

## **The Emergence of the “Super-Commuter”**

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**February, 2012**

The twenty-first century is emerging as the century of the “super-commuter,” a person who works in the central county of a given metropolitan area, but lives beyond the boundaries of that metropolitan area, commuting long distance by air, rail, car, bus, or a combination of modes.<sup>i</sup> The super-commuter typically travels once or twice weekly for work, and is a rapidly growing part of our workforce. The changing structure of the workplace, advances in telecommunications, and the global pattern of economic life have made the super-commuter a new force in transportation.

Many workers are not required to appear in one office five days a week; they conduct work from home, remote locations, and even while driving or flying. The international growth of broadband internet access, the development of home-based computer systems that rival those of the workplace, and the rise of mobile communications systems have contributed to the emergence of the super-commuter in the United States. Super-commuters are well-positioned to take advantage of higher salaries in one region and lower housing costs in another.

Many workers are not expected to physically appear in a single office at all: the global economy has made it possible for highly-skilled workers to be employed on a strictly virtual basis, acquiring clients anywhere and communicating via email, phone and video conference. Furthermore, the global economy has rendered the clock irrelevant, making it possible for people to work, virtually, in a different time zone than the one in which they live. Simply put, the workplace is no longer fixed in one location, but rather where the worker is situated. As a result, city labor sheds (where workers live) have expanded over the past decade to encompass not just a city's exurbs, but also distant, non-local metropolitan regions, resulting in greater economic integration between cities situated hundreds of miles apart.

NYU's Rudin Center has found that super-commuting is a growing trend in major United States regions, with growth in eight of the ten largest metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Washington, D.C. is not included in this study, as no data is available.

## **Key Findings**<sup>2</sup>

- Across the country, city labor sheds (where workers live) are expanding rapidly and super-commuter growth rates are far outpacing workforce growth rates. Super-commuting is on the rise among workers in the central commuting counties of ten of the largest metropolitan labor forces in the nation, with the exceptions of Atlanta and Minneapolis. As a result, labor sheds have expanded to include non-local regions; this trend is particularly apparent in Los Angeles and Chicago, where commuters from Northern California and St. Louis, respectively, account for an increasingly larger share of the labor force (Figures 5-6).
- As of 2009, super-commuters accounted for the greatest percent of the workforce in both Dallas and Harris (Houston) counties in Texas, at approximately 13%. The “Texas Triangle” corridor features two of the five fastest-growing super-commutes over the past decade (Figure 3), and three of the five most common super-commutes among the nation’s major cities in 2009 (Figure 4).
- Several cities’ super-commuting rates stand out with exceptional growth:
  - Dallas-Ft. Worth to Houston (Harris Co.) super-commutes have more than tripled since 2002; Austin and San Antonio to Houston super-commutes have both more than doubled
  - Northern California to Los Angeles (L.A. County) super-commutes have both more than doubled, in both San Francisco and San Jose MSAs
  - Boston to Manhattan super-commutes have more than doubled
  - Although super-commuters comprised only 3% of its workforce, Manhattan saw one of the fastest growth rates of these workers
  - Figure 7 illustrates the emerging super-commute corridors that will have increasingly closer social and economic integration within each other.
- Super-commuters across the United States tend to be young (under 29 years old) and are more likely to be middle class than the average worker.
- Future planning decisions should consider metropolitan regions’ growth due to the increase of super-commuting and resultant inter-connectedness; while “twin cities” of the past typically sat 40 miles apart, the new “twin cities” stretch 100-200 miles away from one another, with ever-growing inter-commutes.

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<sup>2</sup> Source of Data: U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics OnTheMap data, <http://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

Figure 1

Top 5 U.S. Counties Among 10 Largest Metropolitan Workforces in U.S. for Super-commuting, 2009	
1) Harris Co. (Houston), TX	251,000 workers; 13.2% of workforce
2) Dallas, TX	176,000; 13.2%
3) Maricopa Co. (Phoenix), AZ	131,000; 8.6%
4) Fulton Co. (Atlanta), GA	47,700; 7.5%
5) Philadelphia, PA	42,100; 7.3%

Figure 2

Top 5 U.S. Counties Among 10 Largest Metropolitan Workforces in U.S. by Rate of Growth in Super-commuters, 2002-09	
1) Harris Co. (Houston), TX	98.3% increase
2) Los Angeles, CA	76.7% increase
3) King Co. (Seattle), WA	60.4% increase
4) Manhattan (New York City), NY	60% increase
5) Philadelphia, PA	49.9% increase

Figure 3

Top 5 Super-commutes by Rate of Growth, 2002-09	
1) Dallas-Fort Worth to Houston, TX	+218% (+35,600 total)
2) San Jose to Los Angeles, CA	+153% (+7,600 total)
3) Yakima to Seattle, WA	+131% (+3,000 total)
4) Boston, MA to Manhattan, NY	+128% (+1,700 total)
5) San Antonio to Houston, TX	+116% (+16,700 total)

Figure 4

Top 5 Super-commutes Among Major U.S. Cities*, 2009	
1) Tucson to Phoenix, AZ	3.6% of workforce (54,400 total)
2) Houston to Dallas, TX	3.3% (44,300 total)
3) Dallas-Fort Worth to Houston, TX	2.7% (51,900 total)
4) Austin to Dallas, TX	2.4% (32,400 total)
5) San Diego to Los Angeles, CA	2.2% (78,300 total)

\*Among Top 5 super-commuting home destinations of central counties in 10 largest metro areas by workforce size in 2009.

Figure 5

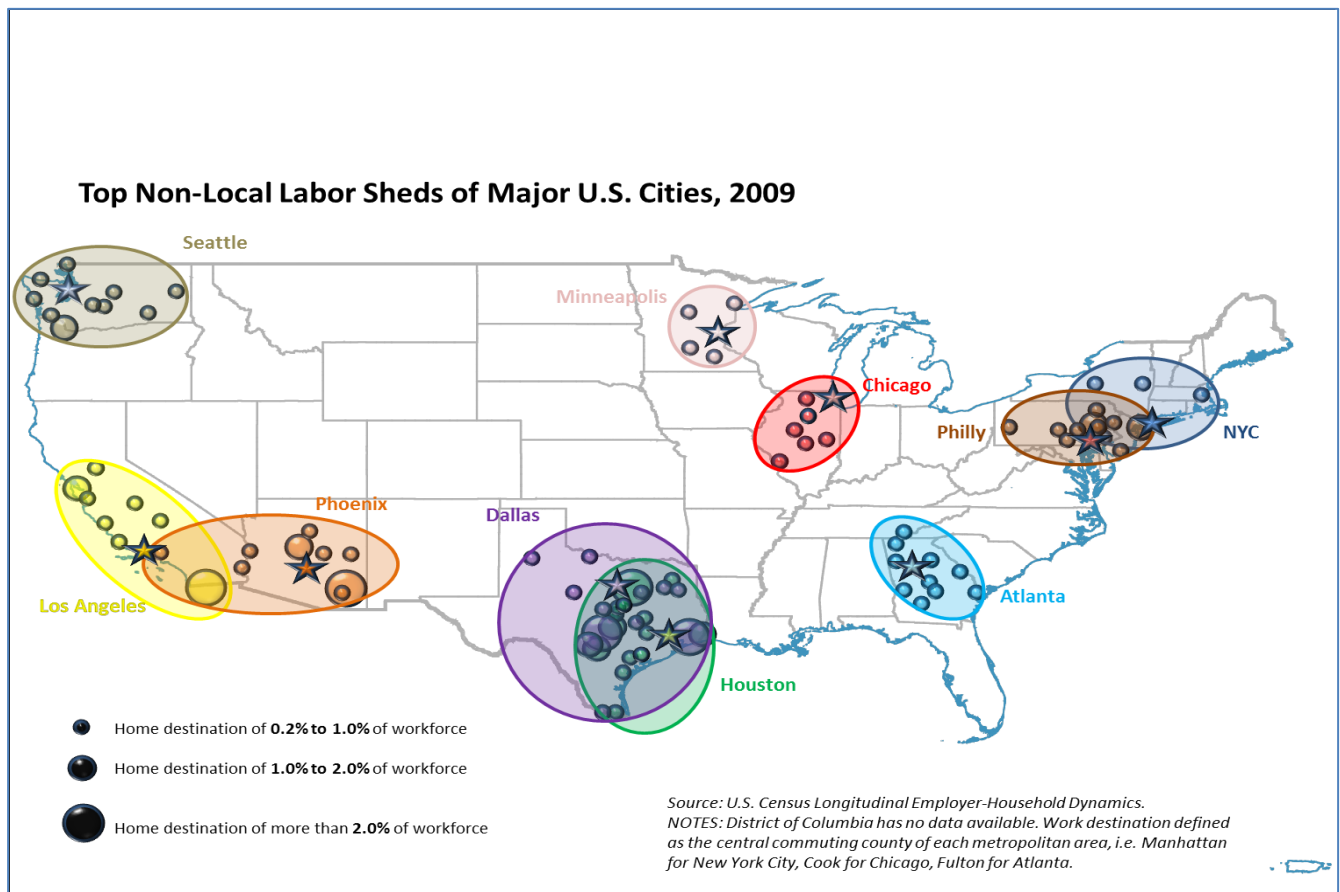
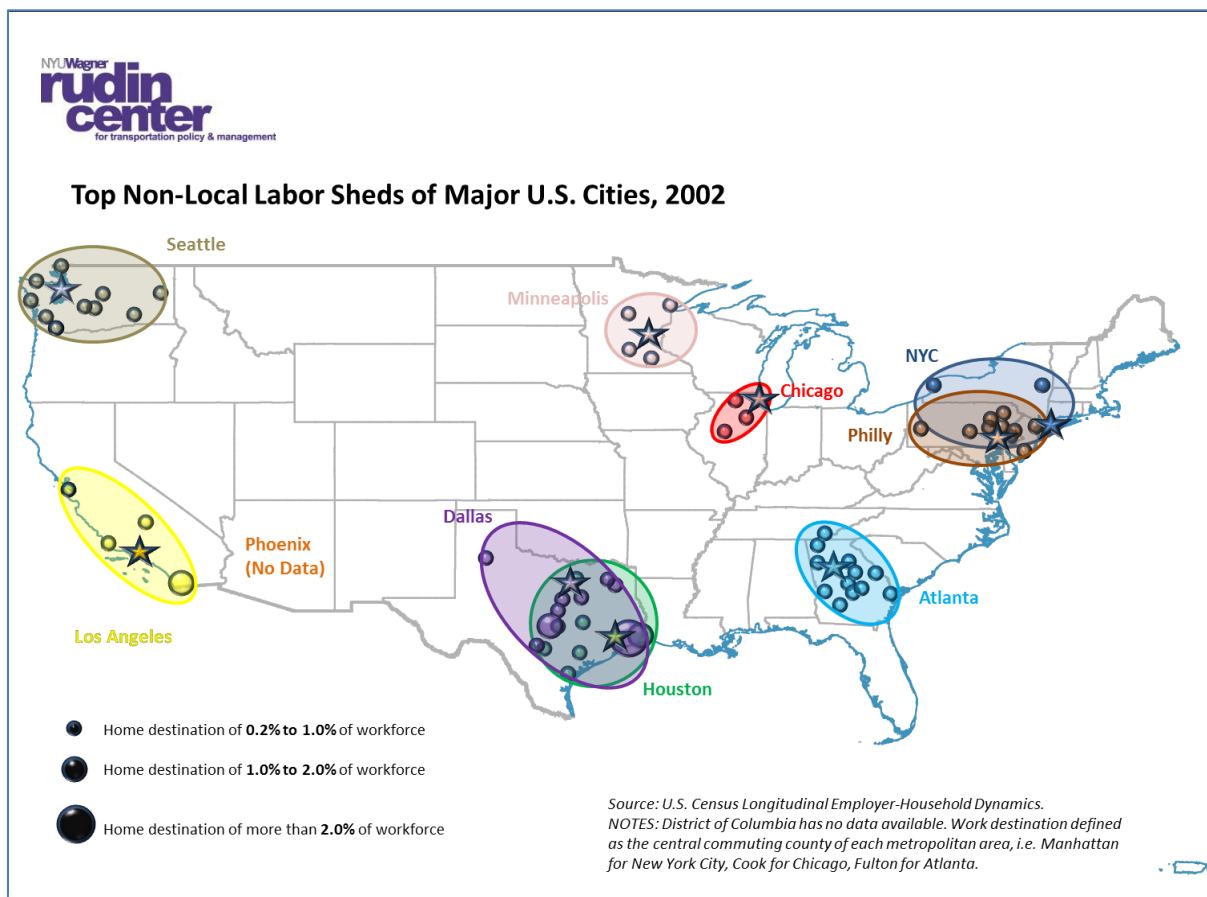
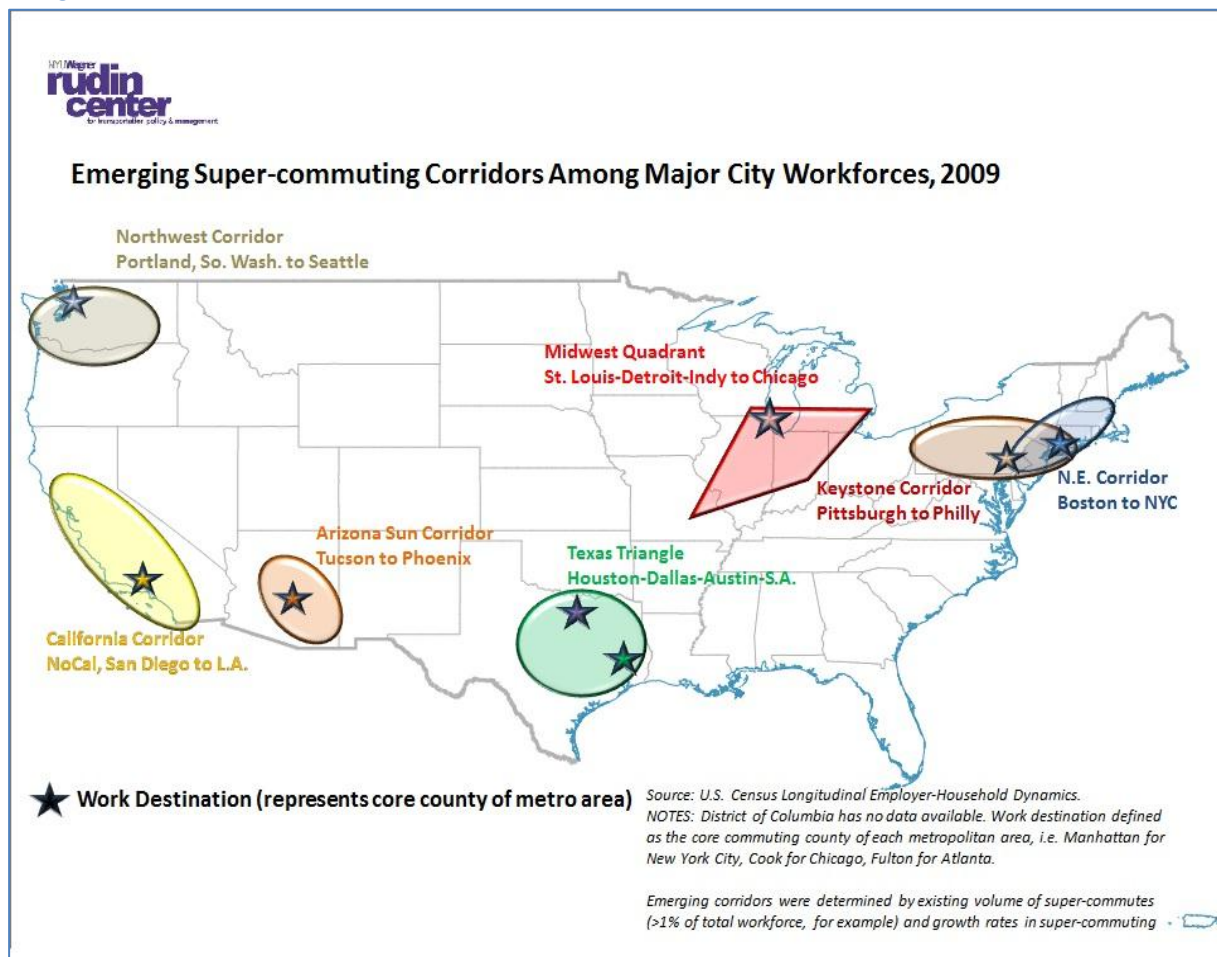


Figure 6



Each bubble represents a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) located outside the Combined Statistical Area (CSA) of the central county.

Figure 7



## **Methodology**

This study classified any individual who lives beyond the census-defined Combined Statistical Area of their workplace as a “super-commuter.” Using the U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics OnTheMap data tool<sup>3</sup>, the study analyzed home destination data for all workers in the central counties of the ten largest metropolitan regions in the United States by workforce size. For instance, in the case of the New York City metropolitan area, the workforce study area was the central county of Manhattan; individuals living within the New York City Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and surrounding MSAs (i.e. Bridgeport, New Haven, Poughkeepsie, and Trenton) that were included as part of the CSA were considered part of the “local labor shed.” Individuals of MSAs beyond the New York City-Newark-Bridgeport CSA were considered part of the non-local labor shed and classified as “super-commuters.”

However, because OnTheMap does not identify the travel patterns of individuals in the non-local labor shed, this study cannot ascertain whether all of these individuals can be considered “super-commuters” in the truest sense, since the study interpreted an actual super-commute as an occasional (clarify in parenthesis) long-distance trip, such as once or twice per week, made for work purposes by a variety of intercity travel modes. These figures and trends on “super-commuting” should be interpreted as *potential* or *likely* super-commuters, since the data only reflects residential location. What these figures do represent for certain is the expansion of city labor sheds (where workers live) beyond the exurbs of the metropolitan region, spilling into other regions that are hundreds of miles away.

## **Demographic Characteristics and Implications**

**In general, the super-commuter is younger than the average worker.** In fact, in all ten major central commuting counties, the proportion of workers younger than 29 years old among super-commuters was higher than the share of under-29s of the entire workforce, indicating that a supercommuter is more likely to be less than 29 years old than the average worker (Figure 9). However, older age groups of super-commuters are increasing; some of these trends can be attributed to demographics, since the U.S. population as a whole is aging as the baby boomers reach retirement age. But in relative terms, when comparing the share of super-commuters of each age cohort (29 or younger, 30-54, or 55 or older) with that of the entire workforce, super-commuters still are increasingly represented by the older age cohorts. For instance, in Manhattan, the share of 55+ year-old workers in the workforce grew by 15% from 2002 to 2009, but among super-commuters, the share of 55+ workers grew by 21.6%. Similar trends were also present among super-commuters to Houston, Dallas, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis (Figure 10).

Segregating the super-commuters by income cohorts also reveal that they are more likely to come from middle-class backgrounds (less than \$40,000 per year) than individuals in the local labor shed. In each of the ten major central commuting counties, high-income (earn more than \$40,000 per year) individuals represented a smaller proportion of super-commuters than that of the entire workforce (Figure 11).

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<sup>3</sup> <http://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

The relative prevalence of middle-income earners among super-commuters may also be related to the fact that super-commuters are younger than the average worker, when salaries tend to be lower. However, even though super-commuters are increasingly older, they are not necessarily increasingly more affluent in most major cities, with the exceptions of Atlanta, Minneapolis, and Seattle. While in absolute terms, the total number of super-commuters in the highest income cohort has more than doubled in New York, Houston, and Seattle, the total number of workers in that income cohort has also grown at a fast rate: the percent change in the share of high-income workers among super-commuters has not kept pace with that of the workforce as a whole (Figure 12). **This data suggests that while super-commuters are increasingly high-income in absolute terms, they have increasingly middle-class incomes when compared to the rest of the workforce.** Thus, the super-commuting population should not be perceived as elite business travelers, but rather more representative of middle-income individuals who may opt for more affordable housing and means of transportation, such as driving or intercity buses.

## **Geographic Characteristics and Implications**

The emergence of the super-commuter has created unique geographic characteristics for many metropolitan areas. As Figures 4-5 show, the growth in super-commuting has made the geographic boundaries of metropolitan areas increasingly challenging to define. As a rule of thumb, the U.S. Census Bureau bases its metropolitan area boundaries on the degree of “social and economic integration, as measured by commuting to work” between adjacent areas and the urban core. But as labor sheds expand and commuting patterns become increasingly interregional, particularly in Texas, California, and the Northeast Corridor, the applicability of commuting patterns to define metropolitan geographies is less relevant today than a decade ago. Given these advances in telecommunications, the degree of “social and economic integration” between regional urban centers has increased dramatically over the past decade, as illustrated by these recent trends in super-commutes.

The implications of the growth in super-commuting on the geographic characteristics of metropolitan regions reinforce theories and interpretations of American cities as increasingly integrated: Jean Gottmann (1961) was the first to introduce the concept of a “megalopolis” based on the string of urban agglomerations along the Northeast Corridor extending from Washington D.C. to Boston, highly connected by a vast intercity transport infrastructure consisting of short flights, superhighways, long-distance buses, and passenger rail<sup>ii</sup>. More recently, think tanks such as the Regional Plan Association and the Brookings Institution have also interpreted 21<sup>st</sup> century American cities as increasingly “megalopolitan” in nature to advocate for investments in intercity transport infrastructure such as high-speed rail<sup>iii</sup>, or for a shift towards “mega-regional” planning and closer economic cooperation between cities<sup>iv</sup>. This shift would certainly apply to regions such as the Arizona “Sun Corridor” from Tucson to Phoenix, the “Texas Triangle” mega-region, and in California, all of which are now already well-established super-commute corridors, suggesting a greater degree of economic integration. Such an approach to metropolitan planning may also be relevant in the future for regions where super-commuting is rapidly growing, such as Portland-Seattle in the Pacific Northwest, St.

Louis-Chicago and Detroit-Chicago in the Midwest, and Pittsburgh-Philadelphia and Boston-New York City in the Northeast.

This expansion of city labor sheds exemplifies how the economic geography of American cities has evolved in the information age, as cities begin to share labor/commuter sheds and social and economic activities become increasingly inter-regional. While city-regions, such as Minneapolis-St. Paul, San Francisco-Oakland, the North Carolina Research Triangle, and Dallas-Fort Worth, are already highly integrated due to proximity, technological advances over the past 20 years in broadband, mobile communications, and teleconferencing has made geographic proximity a less relevant precondition for metropolitan integration. A new “Twin Cities” can be characterized by Phoenix-Tucson: Phoenix super-commuters from Tucson accounted for a greater share of the county’s workforce than any of the 10 major counties included in this study. While traditional Twin Cities like Dallas-Fort Worth are typically situated no more than 40 miles from each other, the Phoenix-Tucson “Sun Corridor” stretches for more than 100 miles. Similarly, the emerging “Texas Triangle” cities are more than 200 miles from each other, compared to the original Triangle metropolis of Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, which are no more than 30 miles apart.

These trends towards urban integration and “super-commuting” are not necessarily limited to the United States. To compete in the global economy, nations around the world are seeking to establish economically competitive “mega-regions” that are highly connected both in terms of social and economic activity and infrastructure, such as the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta megalopolises in China, the Rio-Sao Paulo corridor in Brazil, and the Gauteng mega-region in South Africa, with enormous investments in high-speed rail and super-highway systems. Richard Florida, et al. (2007) argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy, these integrated mega-regions will play an increasingly important role in both advanced and emerging nations as drivers of economic growth<sup>v</sup>. Thus, the growth in super-commuting nationwide and the increased level of economic integration between distant cities can present metropolitan regions with tremendous opportunities to become more economically competitive through increased coordination in goals, resources, and policymaking.



# MANHATTAN

## Center of New York City-Newark-Bridgeport CSA



**60%** increase in super-commuters 2002-09

**8%** growth in primary jobs 2002-09

**59,000** super-commuters

**3%** of workforce

**22,200** total increase in super-commuters

**19%** more likely to be 29 years or younger than average worker

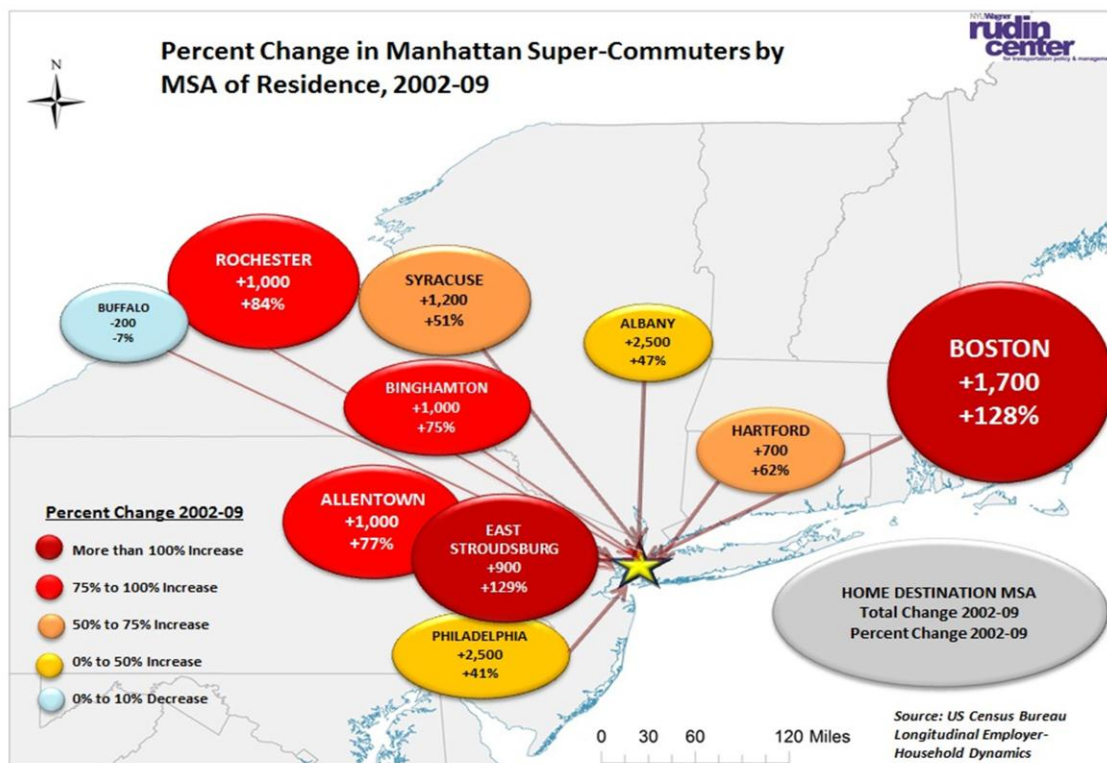
**49%** more likely to earn less than \$15,000 per year than average worker

**26.5%\*** increase in share of super-commuters earning more than \$40,000/year

\*28.3% increase in share of total Manhattan workers earning more than \$40,000/year, indicates that in relative terms, super-commuters are still have increasingly lower to middle income characteristics than the rest of the workforce.

### TOP 10 SOURCES OF MANHATTAN'S SUPER-COMMUTING WORKFORCE

Metropolitan Area of Residence for Non-local Manhattan Worker	2009 Total Super-commuters	Percent Change 2002-09
1) Philadelphia, PA-NJ-DE-MD	8,600	+40.9%
2) Albany, NY	7,700	+47.5%
3) Syracuse, NY	3,400	+51.2%
4) Boston, MA-NH	3,100	+128%
5) Buffalo, NY	2,700	-7.2%
6) Binghamton, NY	2,300	+75.5%
7) Allentown, PA-NJ	2,300	+77.2%
8) Rochester, NY	2,100	+83.8%
9) Hartford, CT	1,800	+62.2%
10) East Stroudsburg, PA	1,600	+129%



# LOS ANGELES

*Los Angeles County*  
*Center of Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside CSA*



**76.7%** *growth in super-commuters 2002-09*

**3.6%** *growth in primary jobs 2002-09*

**233,000** *super-commuters*

**6.4%** *of workforce*

**101,300** *total increase in super-commuters*

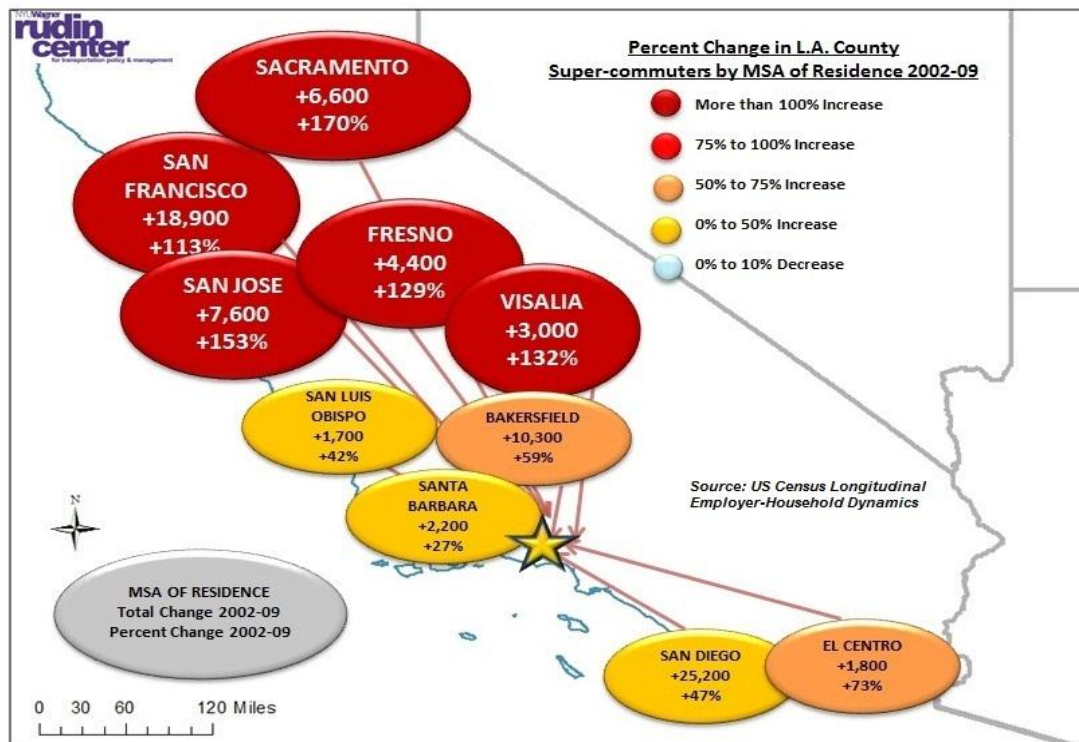
**29%** *more likely to be 29 years or younger than average worker*

**31%** *growth in share of workers earning more than \$40,000/year, 2002-09*

**11%** *growth in share of super-commuters earning more than \$40,000/year, 2002-09*

## TOP 10 SOURCES OF L.A. COUNTY'S SUPER-COMMUTING WORKFORCE

Metropolitan Area of Residence for Non-local Manhattan Worker	2009 Total Super- commuters	Percent Change 2002-09
1) San Diego, CA	78,300	+47.4%
2) San Francisco, CA	35,700	+113%
3) Bakersfield, CA	27,600	+59.2%
4) San Jose, CA	12,500	+153%
5) Santa Barbara, CA	10,500	+26.5%
6) Sacramento, CA	10,400	+170%
7) Fresno, CA	7,800	+129%
8) San Luis Obispo, CA	5,800	+42.5%
9) Visalia, CA	5,300	+132%
10) El Centro, CA	4,400	+73.5%



# CHICAGO

## Cook County

Center of Chicago-Naperville-Michigan City CSA



**41.6%** growth in super-commuters 2002-09

**0.8%** growth in primary jobs 2002-09

**99,000** super-commuters

**4.4%** of workforce

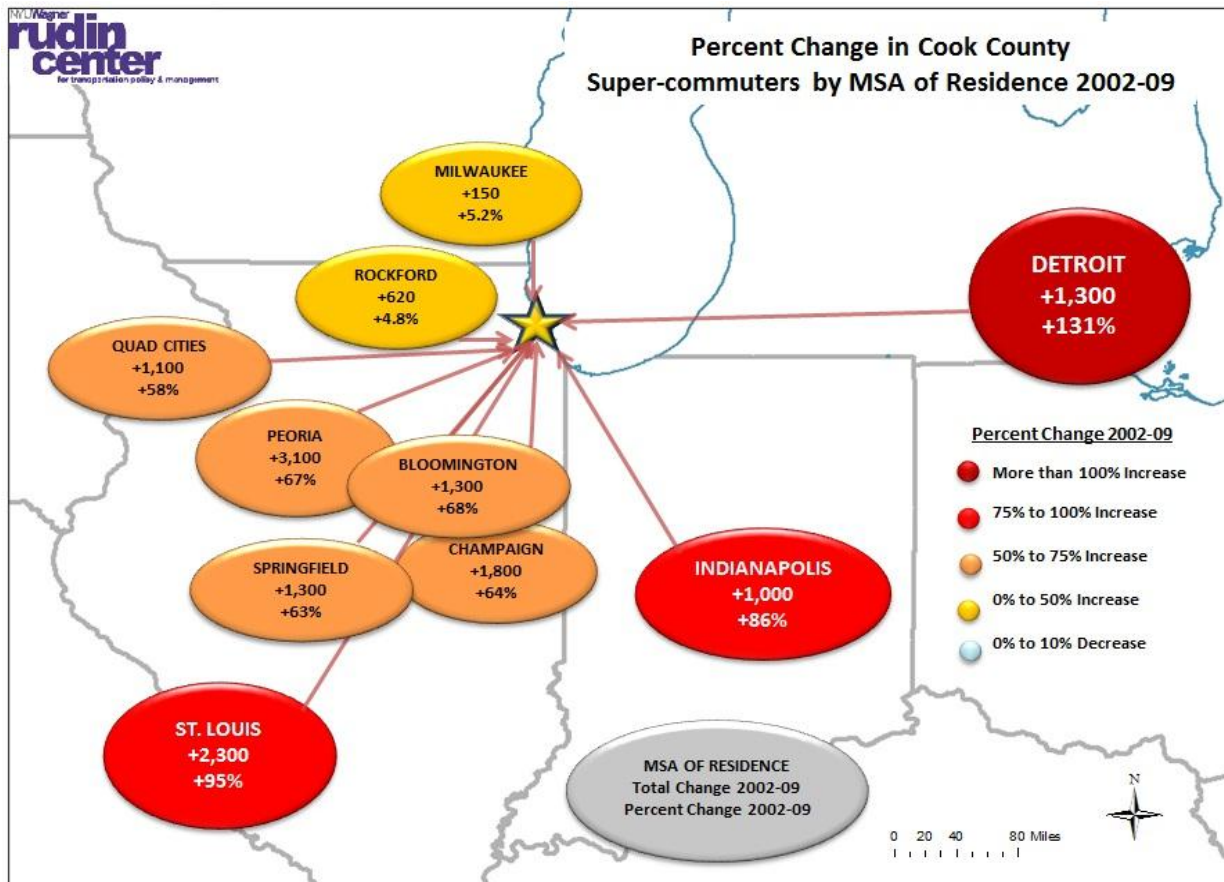
**29,100** total increase in super-commuters

**20%** more likely to be 29 years or younger than average worker

**26%** less likely to earn more than \$40,000/year than average worker

## TOP 10 SOURCES OF COOK COUNTY'S SUPER-COMMUTING WORKFORCE

Metropolitan Area of Residence for Non-local Cook County Worker	2009 Total Super- commuters	Percent Change 2002-09
1) Rockford, IL	13,700	+4.8%
2) Peoria, IL	7,700	+66.7%
3) St. Louis, MO-IL	4,675	+94.8%
4) Champaign, IL	4,660	+64.2%
5) Springfield, IL	3,340	+63.4%
6) Bloomington, IL	3,290	+67.5%
7) Milwaukee, WI	3,100	+5.2%
8) Quad Cities, IA-IL	3,000	+57.5%
9) Detroit, MI	2,300	+131%
10) Indianapolis, IN	2,100	+85.8%





# HOUSTON

Harris County  
Center of Houston-Baytown-Huntsville CSA



**98.3%** growth in super-commuters 2002-09

**9.3%** growth in primary jobs 2002-09

**251,200** super-commuters

**13.2%** of workforce

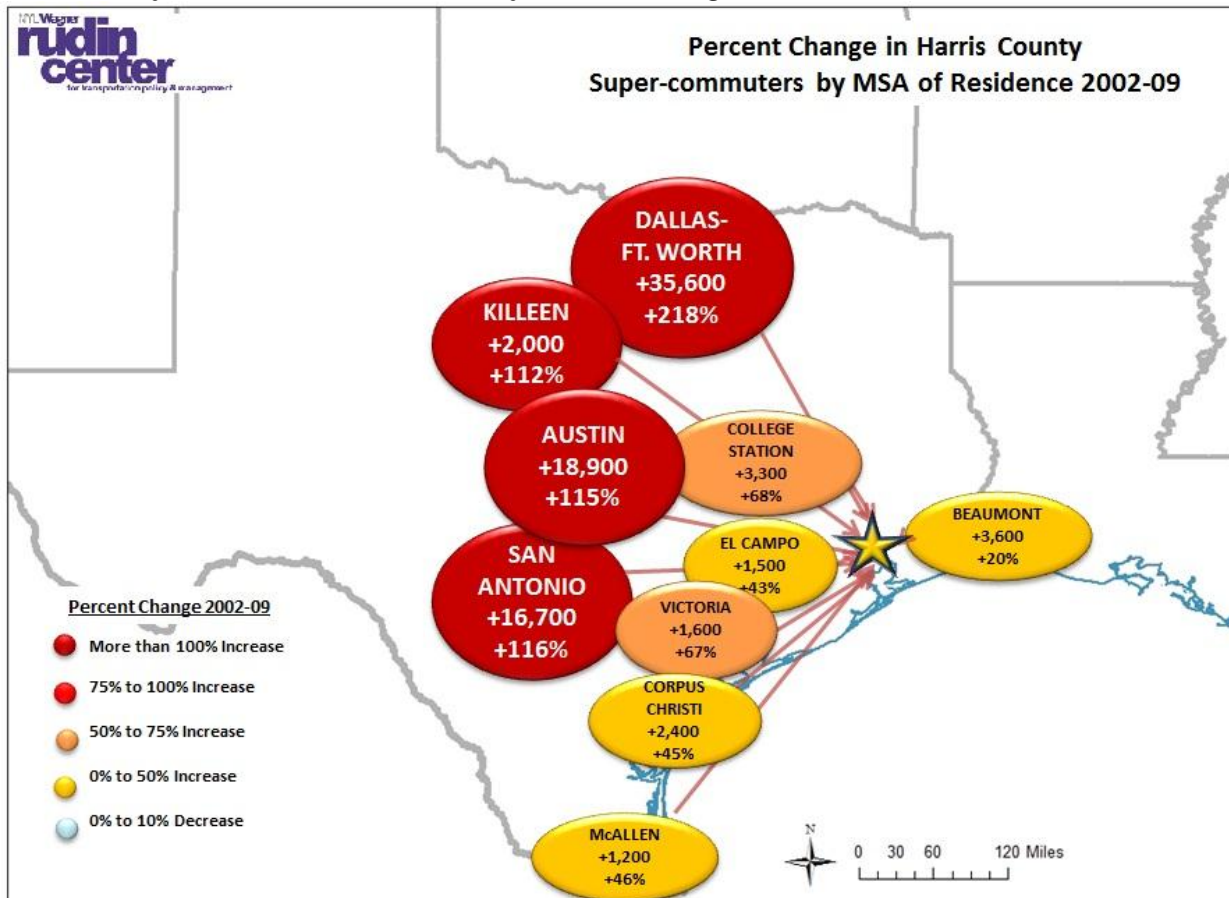
**124,500** total increase in super-commuters

**17%** more likely to be 29 years or younger than average worker

**7.5%** less likely to earn more than \$40,000/year than average worker

## TOP 10 SOURCES OF HARRIS COUNTY'S SUPER-COMMUTING WORKFORCE

Metropolitan Area of Residence for Non-local Harris County Worker	2009 Total Super-commuters	Percent Change 2002-09
1) Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	51,900	+218%
2) Austin, TX	35,400	+115%
3) San Antonio, TX	31,100	+116%
4) Beaumont, TX	5,600	+0.0%
5) College Station-Bryan, TX	4,400	-3.5%
6) Corpus Christi, TX	4,100	+32.2%
7) El Campo, TX	4,000	+0.0%
8) Victoria, TX	2,730	+34.0%
9) Killeen-Temple, TX	2,660	+50.4%
10) McAllen, TX	2,500	+219%



# DALLAS

*Dallas County*  
*Center of Dallas-Fort Worth CSA*



**38.4%** growth in super-commuters 2002-09

**1.7%** growth in primary jobs 2002-09

**175,700** super-commuters

**13.2%** of workforce

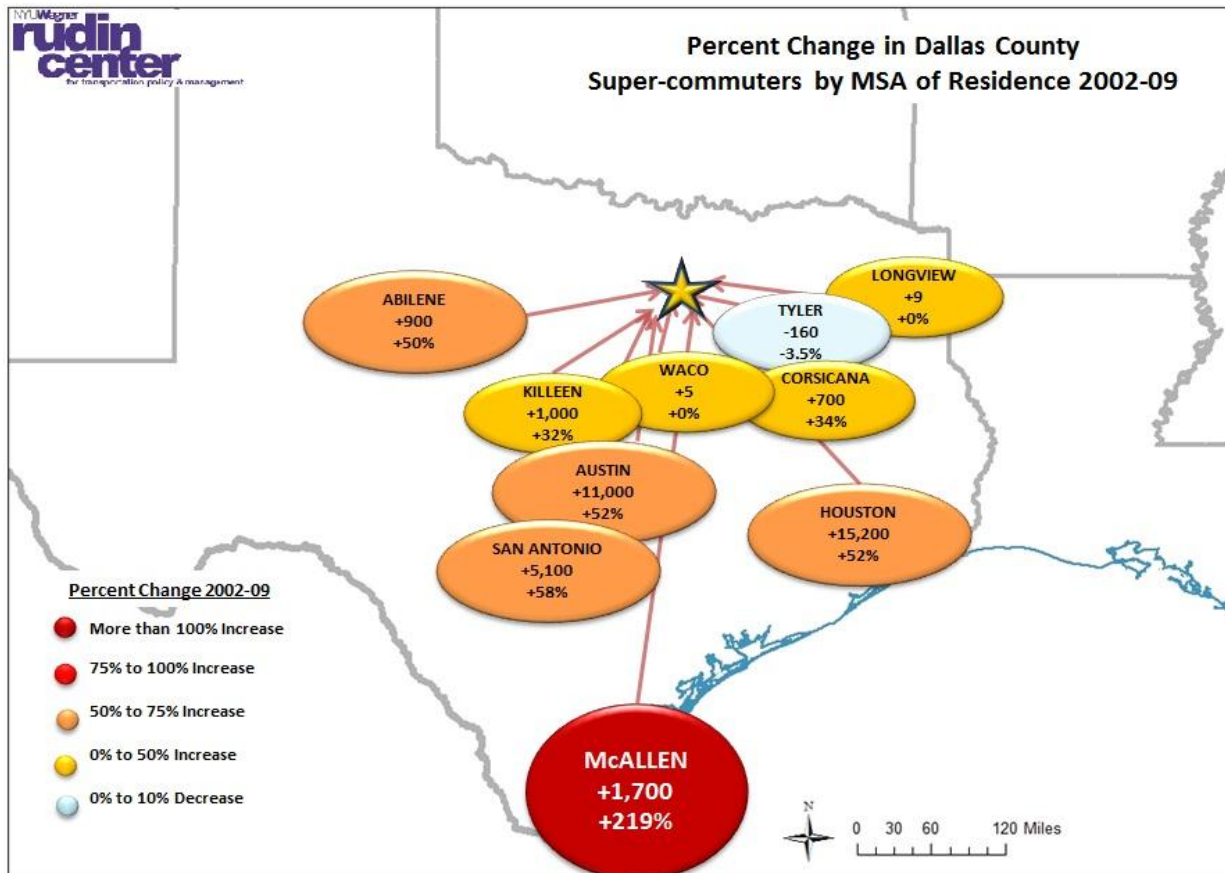
**48,700** total increase in super-commuters

**15%** more likely to be 29 years or younger than average worker

**11%** less likely to earn more than \$40,000/year than average worker

## TOP 10 SOURCES OF DALLAS COUNTY'S SUPER-COMMUTING WORKFORCE

Metropolitan Area of Residence for Non-local Dallas County Worker	2009 Total Super- commuters	Percent Change 2002-09
1) Houston, TX	44,300	+52.1%
2) Austin, TX	32,400	+51.5%
3) San Antonio, TX	13,800	+57.6%
4) Waco, TX	5,600	+0.0%
5) Tyler, TX	4,400	-3.5%
6) Killeen-Temple, TX	4,100	+32.2%
7) Longview, TX	4,000	+0.0%
8) Corsicana, TX	2,730	+34.0%
9) Abilene, TX	2,660	+50.4%
10) McAllen, TX	2,500	+219%



### **Fulton County**

Center of Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Gainesville CSA

County Labor Force Growth Rate 2002-09: -3.4%

47,700 super-commuters (7.5% of workforce), 19.5% decrease since 2002

Top 5 MSAs of residence for super-commuters, percent change 2002-09:

- 1) Augusta, GA-SC 4,200 super-commuters, -22.6% since '02
- 2) Macon, 3,800, -23.4%
- 3) Columbus, GA-AL, 3,500, -21.6%
- 4) Athens, GA, 2,900, -9.7%
- 5) Rome, GA, 2,000, +4.7%

### **Philadelphia County**

Center of Philadelphia-Camden-Vineland CSA

County Labor Force Growth Rate 2002-09: +1.5%

42,100 super-commuters (7.3% of workforce), 49.9% increase since 2002

Top 5 MSAs of residence for super-commuters, percent change 2002-09:

- 1) Allentown-Bethlehem, PA-NJ, 6,300 super-commuters, +41.1% since '02
- 2) New York City, NY-NJ-PA, 5,800, +42.8%
- 3) Pittsburgh, 4,200, +95.2%
- 4) Harrisburg, 3,200, +30%
- 5) Lancaster, 3,160, +42.1%

### **Maricopa County**

Center of Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale MSA

2002 home destination data is not available.

131,100 super-commuters (8.6% of workforce) in 2009

Top 5 MSAs of residence for super-commuters in 2009

- 1) Tucson, 54,400 super-commuters
- 2) Prescott, AZ: 18,500
- 3) Yuma, 8,700
- 4) Lake Havasu City-Kingman, 8,100
- 5) Flagstaff, 8,000

NOTE: 9) Los Angeles, 3,400

### **Hennepin County**

Center of Minneapolis-St. Paul-St. Cloud CSA

40,000 super-commuters (5.2% of workforce), 2.5% decrease since 2002

Top 5 MSAs of residence for super-commuters, percent change 2002-09:

- 1) Duluth, MN-WI, 5,300 super-commuters, -13.5% since '02
- 2) Rochester, MN, 4,100, -12.2%
- 3) Mankato, MN, 2,160, -3.4%
- 4) Brainerd, MN, 1,670, -16%
- 5) Willmar, MN, 1,050, +10.3%

## King County

Center of Seattle-Tacoma-Olympia CSA

71,000 super-commuters (6.8% of workforce), 60.4% increase since 2002

Top 5 MSAs of residence for super-commuters, percent change 2002-09:

- 1) Portland, OR-WA, 12,900 super-commuters, +72.8% since '02
- 2) Spokane, 7,700, +7.2%
- 3) Bellingham, WA, 6,700, +20.4%
- 4) Yakima, WA, 5,300, +131%
- 5) Kennewick, WA, 4,800, +112%

## Demographics of Super-Commuters

Figure 9

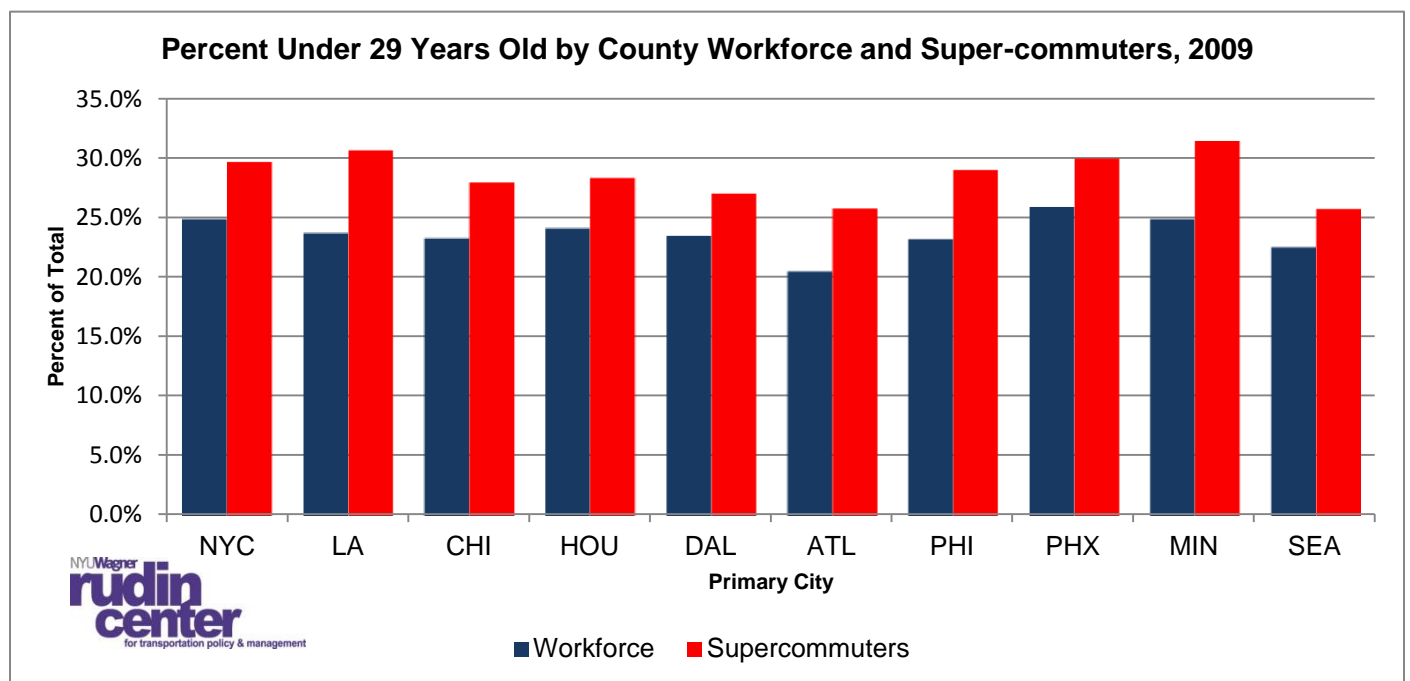


Figure 10

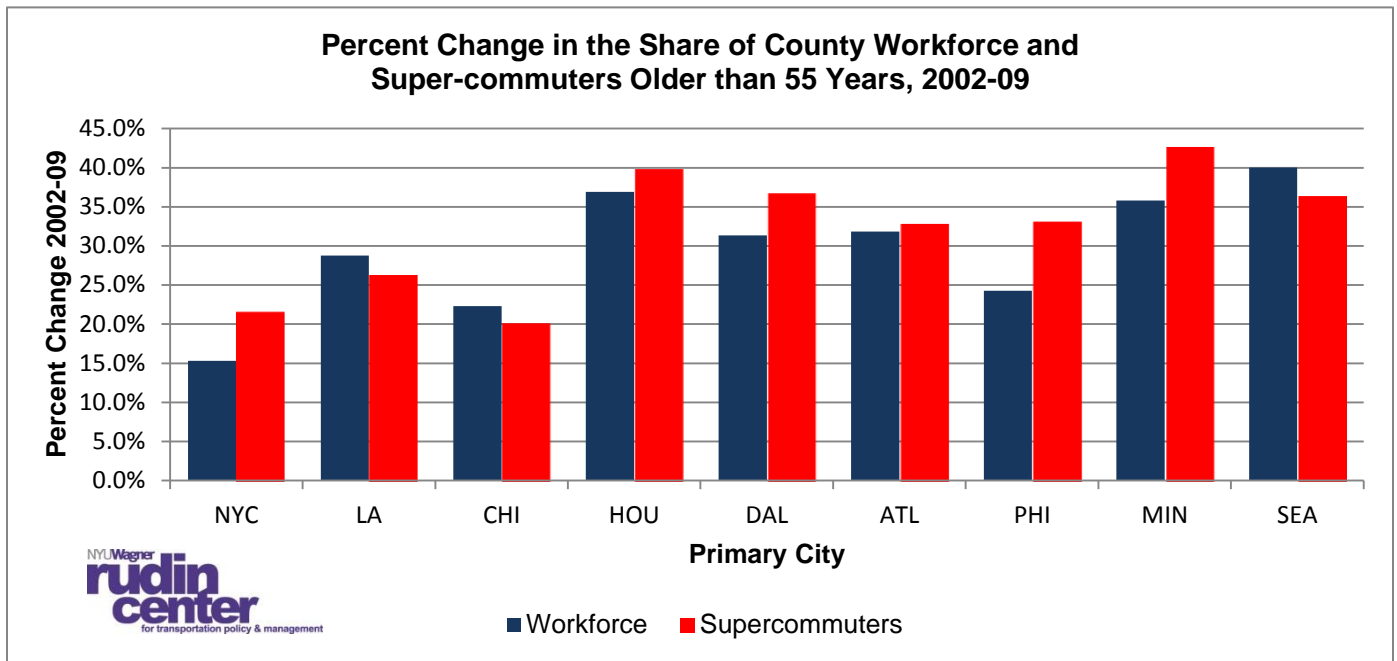


Figure 11

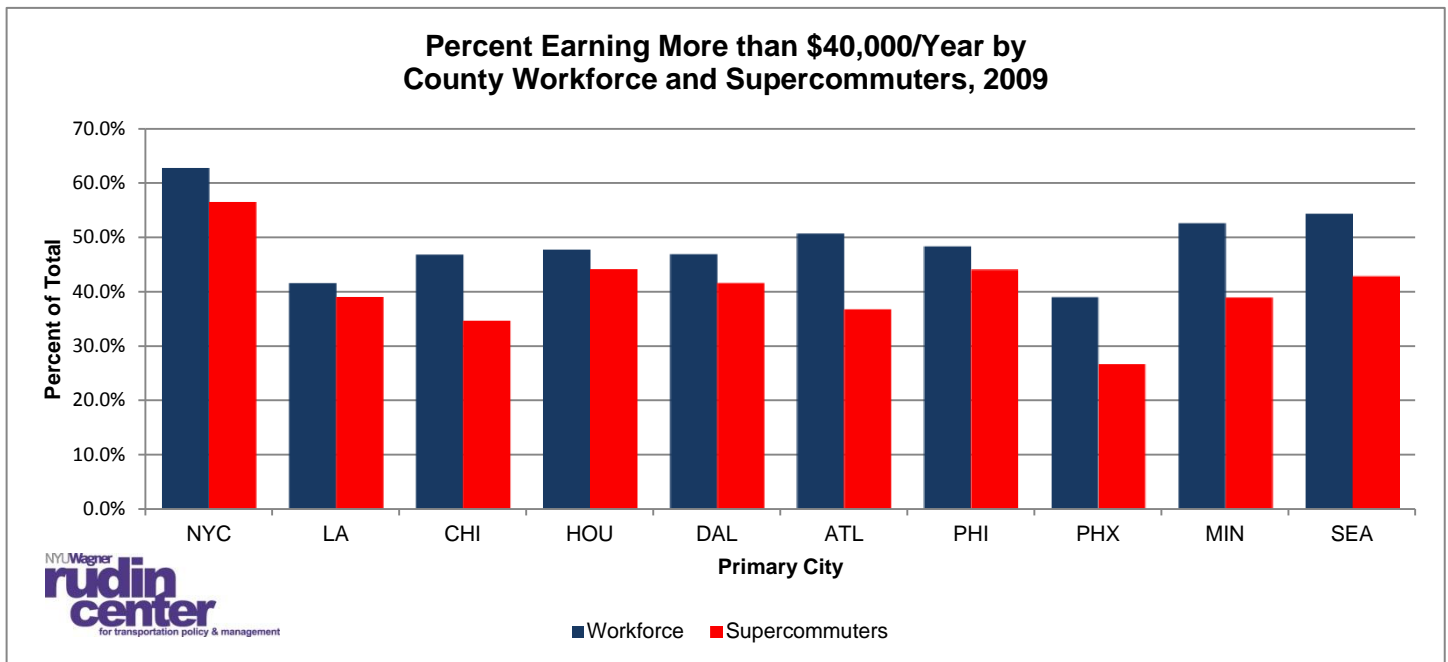
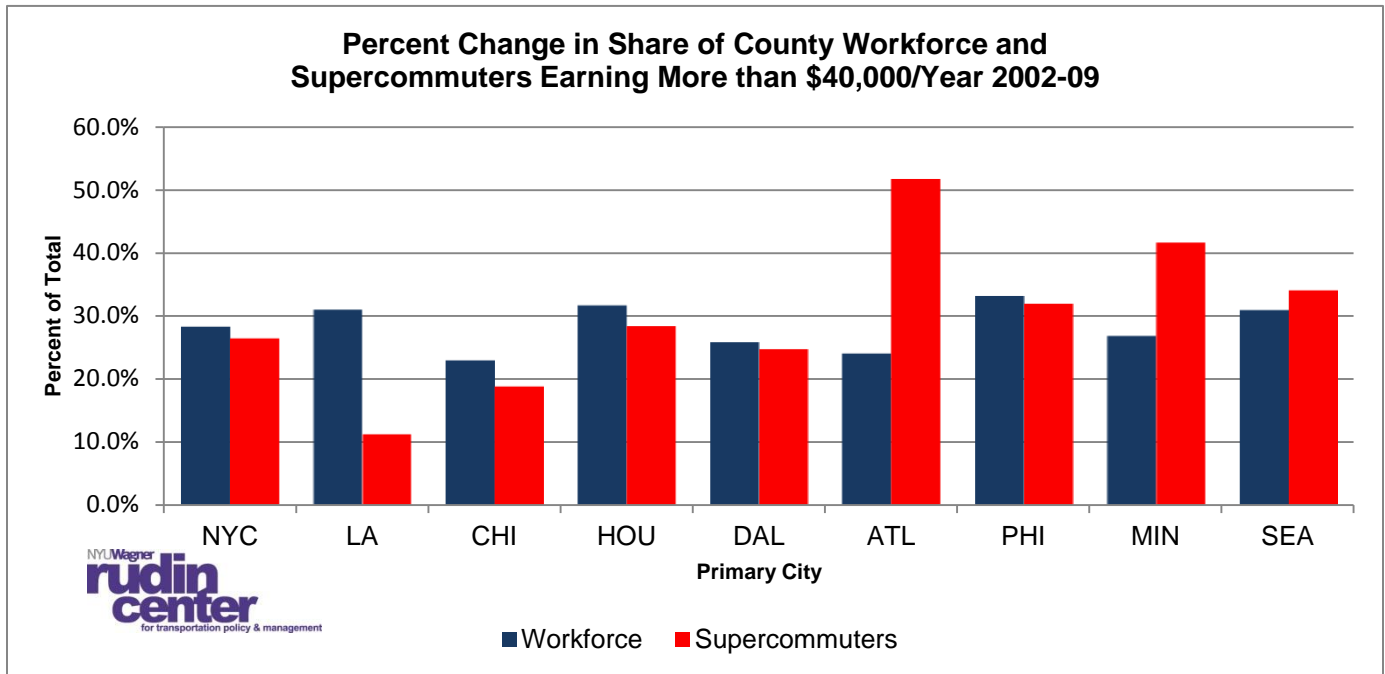




Figure 12



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- <sup>ii</sup> Gottman, Jean. *Megalopolis: The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*. 15 March 1964. The MIT Press.
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- <sup>v</sup> Florida, Richard, Gulden, Tim, & Mellander, Charlotta. "The Rise of the Mega-Region." October 2007