



## A review of Shrinking Cities: Understanding Urban Decline in the United States By Russell Weaver, Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen, Jason Knight, and Amy E. Frazier

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# Shrinking Cities: Understanding Urban Decline in the United States



By Russell Weaver, Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen, Jason Knight, and Amy E. Frazier  
New York: Routledge, 2017.

Scholars from a variety of fields have been discussing the rise and fall of cities since their inception. However, shrinking cities as a distinct academic field is relatively new. Due to its infancy, few studies have taken a broad, comprehensive approach to examining the phenomenon. The majority of books in the field are piecemeal edited volumes or concentrate on geographically limited case studies. In contrast, the broad goals of *Shrinking Cities* “are to expand the discussion on patterns of shrinkage and decline in the United States, introduce the difficulty in unpacking the complex processes that have produced these patterns, and examine broader policy frameworks that have been under consideration to address shrinkage in U.S. cities” (p. 4). The authors meet and surpass these goals, and in doing so, they provide a much needed foundational shrinking cities text to the urban studies scholarship.

The structure of the book is well designed to meet the authors’ ambitious goals. Eschewing the conventional approach of a conceptual framework followed by empirical results, the authors begin by providing empirical evidence of past, current, and future patterns of shrinkage and decline. After establishing these empirical trends, Weaver et al. delve into causal theories of change, the implications of progrowth and rightsizing policy, as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with regionalism and sustainability. Their approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the complexities and subtleties often overlooked or circumvented in the shrinking cities literature. The clear distinction made, and measured, between shrinkage and decline is a perfect example. Throughout the book, the authors call upon the empirical groundwork to bring theory and policy discussions to life while providing several important empirical contributions to the literature.

*Shrinking Cities* is extremely well written. The authors offer apt summaries of a wide range of theoretical models of urban change, progrowth and rightsizing policies, and much more. Most importantly, and impressively, they provide clear and concise explanations of the bevy of quantitative approaches applied in their research. The ability of the authors to demonstrate and articulate the assumptions, execution, results, and interpretation of a myriad of statistical methods is incredible. They manage to integrate relatively sophisticated statistical analysis without alienating the wider audience. Beyond being a great resource for shrinking cities scholarship, *Shrinking Cities* is also a veritable guidebook for nonquantitative researchers seeking to understand nonparametric statistical analysis in urban research. Chapter 2 even includes a detailed overview of population and other urban data sources for the United States (Box 2.1). Many urban scholars could learn from Weaver et al.’s eloquent explanations of quantitative methods and results.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is its geographic scope. Whereas the majority of the shrinking cities and urban decline literature concentrates exclusively on the Rust Belt, *Shrinking Cities* examines the entire United States at the neighborhood (census tract), city, and regional level. The broad scope of their analysis allows the authors to determine the emergence and movement of urban shrinkage and decline trends over time. Clearly labeled maps throughout the book help illustrate their

findings. Although *Shrinking Cities* is largely focused on overarching national trends, it is not void of local-level inquiry. On several occasions, the authors provide local vignettes to contextualize the discussion. Highlights include reimagining vacant land in Cleveland, examining water management in Detroit, and looking back upon the highly lauded *Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan*. As the title suggests, the book concentrates solely on American shrinking and declining cities. As such, the book needs to be paired with European and Asian literature in order to gain a full appreciation of the shrinking cities field of research. However, this is hardly a shortcoming of the text in question, since tackling urban shrinking and decline across the entire United States is a significant feat in and of itself. The clarity with which the authors present their arguments across such a large and varied country is remarkable.

*Shrinking Cities* is far more than a well-crafted book on an in vogue topic. It is a foundational text for shrinking cities scholarship. Not only does it provide a thorough review of the urban shrinkage and related literature, it also contributes fundamental empirical evidence of the shrinking cities phenomenon in the United States. *Shrinking Cities* is without a doubt a must read for academics interested in urban shrinkage and decline. I would even go further to contend that it is a must own, as it provides an empirical baseline to so many aspects of the urban shrinkage literature and is such a great resource for understanding nonparametric statistical analysis in urban research. This is a book worth revisiting again and again. For students, it provides an in-depth but clear overview of the shrinking cities scholarship in the United States. And for practitioners in shrinking cities, there is no better single text to gain an understanding of the geography, causes, challenges, and opportunities to come in US shrinking cities.

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