The growth of suburbs may also be read in the patterns of change recorded in Figure 2. Suburban growth may have encouraged the evolving covariation we have observed between urbanism, crime, and police strength. As the suburbanization process sorts people on the basis of race and class and weakens the economic fabric of the central city, it leaves behind poverty, limited opportunity, despair, and physical deterioration, all of which contribute to crime at the individual level. Within this sample of cities, suburbanization is most advanced around the largest, densest, and most heterogeneous of them.

The low correlation between the 1946 and 1970 crime rates for this sample of cities ($r = -.09$) indicates that the differential growth of the crime rate led to a substantial redistribution of this particular burden on citizen and government. Over the 25-year span, crime "relocated" itself among these systems. The data indicate that this relocation took place to the same areas where suburbs grew. Table 1 presents correlations describing the covariation of indicators of urbanization with the spread and current distribution of suburbia. Suburbanization is measured here as the percentage of each Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area's population that lies outside of the central city.⁸

Table 1 indicates that the suburban fringe surrounding American cities has grown where the central core is most urbanized, following Wirth's definition. Even central-city population size, which is negatively affected by population growth in the suburbs, reflects the process. Table 1 also indicates that suburbanization is most advanced around high-crime cities which are forced to invest heavily in social control. This should not be surprising if suburbanization has had the effect on central city life that scholars contend. It has changed the mix of populations there, leaving behind a physical plant which fosters and

TABLE 1
Correlates of Suburbanization

Characteristics of Central Cities in 1970	Correlated with SMSA Suburbanization	
	Growth 1946-1970	Level in 1970
population size	.15	.16
density	.53	.46
heterogeneity	.43	.28
crime rate	.56	.62
police <u>per capita</u>	.65	.54

(N = 32)

SOURCES: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1972), Federal Bureau of Investigation (1947, 1971).

provides opportunities for crime to those who are most vulnerable to their environment. The evidence is that cities are gradually stratifying in response to suburbanization, with the largest, most dense and heterogeneous of them bearing a large share of the consequences.

IMPLICATIONS

This interpretation of the data has several implications relating to social research and the future of large American cities. Studies of the geographic distribution of deviance conducted as early as the 1920s reported findings consistent with what I have dubbed "the normal paradigm" for looking at the problem. They served, in fact, as one basis for Wirth's theorizing about cities. This research typically focused upon *intracity* as opposed to *intercity* variations in the distribution of crime, in part because they were conducted before the advent of a uniform national crime reporting system. Because they examined established communities within which geographic stratification processes had been at work, these studies reported zonal covariations which were consistent with expectations informed by individual-level studies. Crime was higher in poor, undesirable,

disorganized, dense areas of the city and remains so (Beasley and Antunes, 1974). The observed correlations were high because community areas within cities were relatively homogeneous with regard to these characteristics.

The effect of suburbanization has been to speed this racial, class, and cultural segregation at the city level; it has reproduced earlier intracity stratification at the metropolitan level. In the early postwar years the stratification of large cities was not advanced, but by 1970 the cities in this sample had been affected by differential rates of suburban growth. As a result, the Wirthian model now fits data on crime and demography aggregated at the city level as well. The cities in this sample have become more differentiated with respect to its key variables as a result of suburbanization. Moreover, the process probably is a dynamic one, characterized by positive feedback, which is serving to increase further the (relative) pace of suburban growth and metropolitan differentiation. The growth of the suburban fringe at the expense of cities further increases the burdens borne by central cities (Kasarda, 1972), which itself then stimulates selective outward migration.

This indicates the importance of dealing with over-time data in criminological research, especially when those data have been aggregated at some gross level. In this case, relationships between crime and the social structure may have remained unchanged at the individual level, while shifts in the mix of individuals being aggregated produced changes in covariation at the system level. Time-bound aggregate data could not detect this, leading at any point to individual-level inferences which might be faulty. Twenty-seven years ago, Robinson (1950) warned of the fallacies of such generalizations; these data indicate that the errors in inference themselves may be unstable.

That the relationship between crime and urbanism at the city level is changing is a politically important observation as well. To the extent to which these geographic covariations define political and social reality, the condition of communities (as opposed to individual covariation) remains a distinct focus for

inquiry. Both theoretically and empirically there are good reasons to suspect that suburbanization has changed the relevant geographical boundaries of cleavages in our society. While earlier social stratification and geographic segregation by race, class, and culture were neighborhood-level processes, the massive flight of the white middle class beyond the jurisdictional grasp of the schools, courts, police, and governments of many central cities has turned city boundaries into the relevant lines of cleavage. This larger political unit is now the relevant geographical locus for studying aggregate social stratification and its consequences, among which has been the redistribution of the burden of crime.

NOTES

1. Wirth (1938) included another dimension of urbanism that need not concern us here, "permanence."

2. Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Buffalo, NY; Chicago, IL; Cincinnati, OH; Cleveland, OH; Columbus, OH; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Detroit, MI; Houston, TX; Indianapolis, MN; Jacksonville, FL; Kansas City, MO; Los Angeles, CA; Memphis, TN; Milwaukee, WI; Minneapolis, MN; Nashville, TN; New Orleans, LA; New York, NY; Newark, NJ; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AR; Pittsburgh, PA; St. Louis, MO; San Antonio, TX; San Diego, CA; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Washington, DC.

3. These figures were calculated from data in the *Uniform Crime Report (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1971: 185-187)* and the *Census of Population, Volume 1 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972)*.

4. Yearly data for each city on crime rates and police manpower came from the sources cited in the text. Population data were generated by interpolating linearly between census figures. In the absence of intercensal estimates, this is the most conservative method of arriving at yearly population projections. These figures are highly correlated with the scattered mid-term estimates and special census enumerations which were available.

5. Periodic changes in crime recording practices were reported in yearly *Uniform Crime Reports* and by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967: Table 7).

6. In statistical terms, this would imply that we could not make the (nearly universal) assumption that the error terms in our measures are uncorrelated.

7. Such figures are reported yearly in the *Uniform Crime Report*.

8. The SMSA data for the years 1950-1970 were reported by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1972: Part A, Section 1). Data for 1940 were reconstructed by the author from county figures reported in various volumes for the 1940 Census of Population.

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