



IDEAS

HOW PROGRESSIVES FROZE THE AMERICAN DREAM

The U.S. was once the world's most geographically mobile society. Now we're stuck in place—and that's a very big problem.

By Yoni Appelbaum
Illustrations by Javier Jaén

The Atlantic

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THE IDEA that people should be able to choose their own communities—instead of being stuck where they are born—is a distinctly American innovation. It is the foundation for the country’s prosperity and democracy, and it just may be America’s most profound contribution to the world.

No society has ever been as mobile as the United States once was. No society has even come close. In the 19th century, the heyday of American mobility, roughly a third of all Americans changed addresses each year. European visitors were astonished, and more than slightly appalled. The American “is devoured with a passion for locomotion,” [the French writer Michel Chevalier observed in 1835](#); “he cannot stay in one place.” Americans moved far more often, over longer distances, and to greater advantage than did people in the lands from which they had come. They understood this as the key to their national character, the thing that made their country distinctive. “We are a migratory people and we flourish best when we make an occasional change of base,” one 19th-century newspaper explained. “We have cut loose from the old styles of human vegetation, the former method, of sticking like an oyster to one spot through numberless succeeding generations,” wrote another.

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As the 19th century turned into the 20th, as two world wars passed, as the Baby Boom began, Americans kept on moving. And as Americans moved around, they moved up. They broke away from stultifying social hierarchies, depleted farmland, declining towns, dead-end jobs. If the first move didn’t work out, they could always see a more promising destination beckoning them onward.

These ceaseless migrations shaped a new way of thinking. “When the mobility of population was always so great,” [the historian Carl Becker observed](#), “the strange face, the odd speech, the curious custom of dress, and the unaccustomed religious faith ceased to be a matter of comment or concern.”

And as diverse peoples learned to live alongside one another, the possibilities of pluralism opened. The term *stranger*, in other lands synonymous with *enemy*, instead, Becker wrote, became “a common form of friendly salutation.” In a nation where people are forever arriving and departing, a newcomer can seem less like a threat than a welcome addition: *Howdy, stranger*.

Entrepreneurship, innovation, growth, social equality—the most appealing features of the young republic all traced back to this single, foundational fact: Americans were always looking ahead to their next beginning, always seeking to move up by moving on.

But over the past 50 years, this engine of American opportunity has stopped working. Americans have become less likely to move from one state to another, or to move within a state, or even to switch residences within a city. In the 1960s, about one out of every five Americans moved in any given year—down from one in three in the 19th century, but a frenetic rate nonetheless. In 2023, however, only one in 13 Americans moved.

The sharp decline in geographic mobility is the single most important social change of the past half century, although other shifts have attracted far more attention. In that same span, fewer Americans have started new businesses, and fewer Americans have switched jobs—from 1985 to 2014, the share of people who became entrepreneurs fell by half. More Americans are ending up worse off than their parents—in 1970, about eight out of every 10 young adults could expect to earn more than their parents; by the turn of the century, that was true of only half of young adults. Church membership is down by about a third since 1970, as is the share of Americans who socialize several times a week. Membership in any kind of group is down by half. The birth rate keeps falling. And although half of Americans used to think most people could be trusted, today only a third think the same.

These facts by now form a depressingly familiar litany. They are often regarded as disparate phenomena of mysterious origins. But each of them can be traced, at least in part, to the loss of mobility.

In 2016, Donald Trump tapped into the anger, frustration, and alienation that these changes had produced. Among white voters who had moved more than two hours from their hometown, Hillary Clinton enjoyed a solid six-point lead in the vote that year. Those living within a two-hour drive, though, backed Trump by nine points. And those who had never left their hometown supported him by a remarkable 26 points. Eight years later, he tapped that support again to recapture the White House.

Today, America is often described as suffering from a housing crisis, but that's not quite right. In many parts of the country, housing is cheap and abundant, but good jobs and good schools are scarce. Other areas are rich in opportunities but short on affordable homes. That holds true even within individual cities, neighborhood by neighborhood.

As a result, many Americans are stranded in communities with flat or declining prospects, and lack the practical ability to move across the tracks, the state, or the country—to choose where they want to live. Those who do move are typically heading not to the places where opportunities are abundant, but to those where housing is cheap. Only the affluent and well educated are exempt from this situation; the freedom to choose one's city or community has become a privilege of class.

The sclerosis that afflicts the U.S.—more and more each year, each decade—is not the result of technology gone awry or a reactionary movement or any of the other culprits that are often invoked to explain our biggest national problems. The exclusion that has left so many Americans feeling trapped and hopeless traces back, instead, to the self-serving actions of a privileged group who say that inclusion, diversity, and social equality are among their highest values.

Reviving mobility offers us the best hope of restoring the American promise. But it is largely self-described progressives who stand in the way.



I. Moving Day

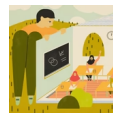
The great holiday of American society at its most nomadic was Moving Day, observed by renters and landlords throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th with a giant game of musical houses. Moving Day was a festival of new hopes and new beginnings, of shattered dreams and shattered crockery —“quite as recognized a day as Christmas or the Fourth of July,” as a Chicago newspaper put it in 1882. It was primarily an urban holiday, although many rural communities where leased farms predominated held their own observances. The dates differed from state to state and city to city—April 1 in Pittsburgh, October 1 in Nashville and New Orleans—but May 1 was the most popular. And nothing quite so astonished visitors from abroad as the spectacle of thousands upon thousands of people picking up and swapping homes in a single day.

For months before Moving Day, Americans prepared for the occasion. Tenants gave notice to their landlords or received word of the new rent. Then followed a frenzied period of house hunting as people, generally women, scouted for a new place to live that would, in some respect, improve upon the old. “They want more room, or they want as much room for less rent, or they want a better location, or they want some convenience not heretofore enjoyed,” *The Topeka Daily Capital* summarized. These were months of general anticipation; cities and towns were alive with excitement.

[Jerusalem Demsas: The right to move is under attack](#)

Early on the day itself, people commenced moving everything they owned down to the street corners in great piles of barrels and crates and carpetbags, vacating houses and apartments before the new renters arrived. “Be out at 12 you must, for another family are on your heels, and Thermopylae was a very tame pass compared with the excitement which rises when two families meet in the same hall,” a Brooklyn minister warned. The carmen, driving their wagons and drays through the narrow roads, charged extortionate rates, lashing mattresses and furnishings atop heaps of other goods and careening

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through the streets to complete as many runs as they could before nightfall. Treasure hunters picked through detritus in the gutters. Utility companies scrambled to register all the changes. Dusk found families that had made local moves settling into their new home, unpacking belongings, and meeting the neighbors.

Americans once tended to look at houses the way Americans today look at cars or iPhones —consumer goods to be enjoyed until the next model came within reach.

In St. Louis, the publisher of a city directory estimated in 1906 that over a five-year span, only one in five local families had remained at the same address. “Many private families make it a point to move every year,” *The Daily Republican* of Wilmington, Delaware, reported in 1882. Moving Day was nothing short of “a religious observance,” the humorist Mortimer Thomson wrote in 1857. “The individual who does not move on the first of May is looked upon ... as a heretic and a dangerous man.”

Moving Day was, *The Times-Democrat* of New Orleans attested, “an essentially American institution.” Europeans might move “in a sober, quiet, old-world way, once in a decade or thereabout,” the paper explained, but not annually, in the “excessive energetic manner of the nomadic, roving American.” European visitors made a point of witnessing the peculiar ritual and included accounts of carts flying up and down the streets in their travelogs.

For some, Moving Day meant trauma and dislocation. In tightening markets, landlords seized the opportunity to jack up rents. But in most places and for most people, Moving Day was an opportunity. The housing stock was rapidly expanding. You could spot the approach of the holiday, a Milwaukee paper explained, by the sight of new buildings being rushed to completion and old houses being renovated and restored. As wealthier renters snapped up the newest properties to come to market, less affluent renters grabbed the units they vacated in a chain of moves that left almost all tenants better off.

Landlords faced the ruinous prospect of extended vacancies if they couldn't fill their units on Moving Day. Tenants used their leverage to demand repairs and upgrades to their house or apartment, or to bargain for lower rent.

The habit of annual moves was not confined to the poor or the working class. Nor was it confined to local relocations. Americans moved to new territories, thriving towns, and rapidly growing cities, driven forward by hope. "That people should move so often in this city, is generally a matter of their own volition," the journalist and social reformer Lydia Maria Child wrote of New York. "Aspirations after the infinite," she added tartly, "lead them to perpetual change, in the restless hope of finding something better and better still." It's not a bad summary of the American dream.

WHAT LUBRICATED all of this movement was not an abundance of space but rather a desperate eagerness to put space to better use. The viability of their communities, Americans believed, rested on their capacity to attract merchants and manufacturers and, above all, residents. Land use was regulated as early as the colonial era, but the rules were sparse, and written to maximize development. A fallow field or an abandoned mine could be seized; a vacant lot could draw a stiff fine. Noxious businesses, such as tanneries and distilleries, were consigned to the margins, for fear that they would deter construction in the center. The goal was growth.

The nation's push westward in the 1800s created new opportunities, and Americans moved toward them—dispossessing Native peoples of their land—but westward migration was never the whole story, or even most of it. The rate of migration *within* the East was even higher, as Americans drained away from farms and into market towns, county seats, and teeming industrial cities. There were few rules about what could be constructed on private property, and a diverse array of buildings sprang up to meet demand. A new arrival might rent a room in a private home, boardinghouse, tenement, residential hotel, or bachelors-only apartment building. Some of these structures were garish, or stuck out from their surroundings like tall weeds. Reformers were eager to manage the chaos, and cities began to adopt more extensive building codes, aimed at reducing the risk of fire and protecting the health of residents. But old buildings continually yielded to newer ones, as neighborhoods climbed higher to meet demand; the first townhouse on a block of freestanding homes might, a couple of decades later, be the last remaining townhouse sandwiched between apartment buildings.

So long as speculators erected new buildings, so long as aging houses were turned over to the rental market or split up into flats, so long as immigrant entrepreneurs built new tenements, people could reasonably expect to find a

new home each year that in some way exceeded their old. And through the 19th century and into the early decades of the 20th, the supply of homes steadily expanded.



Javier Jaén

Americans of that era tended to look at houses the way Americans today look at cars or iPhones—as useful contrivances that nevertheless lose their value quickly and are prone to rapid technological obsolescence. Every year, newly constructed and freshly renovated homes offered wonders and marvels: water that ran out of taps, cold and then hot; indoor plumbing and flush toilets and connections to sewer lines; gas lighting, and then electric; showers and bathtubs; ranges and stoves; steam heating. Factories created new materials and cranked out hinges, doorknobs, hooks, wooden trim, and railings in a dizzying variety of styles. One decade's prohibitive luxury was the next's affordable convenience and the third's absolute necessity. A home was less a long-term investment—most people leased—than a consumer good, to be enjoyed until the next model came within reach.

The cultural implications of an always-on-the-move society were profound, and perhaps counterintuitive. As they observed the nomadic style of American life, some critics worried that the constantly shifting population would produce an atomized society, leaving people unable to develop strong ties,

invest in local institutions, maintain democratic government, or build warm communities. In fact, that got the relationship between mobility and community precisely backward. Over the course of the 19th century and well into the 20th, Americans formed and participated in a remarkable array of groups, clubs, and associations. Religious life thrived. Democracy expanded. Communities flourished.

The key to vibrant communities, it turns out, is the exercise of choice. Left to their own devices, most people will stick to ingrained habits, to familiar circles of friends, to accustomed places. When people move from one community to another, though, they leave behind their old job, connections, identity, and seek out new ones. They force themselves to go meet their neighbors, or to show up at a new church on Sunday, despite the awkwardness. American individualism didn't mean that people were disconnected from one another; it meant that they constructed their own individual identity by actively choosing the communities to which they would belong.

[Jacob Anbinder: The pandemic disproved urban progressives' theory about gentrification](#)

All of this individual movement added up to a long, grand social experiment—a radical reinvention of what society could be. In the European lands that many immigrants had come from, successive generations lived in the same towns, inhabited the same houses, plied the same trades, and farmed the same land. Experience had taught them that admitting new members left a community with less to go around, so they treated outsiders with suspicion and hostility. They learned that rifts produced lasting bitterness, so they prioritized consensus and conformity. Village life placed the communal above the individual, tradition ahead of innovation, insularity before acceptance.

But when the earliest settlers crossed the Atlantic, they left behind their assumptions. They had moved once, so they should be able to move again. The Puritans soon codified into law the right to leave the Massachusetts Bay Colony, likely the first time anywhere in the world that this freedom was put into writing and defined as a fundamental right. Two centuries later, as the midwestern territories competed to attract residents, they would add a complementary freedom, the right to arrive—and to stay, without the need to secure the formal consent of the community. Together, these revolutionary rights conferred on Americans a new freedom to move, enabling the American story.

Mobility was not always uncontested, of course. Waves of immigrants faced discrimination from those who had come only slightly before, turned away

from communities just because they were Irish, or Italian, or Jewish. Laws excluded the Chinese, and vigilantes hounded them from their homes. Women seldom enjoyed the full privilege of mobility, constrained by social strictures, legal barriers, and physical dangers. And even after the end of slavery, Black Americans had to fight at every turn to move around, and toward opportunity, in the face of segregation and racist violence. But by the end of the 19th century, mobility was a deeply ingrained habit throughout the United States.

That habit has now been lost, and the toll is enormous. By one estimate, the decline in mobility is costing the American economy nearly \$2 trillion each year in lost productivity. The personal costs may be even greater, albeit sometimes harder to recognize. Residential relocation is like physical exercise in this way: Whether you're sitting on a couch or ensconced in a home, you're unlikely to identify inertia as the underlying source of your problems. It's only when you get up that the benefits of moving around become clear. People who have recently changed residences report experiencing more supportive relationships and feeling more optimism, greater sense of purpose, and increased self-respect. Those who want to move and cannot, by contrast, become more cynical and less satisfied with their lives. And Americans are shifting from that first category to the second: Since 1970, the likelihood that someone who expects to move in the next few years will successfully follow through on that ambition has fallen by almost half.

Americans of previous generations would be shocked by our stagnation. The inclination to keep moving was long the defining feature of the American character. And yet today, we're stuck. What went wrong?

II. Who Killed American Mobility?

Blame Jane Jacobs. American mobility has been slowly strangled by generations of reformers, seeking to reassert control over their neighborhoods and their neighbors. And Jacobs, the much-celebrated urbanist who died in 2006, played a pivotal role.

In 1947, when Jacobs and her husband, Robert, moved to their new home in Manhattan's West Village, the area was still filled with immigrants and their children, with people constantly moving in and moving out. Before the Jacobses arrived at 555 Hudson Street, the building had been rented by an immigrant named Rudolph Hechler, who lived with his family above the store they operated. A large sign read FOUNTAIN SERVICE—SODA—CANDY, and a cheerful awning added cigars and toys to the list of promised delights. Hechler

had come to the U.S. from Austrian Galicia when he was 13, and spent much of his life working in the garment industry, chasing the American dream. He moved between apartments and neighborhoods until he had finally saved enough to move his family from the Bronx to the West Village and open his own shop.

Bob and Jane were different. They were young, urban professionals, Bob an architect and Jane a writer for a State Department magazine. And they came to stay. With dual incomes and no kids, they were able to put down \$7,000 in cash to purchase a house, placing them among the scarcely 1 percent of families in all of Greenwich Village who owned their home.

Instead of finding a new tenant for the storefront, the Jacobses ripped it out, transforming their building into a single-family home. They cleared the bricks from the lot behind the house, turning it into a fenced-in garden. On the first floor, they installed a modern kitchen, dining room, and living room, with French doors opening onto the backyard. “The front of No. 555,” a [preservation report](#) later noted, “was rebuilt in 1950 at considerable expense, using metal sash and two-colored brick to complete the horizontality of the wide windows. It retains no vestige of its original appearance.” (The new facade, the report concluded, had been “badly remodeled,” and was “completely out of character” with the neighborhood.)

That Jacobs would later celebrate the importance of mixed-use spaces to urban vitality, drawing a vivid portrait of the remaining shops on her street, presents no small irony. But in doing as she pleased with the property she had purchased, she was only upholding a long American tradition. The larger irony involves what Jacobs did next. Although she is widely remembered as a keen-eyed advocate for lively and livable cities, her primary legacy was to stultify them—ensuring that no one else could freely make changes as she had and, most important, ruling out the replacement of existing buildings with larger structures that could make room for upward strivers.

[From the August 2019 issue: The economist who would fix the American dream](#)

Jacobs arrived in the West Village just as many Americans were abandoning dense, urban neighborhoods for the attractions of suburbia. For decades, city officials and reformers had worried about the spread of urban blight. They looked at the crowding, chaos, and confusion of immigrant neighborhoods like the West Village with horror. They wanted to sweep away neighborhoods that grew and decayed organically and replace them with carefully planned blocks. Urban planners sought to provide families with affordable homes,

consolidate the jumble of corner stores into supermarkets, and keep offices at a distance. Everything would be rational, everything modern. They wanted to take the rich stew of urban life and separate out its components like a toddler's dinner—the peas to one quadrant, the carrots to another, the chicken to a third—safely removed from direct contact.

In 1916, the year Jacobs was born, New York City began an ambitious effort to achieve this sort of separation: enacting the first comprehensive zoning code in the United States. By the time Jacobs moved there almost two decades later, the once-radical scheme of zoning, with sections of the city separated out for different uses, seemed less a startling change than a natural feature of the city's environment. Urban planners had hailed it as a cure for poverty and blight; it was supposed to ensure a better future for the city. But zoning failed to produce these benefits, instead limiting the ability of New York and like-minded cities to adapt to evolving needs. Officials soon embraced a more radical scheme of urban renewal: bulldozing old, dense neighborhoods in the name of slum clearance. And Jacobs, whatever her other sins, had the courage to stand up and demand that it stop.

From her renovated home on Hudson Street, Jacobs fell in love with the city as it was—not the city as urban planners dreamed it might be. She saw shopkeepers greeting customers and schoolchildren buying candy. She watched her neighbor wheeling his handcart, making laundry deliveries to customers, in what she later described as an “intricate sidewalk ballet.” She realized that many of the things professional planners hated about cities were precisely what most benefited their residents.

And so Jacobs sat down before her Remington and pounded out *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Her book, published in 1961, took aim at urban renewal and all that it destroyed in the name of progress. When, that same year, Jacobs learned that the city intended to designate her own neighborhood for renewal, she rallied a small group of residents to its defense. They wrote letters and showed up at hearings and plastered the neighborhood with flyers, creating the illusion of mass opposition. And it worked. Jacobs and her collaborators were among the first residents of a city neighborhood to successfully block an urban-renewal scheme. Jacobs's book—its brilliantly observed account of urban life, its adages and conjectures—paired with her success as an activist to catapult her to fame. She became the apostle of urbanism, and eager disciples sought her out to learn how they might defend their own neighborhood.

But in halting the ravages of clearance, Jacobs advanced a different problem: stasis. For centuries, the built form of the West Village had continually

evolved. Old buildings were torn down and larger structures were erected in their place. The three-story houses to one side of Jacobs's, at 553 and 551 Hudson, which had once held small businesses of their own, had been bought by a developer in 1900 and replaced with a six-story apartment building. Zoning had already begun to put some limits on this evolution but had not stopped it.

Jacobs's activism blocked efforts to add any more buildings like the one next to her house. Other three-story houses could no longer be consolidated and built up into six-story apartment blocks; the existing six-story walk-ups couldn't be turned into 12-story elevator buildings. Such development would change the physical appearance of the neighborhood, and also risk displacing current residents or small businesses—eventualities to which Jacobs was fundamentally hostile. Before, the neighborhood had always grown to accommodate demand, to make room for new arrivals. Now it froze.

At an intellectual level, Jacobs understood that simply preserving historic buildings cannot preserve a neighborhood's character; she warned that zoning should not seek "to freeze conditions and uses as they stand. That would be death." A neighborhood is defined by its residents and their interactions, as Jacobs herself so eloquently argued, and it continually evolves. It bears the same relation to its buildings as does a lobster to its shell, periodically molting and then constructing a new, larger shell to accommodate its growth. But Jacobs, charmed by this particular lobster she'd discovered, ended up insisting that it keep its current shell forever.

To stave off change, Jacobs and her allies asserted a proprietary right to control their neighborhood. It belonged, they argued, to those who were already there, and it should be up to them to decide who would get to join them. Over the decades that followed, that idea would take hold throughout the United States. A nation that had grown diverse and prosperous by allowing people to choose their communities would instead empower communities to choose their people.



Javier Jaén

JACOBS'S BOOK MARKED a shift in American attitudes. Where civic boosters once sketched fantastical visions of future development, competing to lure migrants their way, by the 1960s they had begun to hunker down and focus on preserving what they had against the threat of what the architectural critic Lewis Mumford called the “disease of growth.” State legislatures had authorized local governments to regulate land use at the beginning of the 20th century, but now activists pressed for even more local control—for what the writer Calvin Trillin has called “neighborhoodism.” They were justifiably concerned that unrestrained growth was degrading the environment, displacing residents, and leveling historic structures. More than that, they were revolting against the power of Big Government and Big Business, and trying to restore a focus on the public interest. They demanded that permitting processes consider more fully the consequences of growth, mandating an increasing number of reviews, hearings, and reports.

But in practice, the new processes turned out to be profoundly antidemocratic, allowing affluent communities to exclude new residents. More permitting requirements meant more opportunities for legal action. Even individual opponents of new projects had only to win their lawsuits, or at least spend long enough losing them, to deter development.

The preservation of the West Village itself, long celebrated as a triumph of local democracy, was in fact an early case study in this new form of vetocracy. What saved it from being bulldozed like other working-class areas in Manhattan was not the vitality of its streetfronts. Instead, it was saved because the displacement of working-class immigrants by college-educated professionals was already further along than the urban planners had appreciated when they'd designated it a slum. The night after the first public meeting of the Committee to Save the West Village in 1961, the activists reconvened in the apartment of a recent arrival who conducted market research for a living. He showed them how to survey residents to compile a demographic profile of the area. Jane's husband, Bob, the architect, began looking at the condition of the existing buildings. Carey Vennema, who'd graduated from NYU Law School a few years before, began researching tax records. A sound engineer compared recordings he took in the West Village with those in affluent neighborhoods. This small group of professionals leveraged their training and expertise to mount a challenge to the planning process—a form of bureaucratic warfare unavailable to the great majority of Americans.

Their success in limiting new housing in the West Village hasn't just kept the neighborhood from expanding; it's helped empty it out. The neighborhood that Jacobs fought to preserve in the 1960s was already shrinking. Jacobs celebrated the fact that her neighborhood's population, which peaked at 6,500 in 1910, had dropped to just 2,500 by 1950. This represented, she argued, "unslumming"—what today we would call gentrification. As households more than doubled the space they occupied, amid rising standards of living, the neighborhood would have needed to replace its existing townhouses with apartment buildings that were at least twice as tall, just to maintain its population. Instead, the neighborhood kept its townhouses and lost most of its population. Despite her strident insistence that not a sparrow be displaced from the Village of the '60s, Jacobs cast the displacement of a dynamic working-class community of immigrant renters in the 1950s by a stable, gentrified population of professional-class homeowners as a triumph. "The key link in a perpetual slum is that too many people move out of it too fast—and in the meantime dream of getting out," she wrote. Jacobs prized stability over mobility, preferring public order over the messiness of dynamism.

Yet in one respect, preservation proved more lethal to the texture of the community than redevelopment. Jacobs bought her home for \$7,000 in 1947, rehabilitated it, and sold it 24 years later for \$45,000. “Whenever I’m here,” Jacobs told *The New Yorker* in 2004, “I go back to look at our house, 555 Hudson Street, and I know that I could never afford it now.” Five years after that interview, it sold again, for \$3.3 million; today, the city assesses it at \$6.6 million. If you could scrape together the down payment at that price, your monthly mortgage payment would be—even adjusted for inflation—about 90 times what the Hechlers paid each month to live in the same building.

JANE JACOBS, of course, is not the only suspect in the death of American mobility; there are many others. People have always been most mobile while they’re relatively young, and the country is aging; the median American was just 16 years old in 1800 and 28 in 1970, but is nearly 39 today. The rise in two-career households might have made relocation more difficult. The prevalence of joint custody makes it harder for members of divorced couples to move. More Americans own their home, and renters have always been more mobile. Some Americans, perhaps, have simply grown more successful at locating jobs and communities that meet their needs, reducing their impulse to move someplace else. Some are relying on remote work to stay where they are.

But none of these answers can possibly explain the broad, persistent decline in geographic mobility. The country may be older, but the drop in mobility has been particularly steep among younger Americans. Two-earner households may be less mobile, but their mobility has declined in tandem with that of other groups. Mobility is down not just among homeowners but also among renters, and its decline predates the rise of remote work. And there is little to suggest that staying put over the past half a century has left Americans more satisfied with their lives.

Mobility is what made this country prosperous and pluralistic. Now progressives are destroying the very force that produced the values they claim to cherish.

Jacobs's activism capped a century of dramatic legal change that eroded the freedom to move. Zoning may have been adopted, eventually, by well-meaning urban planners, but the process began in 1885 in Modesto, California, where bigoted local officials were looking for a tool to push out Chinese residents. The federal courts would not allow them to segregate their city by race, but they hit on a workaround, confining laundries—whose proprietors were overwhelmingly Chinese and generally lived in their shops—to the city's Chinatown. Over the ensuing decades, other cities embraced the approach, discovering that segregating land by its uses and the size of the buildings it could hold was a potent means of segregating populations by race, ethnicity, and income. New York, for example, first adopted zoning in part to push Jewish garment workers down fashionable Fifth Avenue and back into the Lower East Side. As zoning proliferated, it was put to a wide variety of uses, some laudable and others execrable. The housing programs of the New Deal then spread the system nationally, by limiting federal loans only to those jurisdictions that had put in place tight zoning rules and racially restrictive covenants.

But zoning alone was not enough to halt American mobility, even if it did serve to widen inequalities. Zoning had introduced a new legal reality: Putting up any housing now required government approval. It was progressives like Jacobs who then exploited this reality, creating a new set of legal tools, beginning around 1970, for anyone with sufficient time, money, and patience to challenge government decisions in court, handing neighbors an effective veto over housing approval.

Not every place in America is having its growth choked off by zoning, or by the weaponization of environmental reviews or historic-preservation laws. The opposition to mobility appears concentrated in progressive jurisdictions; one study of California found that when the share of liberal votes in a city increased by 10 points, the housing permits it issued declined by 30 percent. The trouble is that in the contemporary United States, the greatest economic opportunities are heavily concentrated in blue jurisdictions, which have made their housing prohibitively expensive. So instead of moving toward opportunity, for the first time in our history, Americans are moving away from it—migrating toward the red states that still allow housing to be built, where they can still afford to live.

M. Nolan Gray: Cancel zoning

It is hard to overstate how much is lost when people can no longer choose to move toward opportunity. Social-science research suggests that the single most important decision you can make about your children's future is not what you

name them, or how you educate them, or what extracurriculars you enroll them in—it's where you raise them. But if Americans cannot afford to move to the places with growing industries and high-paying jobs, or if they can't switch to a neighborhood with safer streets and better schools, and instead remain stuck where they are, then their children will see their own prospects decline.

Not far from where I live, in Washington, D.C., two lawn signs sit side by side on a neatly manicured lawn. One proclaims NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE FROM, WE'RE GLAD YOU'RE OUR NEIGHBOR, in Spanish, English, and Arabic. The other reads SAY NO, urging residents to oppose the construction of an apartment building that would house the new neighbors the other sign purports to welcome. Whatever its theoretical aspirations, in practice, progressivism has produced a potent strain of NIMBYism, a defense of communities in their current form against those who might wish to join them. Mobility is what made this country prosperous and pluralistic, diverse and dynamic. Now progressives are destroying the very force that produced the values they claim to cherish.

III. Building a Way Out

In December, the Census Bureau reported that the United States had set a dismal new record: The percentage of Americans who had moved in the previous year was at an all-time low. That same month, the economist Jed Kolko calculated that geographic inequality—the gap in average incomes between the richer and poorer parts of the country—had reached an all-time high. The loss of American mobility is a genuine national crisis. If it is less visible than the opioid epidemic or mounting political extremism, it is no less urgent. In fact, the despair it fosters is fueling these and other crises, as Americans lose the chance to build the best possible lives for themselves and their children.

Even partial analyses of immobility's costs yield staggering results. Consider, for instance, just the economic growth that has been lost by preventing people from moving to where they would be most productive. The economists Chang-Tai Hsieh and Enrico Moretti recently imagined a world of perfect mobility, in which the three most productive U.S. metropolitan areas—New York, San Francisco, and San Jose—had constructed enough homes since 1964 to accommodate everyone who stood to gain by moving there. That alone, they calculated, would have boosted GDP by about \$2 trillion by 2009, or enough to put an extra \$8,775 into the pocket of every American

worker each year. It's a rough estimate, but it gives a sense of the scale of the distortions we have introduced, and the price we are each paying for them.

But the social costs are arguably even greater than the economic ones. Among academics, the claim that housing regulations have widened inequality is neither novel nor controversial. The economists Peter Ganong and Daniel Shoag offer an illustration: If a lawyer moved from the Deep South to New York City, he would see his net income go up by about 39 percent, after adjusting for housing costs—the same as it would have done back in 1960. If a janitor made the same move in 1960, he'd have done even better, gaining 70 percent more income. But by 2017, his gains in pay would have been outstripped by housing costs, leaving him 7 percent worse off. Working-class Americans once had the most to gain by moving. Today, the gains are largely available only to the affluent.

Many of the country's more dynamic cities, along with the suburbs around them, have continued to wall themselves off in recent years, using any means available. In Manhattan, for instance, 27 percent of all lots are now in historic districts or are otherwise landmarked, predominantly in the borough's most affluent areas. And once a neighborhood in these areas is designated historic, new construction within it drops dramatically below the city's already grossly inadequate rate. In D.C., where nearly 19 percent of buildings are similarly protected, residents of the well-off Cleveland Park neighborhood once stopped the construction of an apartment building by getting the old Park and Shop on which it was going to be built designated as historic; it was one of the first examples of strip-mall architecture in the country, the research of one enterprising resident revealed.

Giving Americans the freedom to live where they want requires tolerating the choices made by others, even if we think the buildings they erect are tasteless. Tastes evolve, as do neighborhoods.

The good news is that addressing this crisis of mobility doesn't depend on your moving anywhere, if you'd rather stay where you are. It doesn't depend on your surrendering your single-family home, if you're lucky enough to have one. You can keep your lawn, your driveway, your garden. Solving crises often requires great sacrifice. But the simplest solution to this one promises to leave everyone better off. All you have to do is make room for some new neighbors—maybe even new friends—to join you, by allowing other people to build new housing on their own property. Americans are generally skeptical of the hassles of development and tend to focus on the downsides of change in their neighborhood. But if you ask them about the benefits—whether they'd allow construction in their neighborhood if it meant letting people live closer to jobs and schools and family members—they suddenly become overwhelmingly supportive of the idea.

If we want a nation that offers its people upward mobility, entrepreneurial innovation, increasing equality, vibrant community, democratic participation, and pluralistic diversity, then we need to build it. I mean that quite literally. We need to build it. And that will require progressives, who constitute overwhelming political majorities in almost all of America's most prosperous and productive areas, to embrace the strain of their political tradition that emphasizes inclusion and equality.

There are at least some signs that this message is taking root. California has enacted a series of legislative reforms aimed at paring back local zoning regulations. Cities across the country are banning zoning that restricts neighborhoods to single-family homes. Where older environmental activists rallied to block any new construction, a new generation of environmentalists sees building new housing near public transit as an essential tool in the fight against climate change. And national politicians have started to talk about our affordable-housing crisis.

These changes are encouraging, but insufficient. And sometimes the solutions on offer solve the wrong problem: Building subsidized housing in a place where land is cheap because jobs are scarce will help with affordability, but only worsen immobility.

Any serious effort to restore mobility should follow three simple principles. The first is consistency. Rules that apply uniformly across a city will tend to produce neighborhoods with diverse populations and uses, while providing equitable protections to residents. Rules that are tailored to the desires of specific neighborhoods will tend, over time, to concentrate less desirable land uses and more affordable housing in poorer areas. Just as the federal government once used its power as a housing lender to force local jurisdictions

to adopt zoning laws, it could now do the same to reform those laws, encouraging states to limit the discretion of local authorities.

From the November 1961 issue: "Moving Day," a short story

The second principle is tolerance. Organic growth is messy and unpredictable. Giving Americans the freedom to live where they want requires tolerating the choices made by others, even if we think the buildings they erect are tasteless, or the apartments too small, or the duplexes out of place. Tastes evolve, as do neighborhoods. The places that thrive over the long term are those that empower people to make their own decisions, and to build and adapt structures to suit their needs.

The third principle is abundance. The best way to solve a supply crunch is to add supply—lots of it, and in places that are attractive and growing, so that housing becomes a springboard, launching people forward rather than holding them back.

How much housing do we need? For 50 years, we've been falling behind demand. The Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation estimates that it would take another 3.7 million units just to adequately house our current population, with the shortfall concentrated among starter homes. Treat that as the lower bound. The trouble is, most *existing* units are located where regulation is loose and land is cheap, not in the places richest in opportunity; a considerable amount of the nation's housing is in the wrong place. Another recent estimate that tries to account for that, by the economists Kevin Corinth and Hugo Dante, puts the tally above 20 million. And even that might be too low.

Here's another way to think about what we really need: As things stand, roughly 20 percent of American workers relocate from one metropolitan area to another over the course of a decade. If all the moves that would happen anyway in the next 10 years brought people to the most prosperous regions, where productivity is highest—places like New York and the Bay Area, but also Austin and northwestern Arkansas—we'd have to add some 30 million new units, or 3 million a year. That's, perhaps, an upper bound. It's an ambitious target, but at roughly double our current pace, it's also an attainable one.

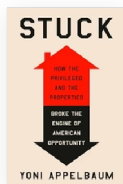
These three principles—consistency, tolerance, and abundance—can help restore American mobility. Federal guidelines can make the environment more amenable, but the solutions by and large cannot come from central planning; states and cities and towns will need to reform their rules and processes to

allow the housing supply to grow where people want to build. The goal of policy makers, in any case, shouldn't be to move Americans to any particular place, or to any particular style of living. They should instead aim to make it easier for Americans to move wherever they would like—to make it equally easy to build wherever Americans' hopes and desires alight.

That would return agency to people, allowing them to pursue opportunity wherever they might find it and to choose the housing that works best for them. For some, that might mean reviving faded towns; for others, it might mean planting new ones. Whatever level of education they have attained, whatever city or region they happen to have been born in, whatever occupation they pursue, individuals—janitors and attorneys alike—should be able to make their own choices.

The genius of the American system was never that its leaders knew what was coming next, but rather that they allowed individual people to decide things for themselves, so that they might collectively make the future.

This article is adapted from Yoni Appelbaum's new book, Stuck: How the Privileged and the Propertied Broke the Engine of American Opportunity. It appears in the March 2025 print edition with the headline "Stuck In Place."



Stuck: How the Privileged and the Propertied Broke the Engine of American Opportunity

By Yoni Appelbaum

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Yoni Appelbaum is a deputy executive editor at *The Atlantic*.

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