

# The Inner City Comeback and Competition

By Richard Florida

Two new studies explore the movement of businesses and people back to the city, but outside the central business district.

In the 1950s and 1960s, America's inner cities experienced sharp declines as people and businesses moved out to the suburbs. By the early 1970s, one of my urban planning professors at Rutgers went so far as to dub the inner city "a sandbox," with federal transfers being used to essentially placate disadvantaged residents. But over the past decade or so, inner cities have staged a comeback, leading to what's been dubbed a "great inversion" as people and jobs move back to and near downtown, and poverty and disadvantage increasingly take up residence in the suburbs.

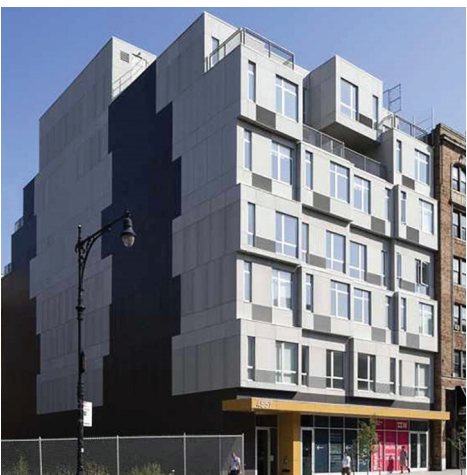
Still, a debate has emerged among urban scholars as to what kinds of cities have really made a comeback and how much growth continues to be centered in the suburbs. When the economist Jed Kolko crunched the latest census figures, he found urban revival to be limited to the young,

skilled, and affluent (who can afford and are contributing to escalating housing prices), while the suburbs continue to account for more growth.

Two new studies published in *Economic Development Quarterly* contribute to this important debate by taking a close look at the extent of employment growth in the inner city, and the business clusters that are driving it. The studies are informed by the work of the Harvard business professor Michael Porter, whose research focuses on the role of clusters of businesses, among other factors, in shaping the competitiveness of the inner city.

## Competition and Employment Growth

The first study, by Daniel Hartley of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and Nikhil Kaza and T. William Lester of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, uses US Census Bureau data to track employment growth among inner cities in two hundred eighty-one metros between 2002 and 2011. The study defines the "inner city" in two ways. The first, broad definition defines the inner city as all neighborhoods or



census tracts outside the central business district in the principal city of a metro area. The second, narrower definition is more in line with Porter's original definition of the distressed inner city, which is limited to neighborhoods or tracts with

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