Suburban growth in the Toronto CMA, 1996-2016:
A Case of Johnny Town-Mouse and Timmy Willie

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Executive Summary

This report addressed the following questions:

1. What proportion of Toronto residents live in suburbs, and what is their distribution?
2. How has this proportion and distribution changed over time?
3. Are local growth management policies achieving their targets and objectives in Toronto?

Methods

To help answer these questions, proven methods to describe population distribution were employed using data from the Statistics Canada Census for 2016, 2006 and 1996. The results classified all 1,151 census tracts in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) as either active core, transit suburb, auto suburb, or exurb. Each census tract is approximately 4,000 to 8,000 people, with boundaries that are stable and define recognizable neighbourhoods.
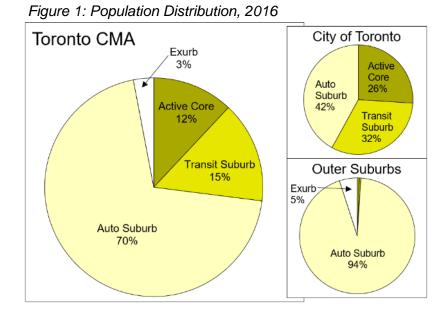
Active cores and transit suburbs were generally considered to be locations of more sustainable development. In these locations, higher proportions of commuters walked, cycled, or used some form of transit. Auto suburbs and exurbs were generally considered to be locations of less sustainable development. In these locations, higher proportions of commuters drove personal vehicles and population densities were lower.

Suburb Proportion and Distribution in 2016

The total population for the Toronto CMA in 2016 was approximately 5.9 million people. Roughly 5.2 million of these people, or 88%, was suburban – 3% exurb (168,000 people), 70% auto suburb (4,143,000), and 15% transit suburb (890,000). The remaining 716,000 people, or 12% of residents, lived in active cores (see Map 1). Put another way, more than 4.3 million people (73%) lived in the less sustainable auto suburbs and exurbs in 2016, while 1.6 million people (27%) lived in more sustainable active cores and transit suburbs.

Population analysis at a smaller scale presented two differing trends. The City of Toronto was 74% suburban while the outer suburbs were more than 99% suburban (see Figure 1). Nearly 60% of the population in the City of Toronto lived in more sustainable development while 99% of the population in the outer suburbs lived in less sustainable development. This contrast should not be unexpected, as the City of Toronto represents the core area of the CMA, yet this figure for the outer suburbs leaves no doubt that conventional suburban development requires continuous attention by regional planning agencies.
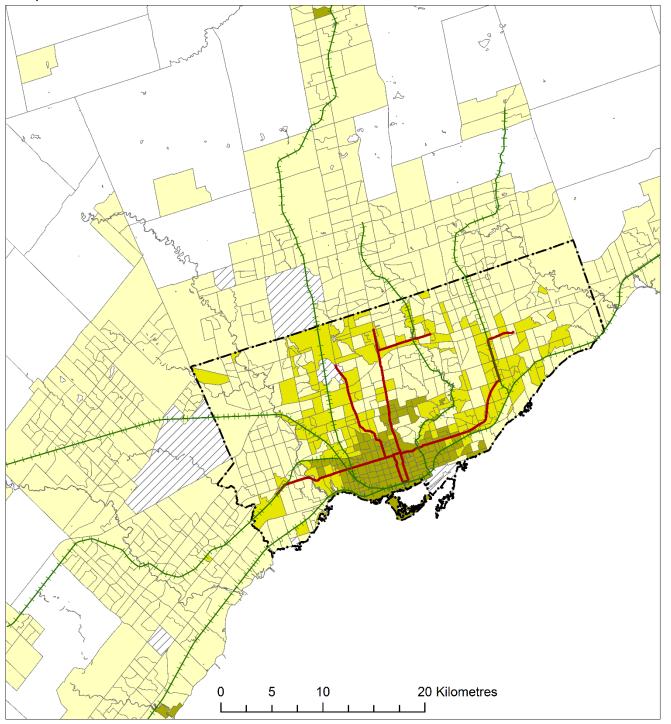
Figure 1: Population Distribution, 2016

Temporal Trends in Suburb Distribution

The temporal aspect of the study is considered using the decades before and after the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006). The population during the decade pre-Growth Plan grew at a faster rate (20%) than the decade post-Growth Plan (16%) (see Figure 2).

In the decade before the Growth Plan, less sustainable growth in the exurbs and auto suburbs grew at a rate of 27%; this represented 91% of all population growth in the CMA. During the same time, more sustainable growth in the active cores and transit suburbs grew at a rate of only 5%.
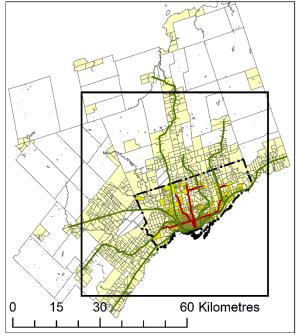
From 2006-2016, less sustainable growth continued to constitute the majority of population growth. However, its growth rate slowed by roughly one-third to a rate of 17%; this represented 77% of all population growth in the CMA. In contrast, the growth rate in more sustainable neighbourhoods increased 2.5 times to 13%. This demonstrated a modest improvement in the share of CMA growth for the more sustainable active cores and transit suburbs, even though they are still more than tripled by less sustainable growth.

Map 1: Suburb classification results for the Toronto CMA, 2016

Toronto CMA, 2016
Transportation Model T9

Census Tract Classification		Share of Population
	Active Core	12%
	Transit Suburb	15%
	Auto Suburb	70%
	Exurban	3%
	Unclassified	
	Subway	
	GO Transit	
	City of Toronto	

0   15   30   60 Kilometres

Census Tract Classification: 2016 Census
Census Tract Data: Statistics Canada
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0   5   10   20 Kilometres

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Figure 2: Growth in the Toronto CMA,

POPULATION	Pre-Growth Plan (1996-2006)		Post-Growth Plan (2006-2016)		DWELLING UNITS	Post-Growth Plan (2006-2016)	
	Growth	CMA growth share	Growth	CMA growth share		Growth	CMA growth share
Active Core & Transit Suburb	69,225 5%	8%	187,730 13%	23%	**Active Core & Transit Suburb**	114,218 18%	33%
Auto Suburb & Exurban	770,827 27%	91%	633,428 17%	77%	**Auto Suburb & Exurban**	227,837 18%	67%

Data for dwelling units, as opposed to population figures, bore slightly more sustainable results yet the pattern remained the same. This is largely due to current trends toward construction of smaller dwelling units. This trend is felt more acutely in the active cores and transit suburbs.

Relationship Between Planning Policy and Growth Trends

Growth Plan policies emphasize intensification and compact development. Despite a slowed growth rate, auto suburbs account for the same proportion of CMA population in 2016 than they did in 1996. Their large volume makes for slow work to decrease their proportion. For every success where an auto suburb in 1996 became an active core (Newmarket Centre) or transit suburb (Etobicoke Centre or Scarborough Centre) for 2016, scores of other examples exist where greenfield lands in exurban areas were developed and became auto suburbs – from Milton, Oakville, and Brampton to Vaughan, Markham, and other municipalities.

Growth in transit suburbs was primarily experienced along major transit corridors in the inner suburbs of the City of Toronto while growth in active cores was primarily expressed as an expansion of the CMA core area. The stark lack of active cores, and even transit suburbs, outside the City of Toronto demonstrates an ineffectiveness of plan policies promoting suburban transit-oriented development to date. Perhaps a review of census data in 2021 will reveal improved results.

Certain limitations were present in this report, which shed caution toward interpretation of its results. Significantly, the suburb classification method employed for this report is a working definition and not yet widely accepted. There are many other scientific and anecdotal definitions of the term "suburb" so understanding how it is defined is important.