

Boomburb, U.S.A.

You may find yourself living not in a metropolitan area, but in a community that's been renamed a "boomburb." And you never even had to change your address. How do you know if your city or town is a "boomburb?"

The rough definition of "boomburb" is a rapidly growing, sprawling city with a population of 100,000 or more on the edge of a major metropolitan area. A boomburb may look like a big city, but often lacks the traditional downtown area of larger, urban cities. In addition to the large number of residents, most boomburbs also have experienced double-digit population growth over the last three-plus decades. Examples of prominent boomburbs include Mesa and Scottsdale, Arizona; Fremont, Daly City, and Santa Rosa in the San Francisco Bay Area; and Naperville, west of Chicago. Other prominent boomburbs include Irving and Arlington, Texas; Clearwater, Florida; Salem, Oregon; Lakewood, Colorado; and North Las Vegas, Nevada.



The vast majority of boomburbs exist in the south and west, in part, because of the advantages larger cities have when negotiating for water rights, an important fact of city-life in drought-prone climates.

Boomburbs typically develop along the interstate freeways that ring large U.S. metropolitan areas. The commercial offerings of these new suburban enclaves, such as office parks, big-box retail stores, and strip malls, all congregate at highway exit ramps and major intersections.



Shopping malls in boomburbs are not the sterile, unattractive blots along the highway of the past. They have come a long way, with widened sidewalks and restaurants and coffee shops offering outdoor seating. Sociologists are finding that rather than suffering social isolation in the suburbs, the population now socializes at the local Starbucks or Borders.

Boomburbs offer similar amenities to those traditionally found in larger cities, such as entertainment, shopping and cultural outlets. Rather than force their burgeoning populations into a central downtown area, boomburbs create their own hubs, complete with museums, entertainment venues, and major and minor league sports teams.

What other features do boomburbs have in common? They all have signs of new development, including housing, business growth and infrastructure development. Some have added light or regional rail systems. Others are located near small airports. Almost all are connected to nearby cities via freeways and expressways. The boomburbs also offer a mix of housing choices, from townhomes to row houses to single-family living. Since a significant portion of boomburb growth has occurred in the last 20 years, many of the cities were created using a community-development model.

But boomburbs are not populated by a homogeneous population. Several boomburbs have some of the highest percentages of foreign-born populations in the United States, often exceeding that of the central cities near their centers.

Boomburbs also have less affordable housing than much of the nation. Only about half of boomburb residents can afford to buy houses in their community and choose rental options instead. As a result, homeownership in boomburbs tends to be lower than the national average.



No trend lasts forever, and some boomburbs have grown into mature cities. But as some boomburbs see growth slow down, others continue to boom. In Arizona, Tempe and Mesa have seen population stagnation in recent years, but towns like Apache Junction and Buckeye are just getting started.