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Suburbanization in the United States 1960-2010

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The second half of the twentieth century saw the large-scale suburbanization of economic activity in the United States. Between 1960 and 2000, the median share of residents who work in the same county where they live fell from 91 to 61 percent. The three leading candidate explanations for this suburbanization are: (i) improvements in transport infrastructure (including the construction of the interstate highway system), (ii) changes in production structure (as manufacturing moved out of urban areas), and (iii) changes in residential amenities (including the quality of local schools and the incidence of crime). This paper develops a framework for isolating the relative contribution of these three forces in a class of quantitative spatial models. Using the structure of this class of models, we estimate theoretically-consistent measures of all three components, and undertake counterfactuals to evaluate the relative importance of each for the observed reallocation of economic activity and welfare.