Here’s an interesting question: which city do you think is more dense—Paris, France

or New York, United States?

It probably seems obvious: New York, the land of skyscrapers, the Big Apple… right?

Wrong.

New York, in fact, has a population density of less than half that of Paris.

Paris’s is 56,000 people per square mile (22,000 per square kilometer) while New York’s

is only 27,000 people per square mile (10,500 per square kilometer.)

To find a European city with a comparable population density to New York’s—the densest

American city—you have to go all the way down to number six on the list: Lyon France

(27,000 per sq/mile; 10,500 per sq/km.)

New York of course has a super-dense urban core, but then around it is miles and miles

of **suburbia(**пригород**)** —just like almost every other American city.

Paris, on the other hand, packs almost its entire population into a compact urban core.

There’s also another interesting pattern that differs between the two continents: rich

Americans live outside the city, rich Europeans live city center.

Compare the income map of Paris to that of Philadelphia.

Of course it’s not perfect, but you can definitely see a pattern.

The most commonly cited reason for both these trends is the difference in age.

Most European cities have existed for hundreds if not thousands of years, while all but a

few American cities only gathered enough population to be called cities in the past one or two hundred years.

What that means is that European cities existed when all but the super-rich had to commute to work by foot.

In the middle ages, Paris had a population of two to three hundred thousand people, but

you could walk from one side to the other in thirty minutes.

It was incredibly densely populated.

You just had to live within walking distance of work.

Therefore, the rich paid more for the houses closest to the center of the city.

This is a similar reason to why in historic European hotels, you’ll often see the nicest

and largest rooms on the lower floors—the opposite of what you’d see today.

Before elevators existed, the rich didn’t want to have to walk up as many flights of

stairs.

Walking distance was not only important to big cities.

Small villages across Europe were almost always the same size because their population was

dictated by the walkability of the surrounding fields.

European farmers tended to live in small towns and walk to their fields during the day rather

than the homesteading approach used in America.

Therefore, villages would only be as large as the amount of people needed to work the

fields within walking distance.

American cities, on the other hand, began their period of rapid growth in a more modern

era when decentralizing technologies were much more advanced.

By the time North American cities grew larger than the distance people could reasonably

walk, there was already the technological capability to create public transportation

systems.

The first major public transportation innovation was the steam train in the mid 19th century.

This was a very expensive means of transport and was therefore only for the super rich.

Interestingly, because steam trains take an enormous amount of time to reach speed, the towns that the rich commuted from, known as railroad suburbs, were generally not just at the nearest bit of countryside, but separated from the city by a few miles of countryside.

The impact of railroad suburbs remains today.

On the track of the old Philadelphia Main Line, there’s a stretch of super-rich communities with huge estates and country clubs from Ardmore to Malvern.

The demographics just never changed from the time of the railroad suburb.

A few decades later, streetcars emerged and quickly became an instrumental part of the

American commute.

Much like steam trains, streetcars also created new communities—this time with slightly

less rich upper-middle class individuals.

In Washington DC, the wealthy suburbs of Tenley town, Chevy Chase, Bethesda, McLean, Rockville,

and more all grew as a result of the streetcar.

But once again, walking distance influenced geography.

Streetcar commuters had to live within walking distance of a stop, so naturally there would

be a radius of civilization about 20 or 30 minutes walking distance from a stop, then

past that…nothing.

That meant that between the lines, there was all this open space where nobody could commute

from.

Enter: the automobile.

At first the car was only for upper class individuals especially with the distraction

of the two World Wars and Great Depression, however, by the time young Americans returned

from World War Two, there had been enough technological advances to make the automobile

affordable for the middle class.

Over 50% of households had cars by 1950.

At the same time, the government was offering loans to returning veterans which significantly

increased the number of americans who could afford to buy homes.

Instead of buying a small central city home, this generation opted to use their new cars

to commute from cheaper, nicer, and larger suburban homes.

The idea was that the working parents would go downtown each day while the rest of the family would stay to enjoy the suburb.

It was the perfect deal.

So that whole history was absolutely true, but it doesn’t entirely explain why European

cities didn't experience suburbanization as well.

In Germany, for example, many, if not most, cities were bombed to rubble during World

War Two.

They had the opportunity to rebuild in any way they wanted, but then chose to keep their compact design.

Today, the average metropolitan population density in Germany is four times higher than the US’s.

At the same time, other cities across Europe that survived the war experienced enormous

population influxes and still maintained their mammoth population densities.

Perhaps the least commonly cited reason for suburbanization in the US is crime.

It’s a bit of an ugly period in American history that we sometimes forget, but crime

levels were absolutely insane in the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s.

There are a ton of different theories for why this was—perhaps the most interesting

being the that the rise in gasoline emitted lead caused lower IQ’s and higher aggressively.

New York had an astronomical 2,245 murders in 1990.

London didn’t even have that many in the entire 90’s decade.

Violent crime rates are still consistently 10 or more times higher in the US.

In 1992, a poll was conducted asking departing New Yorkers why they were moving to the suburbs,

and the most commonly cited reason was crime at 47%.

Cost and quality of living were way down at lower than 10% each.

Crime rates are significantly lower in suburbs as they are typically havens for higher-income individuals.

Europeans don’t have to worry as much about inter-city crime so they’re much more willing to live downtown.

Land for suburban housing is also readily available in the US because farmers have always

been quick to sell their relatively unprofitable land to developers.

By contrast, In France, for example, agricultural subsidies are 12 times higher per acre of land than the US.

That’s a big reason why large European cities are still closely surrounded by small farms.

In many European cities, you can literally take the city bus to farms.

Lastly, all sorts of energy are cheaper in the US.

A gallon of gas costs as much as $7 in some parts of Europe compared to the US average of $2.20.

It’s significantly more expensive to commute by car in Europe so there’s more motivation

to live closer to work where either the drive is shorter or you can take public transportation.

Also, big suburban homes aren’t as attractive in Europe because electricity and heating

costs are higher.

Suburban life really didn’t live up to expectations.

Americans now spend an average of 4.25 hours per week sitting in cars, buses, or trains traveling to and from work.

That’s 2.5% of their entire lives.

It’s also been scientifically proven that commuting from the suburbs is linked to higher

blood pressure, lower frustration tolerance, and higher rates of **anxiety**(беспокойство).

Also, the suburbs are no longer the countryside havens that they once were.

They’re just a continuation of **the urban sprawl**(урбанизация).

Rich Americans are therefore beginning to return to the city.

With lower crime rates, higher fuel costs, and an overall shift in attitude, urban cores

are having a second renaissance.

So that’s why we live where we do.

It’s a complicated, controversial, and surprisingly political history.