

# The Growth of Suburbia

Learn about Levittown and housing benefits for veterans.

## Overview

- In the postwar era, many Americans moved away from cities and into suburbs, helped by **GI Bill** benefits that guaranteed home loans.
- Techniques of mass production made it possible to build homes faster and cheaper than ever before. Using an assembly-line system, the construction firm Levitt and Sons built three giant "Levittown" suburbs in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.
- Due to low prices and veterans' benefits, more Americans could afford to own homes than ever before.

## Suburbia in the Postwar Era

The American Dream: 2.5 kids, a dog, and a house with a white-picket fence. It's one of the most iconic and enduring images in American culture, the object of both praise (as evidence of a high standard of living) and ridicule (as evidence of conformity and materialism). The cookie-cutter homes that sprang up outside metropolitan areas after [World War II](#) weren't grand palaces, but to the generation that had survived the [Great Depression](#) and World War II these little cottages represented almost unimaginable luxury.



During the late 1940s and 1950s, the American landscape changed drastically. Since the late nineteenth century, Americans as well as immigrants had flocked to American cities in search of factory work. In the postwar era, however, that trend was reversed: thanks to low housing costs and [GI Bill](#) benefits, even working-class Americans could afford to own homes in the suburbs.

Though it might not seem like it matters much whether people live in the city, in the suburbs, or on the moon, residential patterns actually constitute a major influence on society and politics. People pay taxes based on where they live, and political representatives are apportioned based on the populations of districts. Consequently, the postwar exodus to the suburbs was part of a vast reorganization of power and money that affected American industry, race relations, and gender roles.

Figure 1: General Electric advertisement depicting a US soldier and his wife dreaming of a home. Image courtesy State Museum of Pennsylvania.

## Houses on the Assembly Line

World War II had gobbled up all of America's production for four years. Factories and construction firms made airplanes and barracks, not automobiles or houses. When the war was over and millions of soldiers returned to the United States, got married, and started the [baby boom](#), there was practically no housing available for them. Newlyweds with bawling babies were doubled up in expensive apartments, or living in temporary dwellings like Quonset huts or even converted trolley cars.

But the same industrial might that had propelled the Allies to victory in World War II now turned its talents to housing veterans. One of the nation's leading construction firms, Levitt and Sons, embarked on a plan to mass-produce homes on the outskirts of New York City. Purchasing 4000 acres of potato fields in Long Island, Levitt and Sons laid the plans for the largest private housing project in American history, which they named **Levittown**.



Figure 2: Aerial view of Levittown, New York. Image courtesy Mark Mathosian.

Built using the principles of assembly-line mass production, Levittown went from a potato field to a community of 82,000 people in less than a decade. Construction proceeded according to 27 distinct steps, from pouring a concrete slab foundation to spray painting the drywall. Trees were planted every 28 feet. Every house in the division had exactly the same floorplan; residents reported that at night they sometimes walked into the wrong house by accident. With all of these cost-saving measures, the earliest Levittown houses were only \$7000, or \$29 per month for a mortgage, compared to the going rate of \$90 per month for an apartment in the city.

Levitt and Sons also took advantage of the government support offered by the **Federal Housing Administration (FHA)** and the Veterans Administration (VA). Before the FHA, would-be homeowners had to put down an average of 58% of a home's purchase price to secure a mortgage, a nearly impossible prospect for working class families. Since the GI Bill insured veterans' mortgages, Levittown could afford to offer them unprecedented credit, in some cases allowing veterans and their families to move in without putting down a cent. Homeownership suddenly became possible for a broader segment of the American population than ever before.

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### What do you think?

1. Are the GI Bill benefits that financed suburban housing similar to New Deal programs, or different from them? Why?
2. Do you think the assembly-line techniques used to build Levittown houses were a positive or negative development overall? Consider the impact on construction workers, families, and prices.
3. Why do you think so many Americans wanted to move into their own homes after World War II? Was it due to financial reasons, messages in popular culture, or something else?

## **The Dark Side of Suburbia**

*Suburbia wasn't paradise for everyone -- especially women and African Americans.*

### **Overview**

- Geographic living patterns in the United States changed during the postwar era as more Americans moved to western and southern states.
- Suburban living promoted the use of automobiles for transportation, which led to a vast expansion of America's highway system.
- Suburbs' emphasis on conformity had negative effects on both white women and minorities. Many white women began to feel trapped in the role of housewife, while restrictive covenants barred most African American and Asian American families from living in suburban neighborhoods at all.

### **Suburbia, USA**

Levitt and Sons went on to build two more highly-successful suburbs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey (both of which they also named Levittown), and other developers quickly adopted their formula for suburban housing. Between 1948 and 1958, 85% of the new homes built in the United States were located in suburbs. Suburban construction across the country also meant that regional differences of architecture and urban planning began to erode in favor of identical housing across the United States. This suburban trend has endured: today, four out of five Americans live in suburbs.

Living in suburbia meant that residents had to own cars in order to go to work or purchase groceries. By 1955 American automobile companies were producing eight million cars per year, more than three times as many as in 1945. Likewise, the system of roads had to expand in order to meet the demand of an increasingly car-oriented society: states and the federal government invested heavily in an interstate highway system in the late 1940s and 1950s. Suburbia helped to promote a "car culture" in the United States that made it easier to drive than to take public transportation.

The war and its aftermath also changed American living patterns on a large scale. Defense plants in the southern and western United States drew workers during the war, and in the following decades more Americans moved to the warmer states of the **Sunbelt** in search of jobs. The population of California doubled between 1940 and 1960. Florida's population nearly tripled in the same period. In general, people, jobs, and money began to move away from the industrial states of the Northeast and the Upper Midwest and into the South and West.

### **Race, Gender and Suburbia**

With its cookie-cutter houses and firm emphasis on material comforts, from shiny new cars to washing machines, suburbia received its share of criticism. What most appalled critics was suburbia's emphasis on sameness and conformity. On one hand, this "sameness" heralded a kind of democratic progress: suburban families made about the same amount of money, lived in identical or nearly identical houses, and generally were at about the same stage in life. Class divisions narrowed as barriers to homeownership fell and the postwar economic boom elevated many families into the middle class. Even longstanding prejudices based on religion and ethnicity eroded in the suburb, as the shared experiences of GIs during the war trumped differences between Italian-Americans and German-Americans, or Catholics and Jews.

But this conformity also had a dark side. For white women, the charms of suburban life began to wear thin after a few years. Although it should not be forgotten that more than 30% of women did work outside the home in some capacity during the 1950s, popular culture was replete with messages counseling women that their greatest satisfaction in life would come from raising children, tending to their husbands' needs, and owning all of the labor-saving household appliances that money could buy. But many began to identify a creeping sense that there ought to be more to life than childcare and housework.

Minority women did not experience the ennui of suburban life because, by and large, they were barred from suburbia altogether. William Levitt was an unapologetic segregationist, declaring openly that his subdivisions were for whites only. In 1960, not a single resident of Levittown, New York was black. Suburbs throughout the nation enacted restrictive covenants that prevented homeowners from selling their houses to African Americans or Asian Americans, upon the pretense that their presence would lower property values. Although the Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that such covenants were unenforceable, de facto segregation continued and was frequently enforced by violence and intimidation.



*Figure 3: Sign at a defense workers' housing project in Detroit, 1942. Levitt and Sons built housing for defense workers during the war and continued discriminating against minorities in their postwar suburbs. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.*

Banks also refused to loan money for new homes or improvements in the inner-city neighborhoods where minorities lived in a practice known as **redlining** (a term derived from mortgage security maps that shaded minority neighborhoods in red, signifying they were 'risky' investments). Thus, government subsidies for suburban home building and prejudice against lending to minorities combined to increase the distance--both physically and economically--between whites and African Americans.

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### What do you think?

1. What are the effects of American "car culture"? Consider its impact on Americans' ability to get to work and to the services they need, as well as its impact on the environment and the oil industry.
2. Do you think the "sameness" of the suburbs was an improvement on the "ethnic enclaves" found in the prewar period (Little Italy in New York, for example), or was the emphasis on conformity stifling?
3. What was the overall impact of housing policies on African Americans during this period? Do you think housing discrimination was a major factor in the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement?