

Population growth is a threat multiplier – it makes other problems worse and more difficult to combat. As more people join the planet, they affect the world around them and the world affects them too. More people also means some of the world’s most pressing issues become harder to solve and at the same time, impact more communities worldwide.

The following topics all have connections to both **population growth and urbanization**. Each is accompanied by bullet points of information on a variety of issues within the topic and **links to continue your research**.

URBANIZATION

The majority of the world’s population now lives in urban areas and that proportion is only expected to increase throughout the century. More than half of the world’s global GDP is [produced by just 600 cities](#). As urbanization continues to rise all over the world, urban residents will become wealthier and more important to their country’s economic potential.

Yet historic problems still remain. Rapid urbanization both compounds these problems and adds new problems on top of the ones that already exist. The sanitation problems that threaten urban water supplies and spread disease now affect millions more people than ever before. Cities expand their use of land even more quickly than their population grows and create new neighborhoods that are isolated and poorly designed. And many cities struggle to integrate new arrivals into their urban communities, cutting off people’s access to services and employment.

Some of the world’s most innovative developments throughout history have stemmed from the unique circumstances of life in cities. Meeting the needs of a rapidly growing urban population will require a similar level of innovation. The challenges that cities face may be difficult to overcome, but people can take advantage of the expansion of urban space to create cities that welcome the world.

Sprawl

When new neighborhoods are constructed near cities, these neighborhoods tend to sprawl, or become spaces where relatively few people are spread out over a large amount of land and commercial services are not within walking distance. Sprawl massively increases the amount of land that a city occupies while eliminating the

positive benefits of city living, like walking to restaurants or access to public transportation. Sprawl both undercuts efforts to conserve natural spaces and lowers the quality of living for urban residents.

- Sprawling areas require cars for transport, which increases carbon emissions and replaces agricultural land with roads. [Read more](#)
- Natural disasters, especially flooding, become more dangerous when sprawl spreads into floodplains, wetlands, and other natural barriers against extreme weather. [Read more](#)
- Developments tend to “leapfrog,” or leave gaps between areas of new construction, which unnecessarily fragments wildlife habitats and extends the reach of pollution from sprawl. [Read more](#)
- Land use policies in many countries makes more areas zoned for low-density, single-family housing rather than multi-unit housing that reduces sprawl. [Read more](#)
- Urban sprawl is expensive for everybody: city residents must spend more on transportation and local governments have less land available for other purposes. [Read more](#)

Overburdened Infrastructure

Cities are growing faster than their governments can respond. This means that cities are often playing catch up to create access to critical services like transportation, sewage treatment, and healthcare for the city’s residents.

- When transportation within cities is inadequate, it limits residents’ ability to move within the city to access services, which in turn makes urban living more expensive. [Read more](#)
- Cities struggle to handle increasing amounts of urban garbage. By 2050, there will be 70% more waste created in cities than in 2016. [Read more](#)
- In many cities, the waste from the wealthiest part of the city is funneled into the poorest areas, where residents must deal with more than their fair share of pollution. [Read more](#)
- Because slums are considered illegal, governmental and other programs are less likely to reach out to peoples in these areas with support. [Read more](#)
- Many governments plan poorly when building in cities. New buildings and services can be created in a city, but because there is no overall plan, people’s needs are still not met. [Read more](#)

Urban Poverty and Access to Services

Over a billion people worldwide [live in settlements that are cut off from basic services](#) like sanitation and schooling. The vast majority of these settlements are in urban slums, or informal neighborhoods around the periphery of cities that house a city's poorest people. These neighborhoods endure many of the problems with urbanization with little access to the benefits.

- Women in the poorest areas of a city tend to have more children than women living in wealthier parts of a city, as poor women are disconnected from health services. [Read more](#)
- Urban poverty gets concentrated into certain areas of a city. Public services become concentrated in wealthy areas. Fewer resources in poorer neighborhoods means that some people can't access services at all. A common form of this problem is food deserts, or neighborhoods where people don't have access to healthy food. [Read more](#)
- Residents of slums may face campaigns from their governments where all structures in a slum are destroyed. Many people not only lose their homes but access to work in the informal economy. [Read more](#)
- The urban poor often live in dangerous areas that are more vulnerable to natural disasters, like floods and mudslides, or close to health hazards like factories or sewers. [Read more](#)
- Children raised in slums have high rates of malnutrition and are more likely to catch diseases spreading from high density and little sanitation. [Read more](#)

Water and Air Quality

Cities are less than 2% of the world's land but create up to 60% of the world's pollution. The effects of this pollution are especially harmful for residents of cities themselves, who are close to the sources of pollution and often cannot afford to move away. Air and water pollution are some of the most pressing issues for these residents.

- Dense cities reduce pollution overall, but residents of denser cities face more pollution within their communities. [Read more](#)
- Multiple air pollutants in cities can combine to make new forms of pollution that is even more problematic. The most famous example of this phenomenon is urban smog. [Read more](#)

- Development in cities interrupts natural systems of water filtration where wastewater is absorbed into the ground; instead, urban runoff goes into streams and rivers. [Read more](#)
- When clean water isn't available to residents of a city, they can be forced to rely on private water vendors, who charge high prices and often provide water that is also polluted. [Read more](#)
- People living in informal urban settlements like slums face an additional level of air pollution from the materials that are burned for heating and cooking, including coal and biomass. [Read more](#)

Housing and Affordability

Affordable housing is defined by quality homes that [cost less than 30% of residents' monthly income](#). In all regions of the world, affordable housing is out of reach for many people; by 2025, 1.6 billion people worldwide will [spend too much on housing](#).

- New arrivals to cities often cannot get housing while they are looking for a job, leading to many people living in areas with no access to basic infrastructure. [Read more](#)
- House prices are increasing in over half the countries in the world, and most places have seen the cost of housing rise more quickly than people's incomes. [Read more](#)
- Because poor residents are less likely to own their home, housing affordability reduces how much money people have to pass on to their children and later generations of their families. [Read more](#)
- The need for housing globally has grown much more quickly than the number of available homes. [Read more](#)
- Land use rules can make it more expensive and difficult to build housing in cities, which in turn makes housing all over the city more expensive. [Read more](#)

Lack of Green Spaces

Green spaces in cities can range from expansive parks to a single tree on a residential street, but all forms of green space are good for the people who live nearby. More plants and landscaping can lower city temperatures and improve health. Unfortunately, many global cities lack green space. And in most global cities that have green space, it is mostly found in wealthy neighborhoods, leaving the world's poorest urban residents without most forms of urban nature and the positive effects that they bring.

- Green space makes neighborhoods more pleasant places to live, which also makes them more expensive. Current residents often can't afford to stay in homes they may have lived in for decades. [Read more](#)
- When impervious surfaces take the place of green spaces, less rain is absorbed by land, which makes flooding worse and creates floods in areas that previously had none. [Read more](#)
- Access to green space helps both mental and physical health. [Read more](#)
- Green spaces are unequal between cities as well as within them. The wealthier and whiter a city is overall, the more green space that residents have available. [Read more](#)
- Cities become hotter and hotter in neighborhoods where there are few green spaces, creating heat islands where some parts of a city are much warmer than others. Buildings and roads retain heat and cause temperatures to increase by several degrees, a change that can be deadly. [Read more](#)

Rural-to-Urban Migration

Most migration does not occur internationally but within a country's own borders, most commonly rural residents moving to urban areas. Whether brought by better jobs or displaced by war, the number of urban migrants is growing and many cities are not keeping up. A growing population means that more people need access to the city's basic systems and services, but the population has grown much more quickly than access has.

- The poorest people in rural areas, especially women, often do not have the identification documents that would allow them to move somewhere else. [Read more](#)
- Indigenous migrants often move to urban areas because their generational land was taken from them. Once living in cities, indigenous migrants often face more discrimination and have trouble finding jobs. [Read more](#)
- As many young people in rural areas move to cities for better economic opportunities, rural areas become disproportionately elderly. [Read more](#)
- Migrants to urban areas often end up living in slums, where they lack access to water and electricity and risk the spread of disease. [Read more](#)
- Governmental and popular opposition to migration reduces migrants' access to services and leaves them more vulnerable to violence. [Read more](#)