The Size of U.S. Metropolitan Areas

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We delineate U.S. metropolitan areas that more closely match common perceptions of their boundaries.

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Metropolitan areas are a fundamental unit of economic analysis, but official U.S. delineations stray egregiously from the conception of them as unions of built-up lo-cations within which people regularly travel among places of residence, employment, and consumption. We develop an algorithm that uses commuting flows among cen-sus tracts to match varied interpretations of this conception. The resulting family of metropolitan delineations exhibits four characteristics: Population probability distributions decline over their entire domain. They are also too bunched at the top relative to the bottom to be consistent with a Pareto benchmark. Land proba-bility distributions peak at an intermediate size. And land area increases less than proportionately with population, with an implicit elasticity that declines further be-low 1 with size. The land-population relationship suggests that centripetal forces, such as centralized employment and centralized amenities, constrain metropolitan expansion.

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Article Citations

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Related Research

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