

SMALL CITIES USA: GROWTH, DIVERSITY AND INEQUALITY, by **Jon R. Norman**. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2013, 208 pp. \$68.00 Cloth, \$23.95 Paper, \$25.95 EBook. ISBN: 978-08135-5277-4.

Reviewed by

Evelyn M. Perry
Rhodes College

Despite considerable variation in the size and type of cities in the United States, sociological investigations of urban life overwhelmingly focus on large metropolitan areas. Are these analyses and the theories they examine useful for understanding the smaller cities that make up much of the urban landscape? In *Small Cities USA*, Jon Norman turns our attention to places like Mobile, Spokane, and Duluth to provide a more nuanced picture of contemporary urban processes. He focuses on change, examining how small cities have fared over the past few decades in light of recent large-scale economic transitions (e.g., global economic integration and the shift to a postindustrial, service-based economy).

To evaluate how and why small cities have changed from 1970 to 2000, Norman employs a comparative approach, analyzing demographic, economic, and geographic data on 80 cities. His sample of small cities includes those that (a) had a central city population between 100,000 and 200,000 at some point during the study time period and (b) are the primary economic and social centers for a region (rather than large suburbs of major metropolitan areas). Examining this large and diverse set of cities over several decades allows Norman to develop typologies useful for comparisons (e.g., the fate of slow growers vs. fast growers) and to identify patterns in historical trajectories leading to urban success, stagnation, or decline.

Although urban researchers have long investigated the reproduction and consequences of economic inequality in cities, measures of inequality are rarely included in evaluations of urban success and failure. Previous assessments of urban change have also been limited by the use of single success indicators, typically population and median income levels. Norman argues that to better grasp how well a city is doing, we need to examine the intersection of changes in population, income, and inequality. He constructs a “success index” composed of all three outcome measures to generate a ranking for each of the small metropolitan areas in the study. Using this composite measure, Norman moves beyond simplistic “all growth is good” appraisals to more contextualized evaluations of how and when growth produces winners and losers.

What we learn through multiple sets of analyses in *Small Cities USA* often runs counter to conventional wisdom and the predictions of dominant theories of urban change: New service-based economy cities are not necessarily faring better than old economy cities; population growth is not consistently tied to economic growth; small cities in the regions experiencing the most growth (the South and West) are not necessarily doing better than those in other parts of the country; and slower-growing cities tended to have better economic outcomes than faster-growing cities over time.

Global cities theorists posit that globalization processes relegate small cities to the periphery; they must specialize to serve global cities (e.g., through the provision of tertiary services) or face certain decline. Yet Norman finds that some of the most successful small metropolitan areas are “glocal” cities—the social, cultural, and economic centers of their local region that often house corporate headquarters and universities. Many of these successful cities have diverse economies by virtue of having developed new, service-based economic sectors while retaining strength in manufacturing.

Studies of metropolitan growth have routinely found that human capital plays a critical role in a region’s economic success. Norman finds that this applies to small cities: Those that are successful attract and retain highly educated people. Contrary to Richard Florida’s theory of urban growth, however, many small cities with high levels of human capital are not desirable destinations for the creative class. Instead of coffee shops, high levels of tolerance, and an abundance of high-end service jobs, these cities offer employment opportunities in a variety of sectors for those with low and high levels of education, attract new immigrants, and are more economically equal. Norman agrees that having the “right mix” of people matters, but cautions against one-size-fits-all strategies for fostering human capital. A high “tolerance index” ranking predicts higher population growth, but such growth comes at a cost: More tolerant small cities have higher levels of inequality.

Norman uses four case-study cities to illustrate the divergent paths small cities have taken over the past few decades. At various points throughout the book, he revisits Green Bay, Providence, Laredo, and Salinas, providing useful substantive touchstones in the midst of sometimes dizzying reports of numerous findings. The writing is accessible and appropriate for a broad audience that might include undergraduates, urban planners, and mayoral staff. Urban researchers will likely find this book useful for situating studies of small cities in a comparative context. Norman adequately addresses basic tenets of relevant theories, but scholars seeking theoretical depth should look elsewhere. Although there is limited information about the statistical analyses in the text, descriptive statistics and regression tables are available on an accompanying website.

Norman’s unprecedented examination of small cities in the United States brings an often-overlooked category of metropolitan life into conversation with theories of urban change and is, therefore, a significant contribution to the subdiscipline. *Small Cities USA* also pushes readers to expand their notions of what constitutes a “good” city. Norman’s attention to economic inequality and its relationship with traditional growth indicators is an important step toward conducting more meaningful and useful assessments of urban change. The reliance on primarily economic indicators, however, still paints a relatively narrow picture of a city’s success or failure. Consideration of the raced and classed geography of cities and associated distribution of resources, opportunities, and political power would provide a richer assessment of how well cities are working—and for whom.