The most transparent trend in U.S. metropolitan areas has been the decentralization of housing and jobs. But what do we really know about the effects of sprawl on travel behavior? This research tackles one key question: How does sprawl affect average commute length? To assess changes in individual commute distance over time, I applied conventional economic models of travel demand to panel data from the American Housing Survey (AHS) and data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis for the years 1985-1997. Surprisingly, my analysis showed that, taken by itself, suburbanization of jobs has actually reduced commute distance. But this result varied by industry type; suburbanization of construction and wholesale jobs reduced commute length, while suburbanization of manufacturing and government jobs was associated with longer commutes. These differences are a simple example of the complex relationships between commute behavior and factors such as job location, employment choice, income, life-cycle, multi-worker households, and underlying forces in residential choice. For a more detailed discussion, see http://www-pam.usc.edu/volume6/v6i1a3print.html

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