

A city is a place where thousands or even millions of people live together in a very small space. Cities are much larger and more important than towns or villages.

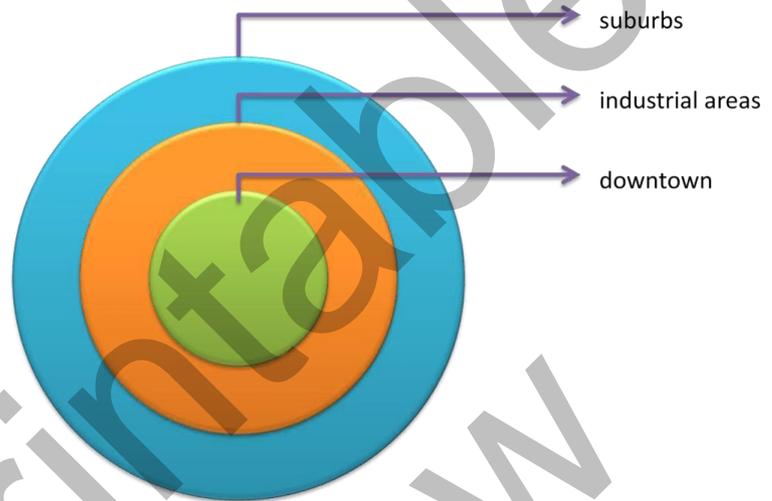
Today, about half of the world's population lives in cities.

Structure of a city

Today's modern cities often have three **characteristic** areas. The centre of the city is called downtown. It **consists of** stores, banks, government buildings and cultural **attractions**. Many people come to work in the downtown area. In large cities, the downtown area is full of **skyscrapers**.

An industrial region with factories, **warehouses, mills**, and other industries lies around the downtown area.

Suburbs are the places farthest away from the city centre. They are new **residential areas** where most people live. Suburbs have their own stores and **shopping malls**, but people often have to travel an hour or longer to get to work downtown.



Typical structure of a city

Image: "Structure of a city" by Klaus Rosmanitz, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Life in Cities

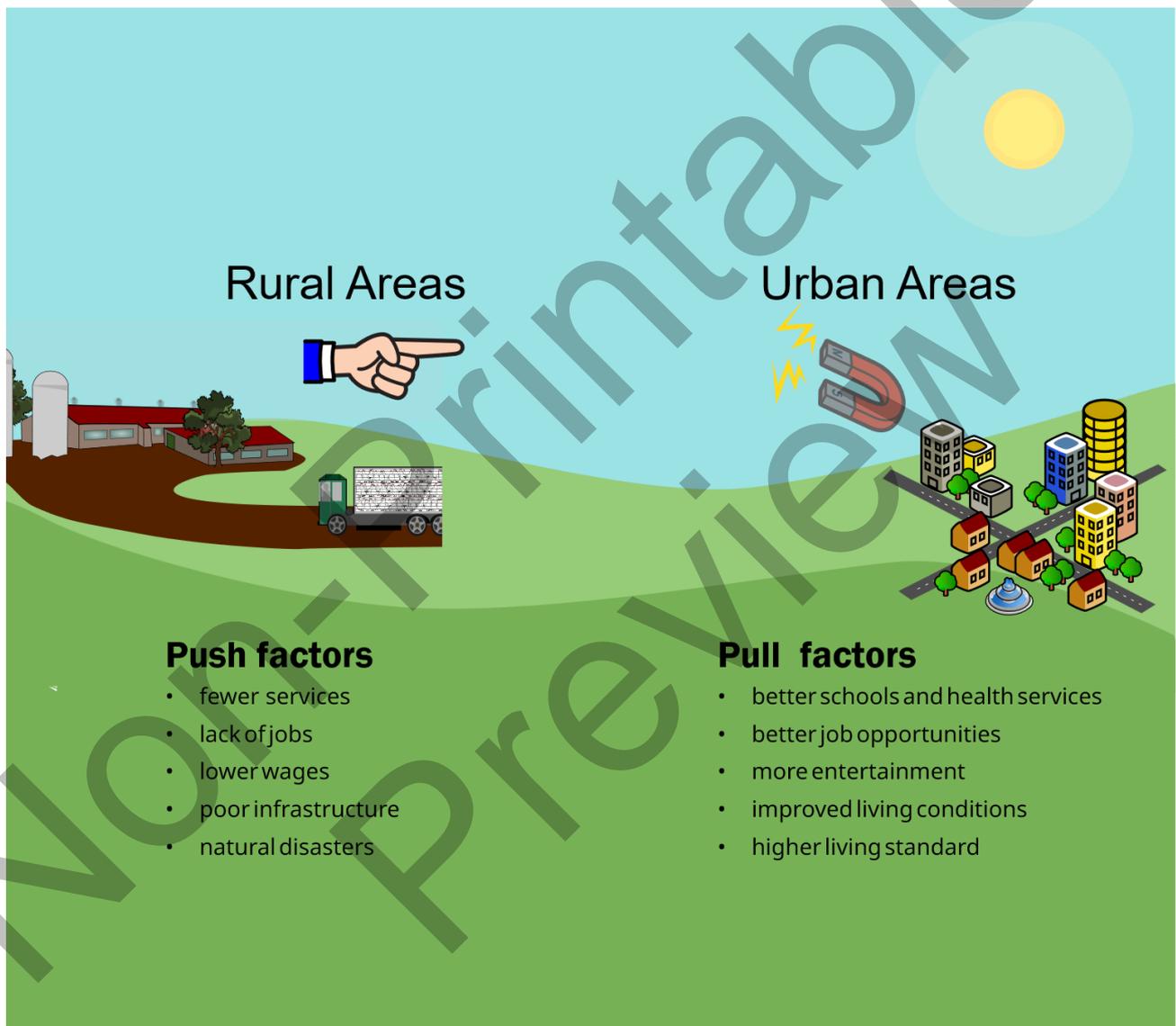
Cities have become very **attractive** places because they **offer** people not only jobs and work, but also many things they can do in their free time. You can go to museums or **art exhibitions, relax** in **public** parks, listen to music at concerts or eat out at expensive restaurants that offer food from all over the world. Big **department stores** give you the **pleasure** of buying many things without leaving the building.

Cities offer their **residents** and the people who work there a **variety** of ways of getting around. Many people walk or ride a bike, which is often the fastest way to move around in a **crowded** city. All cities offer at least some form of **public transport**: buses, trains or trams. Large cities have subways that travel underground.

A city has its own **government**, called the city council. The head of a city is its **mayor**. City governments have many things to **care for**. They must organize their own **police force** to **protect** the **citizens** and fight crime. In addition, They **provide** residents with drinking water, **electricity**, heating, hospitals and **services** to get rid of **waste**. The city council must decide in which parts of a city new factories or houses can be built.

Push and Pull Factors

There are a number of reasons why people leave the countryside. These are called **push factors**. There are also many things that attract people to city life. These are the **pull factors**.



City Definitions

The term **metropolitan** area is used to define the city itself as well as the **surrounding suburbs** or other **urban** areas. The city of New York, for example, has a population of 8 million, but its metropolitan area **includes** many other cities around it: a total of about 20 million people in all.

Megalopolis is a **term** used to describe large cities that are so close to each other that they start growing together. *Boswash*, for example, is a megalopolis that **reaches** from Boston to Washington, D.C. New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore also belong to this region, which more than 50 million people call their home.

Megacity is a word used to describe very large cities, mostly over 10 million people. Examples are Mexico City, São Paulo, Mumbai, and others. Most of them are in **developing countries**, where thousands of people **migrate** from the countryside to the cities every day.



The Boswash metropolitan area

Image: "[Physical Features of North America map](#)", by [Tom Patterson](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), Licence: [CC0 Public Domain](#)

modified by Klaus Rosmanitz

History of Cities

In **prehistoric** times, people were hunters and travelled around. They never lived in one place. As they started to grow **crops** and **raise animals**, they **settled** in villages, which later grew to larger towns.

Ancient Cities

The first real cities **emerged** in **Mesopotamia** about 5,000 years ago. In **ancient** cities, people were not only farmers, they also were **craftsmen**. People lived together in larger houses or buildings. Many cities had walls around them that **protected** the **inhabitants** from enemies. The central part of the city **included** a **temple** or a place to pray.

The biggest ancient city was Rome. Up to one million people lived there. In many **aspects** Rome was a modern city with streets, marketplaces, arenas, parks, and even a **sewage system**.

The people in ancient cities were divided into classes. Government officials, **soldiers**, and priests belonged to the upper classes. The middle and lower classes were made up of **merchants**, farmers, and **craftworkers**. **Newcomers** and **slaves** had to live outside the city and were seen as **outcasts**.

Medieval cities

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the population of cities fell. **Trading** between cities, which the Romans started, stopped again.

Medieval cities were small in size. The centre was often **occupied** by a **Gothic** cathedral, the city's main church. It was the most expensive building in the city and showed that religion was very important during the Middle Ages.

As in ancient cities, medieval ones were dirty and **diseases spread** quickly. Land in the city was very expensive. Cities could not **expand** because of the **surrounding** walls. In some cases, city governments **tore down** the walls and **rebuilt** them farther away from the city.



Medieval walls in Avila, Spain

Image: "Avila - Murallas, Paseo de la Ronda Vieja", by [Zarateman](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), Licence: [CC0](#), [Public Domain](#)

During the Middle Ages, members of the family, **servants**, and workers often lived in the same house. **Craftworkers** and **merchants** were organized in **guilds**, a new economic class in the cities. There were guilds for bakers, **goldsmiths**, **tailors** and other groups.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, **trade** started to become important again. Venice, one of the biggest cities of the time, became a centre of trade in the **Mediterranean** region. Other trading centres **included** northern German cities, Hamburg and Lübeck, Antwerp in Belgium and London.

Industrial cities

The Industrial Revolution and the **growth** of **factories** changed the lives of many people. Many people started to leave their farms in the countryside and moved to the cities, where they hoped to get jobs in new factories. Machines could do work much more quickly than people. Many **skilled craftworkers** lost their work.

The industrial city **focused** on factories, **warehouses**, railway lines and **harbours**. Workers lived in cheap **terraced houses**. The central parts of the city were very **crowded**; the air was **polluted** by the smoke coming out of the factories. **Garbage** and **rusting** metal was

dumped everywhere. Factory workers had tiring jobs, in which they worked up to 16 hours a day. Only few people became rich during the Industrial Revolution. Factory **owners** made big **profits** and built themselves houses outside the city.

Modern cities

In the 20th century, cities grew more than ever before. By building skyscrapers, architects **discovered** a new way to get more space in the city.

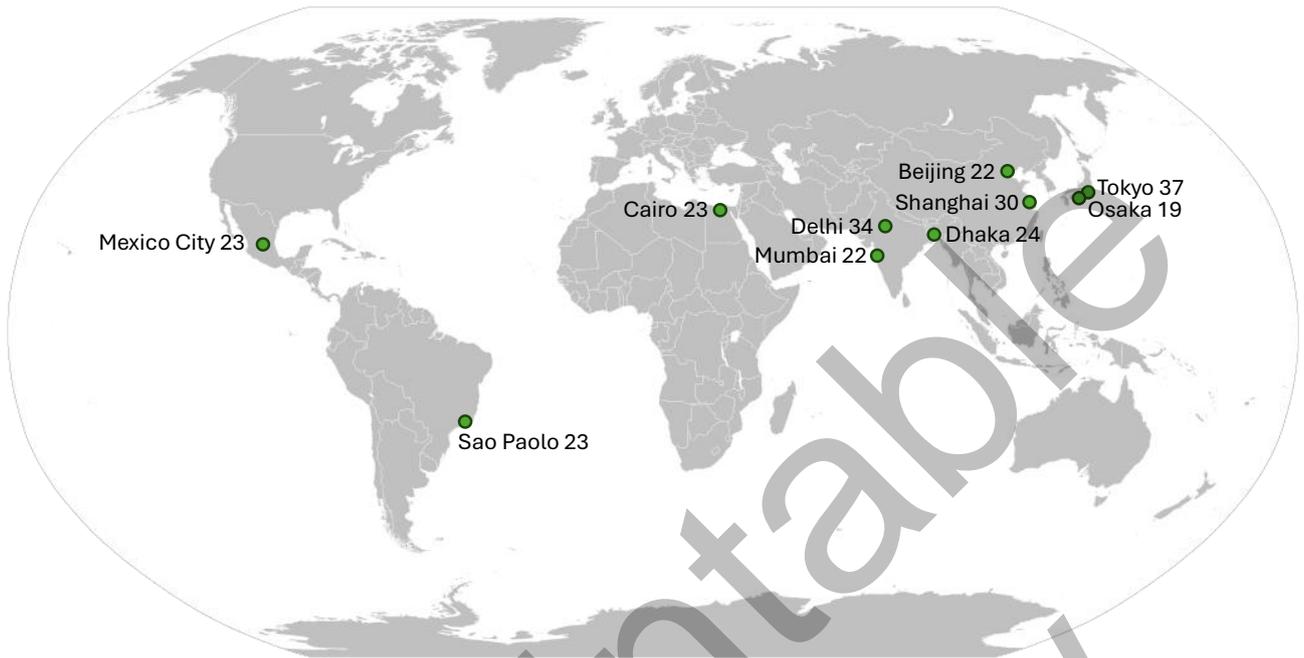
As time went on, more and more people moved away from the inner parts of the city and **settled** down in the **suburbs**, which were places where it was quieter and where the quality of life was better. These suburbs became small towns with their own office buildings and shopping centres. **Residents** can work and live there without having to travel long **distances** to the centre. Poorer people, **however**, stayed in the centres and formed ghettos. They **lacked** the money to buy houses or **flats** in the more expensive suburbs.

Today's cities are much larger than cities in **previous** times. With the help of cars and **public transport**, people can get to all parts of a city very quickly.

City Problems

Modern cities all over the world **face** the same problems.

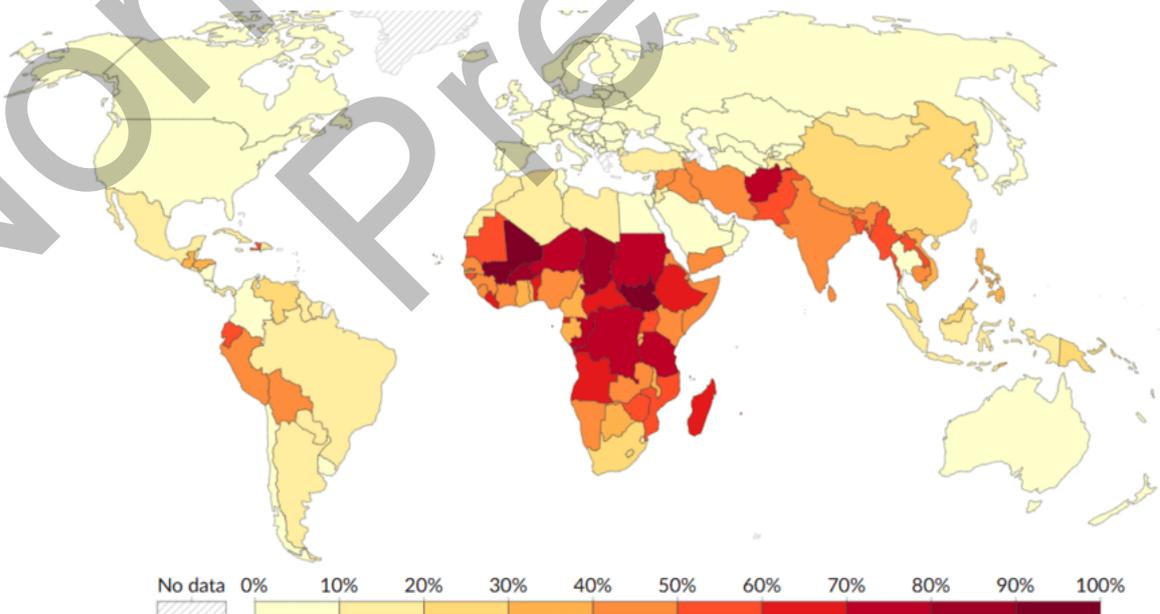
- As city population grows, **governments** don't have the money to build modern apartment buildings. This leads to poor **housing**, where many **residents** live in old houses without **electricity** or **sanitation**.
- City air is **increasingly polluted** by cars and industry. **Waste** is either burned or sent to **landfills**, making cities less healthy places to live.
- **Especially** during morning and evening **rush hours**, cities become packed with **vehicles**. Daily **traffic jams** make it very hard for people to get to work on time. City **authorities** spend more and more money on **public transportation** and are taking other steps to **reduce** traffic in cities. Some large cities, for example London, **charge** drivers a **fee** to enter the city centre.
- The **gap** between **wealthy** and poorer parts of a city is increasing. Government authorities work hard to get rid of **poverty** and make life better for people living in **slums** and **run-down** neighbourhoods. These people need more **opportunities** to get good jobs and better education.
- **Crime rates** are higher in cities, often **due to** problems such as alcoholism and **drug addiction**. In large **multiethnic** cities, conflicts can arise between groups with different cultural backgrounds.



The world's largest cities in millions (2025)

Source: [World Population Review](#)

Image (modified): [BlankMap-World.svg](#), by [Canuckguy](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), Licence: [CC0, Public Domain](#)
 (City names and population data have been added to the original file)



Share of city population living in slums

Image: "[Percent of urban populations living in slums \(2022\)](#)", by [PrydwenCK12](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#),
 Licence: [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)