

The Washington Post: "Turns Out There's Good News on Main St."

By Joel Kotkin

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As the financial crisis takes down [Wall Street](#), the regular folks on Main Street are biting their nails, watching the toxic tsunami head their way. But for all our nightmares of drowning in a sea of bad mortgages, foreclosed homes and shrunken retirement plans, the truth is that the effects of this meltdown won't be all bad in the long run. In one regard, it could offer our society a net positive: Forced into belt-tightening, Americans are likely to strengthen our family and community ties and to center our lives more closely on the places where we live.

This trend toward what I call "the new localism" has been underway for some years, driven by changing demographics, new technologies and rising energy prices. But the economic downturn will probably accelerate it as individuals and corporations look not to the global stage but closer to home, concentrating and congregating on the Main Streets where we choose to live -- in the suburbs, in urban neighborhoods or in small towns.

In his 1972 bestseller, "A Nation of Strangers," social critic Vance Packard depicted the United States as "a society coming apart at the seams." He was only one in a long cavalcade of futurists who have envisioned an America of ever-increasing "spatial mobility" that would give rise to weaker families, childlessness and anonymous communities.

Packard and others may not have been far off for their time: In 1970, nearly 20 percent of Americans changed their place of residence every year. But by 2004, that figure had dropped to 14 percent, the lowest level since 1950. Americans born today are actually more likely to reside near their place of birth than those who lived in the 19th century. Part of this is due to our aging population, because older people are far less likely to move than those under 30. But more limited economic options may intensify this phenomenon while bringing a host of social, economic and environmental benefits in their wake.

For one thing, they may strengthen those long-weakening family ties. We're already seeing signs of that. American family life today may not look like "Ozzie and Harriet," with its two-parent nuclear family, but it reflects a pattern of earlier generations, when extended networks helped families withstand the dislocations of the westward expansion or of immigration. With a majority of married women now working, parents are frequently sharing child-rearing duties, and other family members are getting into the act. Grandparents and other relatives help provide care for roughly half of all preschoolers in the country. As the cost of living rises, this trend could accelerate.

At the same time, difficulty in getting reasonable mortgages and the realities of diminished IRAs will force baby boomers and Generation Xers both to prolong their parental responsibilities and to delay their retirements. This, too, is already happening: According to one study, one-fourth of Gen-Xers still receive help from their parents. And as many as 40 percent of Americans between 20 and 34, according to another survey, live at least part-time with their parents.

This clustering of families, after decades of dispersion, will spur more localism, which has a simple premise: The longer people stay in their homes and communities, the more they identify with and care for those places.

This is evident in everything from the mushrooming of farmers markets in communities nationwide to burgeoning suburban cultural institutions. Since the 1980s, suburbs outside such cities as Chicago, Atlanta, Washington and Los Angeles have been building or contemplating new town centers -- their own Main Streets, if you will, village squares intended to foster a unique local identity and community focus. Scores of suburban towns have established local orchestras and built playhouses and symphony halls -- [Strathmore Hall](#) in Bethesda is one example. All this activity has dispelled some of the view of suburbs as strongholds of middle-class torpor.

"This used to be a place where people went to sleep," says [Patricia Jones](#), president of the Arts Alliance, a group that helps raise funds for the sprawling, \$63 million Civic Arts Plaza in the Los Angeles suburb of Thousand Oaks. "Now it's a place where people live, work and find their entertainment. It's a totally different environment. It's not boring anymore."

Not only that, it's probably more interconnected than ever before. In suburbs and cities from Los Angeles to New York, Web-based community newsletters have sprung up to keep residents informed of goings-on in their neighborhoods and to provide a sense of connectedness. "There's an attempt in this neighborhood to break down the city feel and to see this

more as a kind of a small town," says Ellen Moncure, who edits the Flatbush Family Network Web site in New York. "It may be in the city, but it's a community unto itself, a place where you can stay and raise your children."

Bolstering the trend are today's higher energy prices, which make Americans' old nomadic patterns less economically viable in more ways than one. Take recreation. More and more, says Tim Schneider, publisher of a magazine specializing in sports travel, people are sticking close to home instead of trekking far and wide in search of fun things to do. "Stay cations," or vacations near home, are taking the place of trips to exotic distant locales. This means tougher times for such traditional tourist hot spots as Las Vegas and Hawaii, both of which have seen a drop-off in flight arrivals due to airline cutbacks. But there's a moral for cities, says Schneider: Instead of counting on convention centers and arts and cultural facilities to attract outside tourists, most would do better to promote local "place-branding" events such as festivals, rodeos, sports tournaments and the like.

Higher energy prices may also refocus local economies in unexpected ways. For generations, most Americans have been buying their food from distant corporate providers. But with shipping costs -- and food-safety concerns -- on the rise, the trend to buy local is moving into the mainstream. In Maryland, the number of farmers markets has grown from 20 in 1991 to 84 today. In 1977, California had four such markets; today it has more than 500. Higher energy costs could also benefit local manufacturers, bringing, say, clothing manufacture back to the Los Angeles garment district from China.

The final factor driving the localist trend is technology, which has led to a rapid expansion of home-based work and to companies' setting up work locations closer to where their employees live. The number of home-based workers has doubled twice as quickly in this decade as in the last and is now about 9 million. Nationwide, 13 million people telecommuted at least one day a week in 2007, a 16 percent leap from 2004. And more than 22 million people run home-based businesses. A recent study suggests that more than one-quarter of the U.S. workforce could eventually participate full- or part-time in this new work pattern. And over time, it will accelerate localism. Commuting -- which became common only over the past century -- has cut workers off from the places where they live. Home-based work, by contrast, gives people more choice about where they work and more time to spend with their families and communities.

Telecommunication allows people who want privacy, low-density neighborhoods and good schools to live in small towns in a way never before possible. It also allows a firm such as Renaissance Learning, a leading educational software company, to set up headquarters in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., a city of 17,500 whose small-town feeling, broad river and wooded countryside appeal to many workers. "We don't have any trouble recruiting people here," says Mark Swanson, the firm's technical director. Yet the desire to stay in the local community isn't limited to small towns or suburbs. I see it where I live, in California's San Fernando Valley, or in parts of my mother's native Brooklyn, where lots of people employed in fields such as the arts, consulting and design work at home or nearby and crowd the coffee shops, restaurants and stores of streets such as Ventura Boulevard in Studio City or once-decayed but now bustling Cortelyou Road in Flatbush.

In the end, localism is neither urban nor anti-urban. At its heart, it represents something larger: a historic American tradition that sees society's smaller units as vital and the proper focus of most people's lives. This made the United States different from Europe, which, as [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) noted, has long tended toward centralization of power and decision-making. The expansion of the European welfare state has further fostered this trend. But it's also true that Europeans tend to move less than Americans. And the powerful resistance to the most intrusive forms of [European Union](#) integration, such as a continent-wide constitution, suggest that strong localist elements remain imbedded in European communities.

But if Europe is joining the trend, the United States is likely to be the leader in pushing decentralization. What most impressed Tocqueville wasn't our large cities but the vitality of our many smaller towns and communities. "The intelligence and the power are dispersed abroad," he wrote, "and instead of radiating from a point, they cross each other in every direction." Today's localist revival reflects this tradition, but with the benefit of the great access to the larger world that technology provides. It offers the prospect of an America that, rather than being "a nation of strangers," can aspire again to be a nation of neighbors . . . in places that we choose for ourselves.

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