

POLITICAL NUMBERS:

The Cities Turn a Corner

by Michael Rappoport

Nothing is gloomier these days than a conference of futurists, projecting exponential growth in social problems and calculating that there is little hope. Some recent demographic facts about American cities, however, point to a significant easing of pressure on urban governments. In fact, a confluence of statistics and court decisions indicates that the cities may have turned a historic corner.

The single most important fact is that the absolute number of school children *declined* between 1969 and 1972, with further decreases certain to occur in the future. The statistics in Table I represent Census Bureau figures projected through 1975. The 1975 numbers are highly accurate, of course, because virtually everyone who will be in school by 1975 was included in the 1970 census.

This shift is vitally important for

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city finances, because about 42 per cent of all state and local government spending goes for education. The need for rapid growth in school expenditures will slacken somewhat now that the school population no longer bulges upward every year as it did in the 1960s. (More than 40 per cent of the increase in teacher costs in the '60s was caused by jumps in enrollment and drops in the pupil/teacher ratio. The leveling off of these factors may now point toward even lower costs.) In addition, this stabilization is taking place just as teacher salaries appear finally to have "caught up" with the general level of wages. With the major portion of teachers' relative advancement almost completed (public salaries in many places are now higher than comparable private salaries), another large burden on city budgets should be lessened.

The leveling off in population, with a consequent decrease in the percentage of young people, should help city finances in areas other than education. A good part of the upsurge

in crime (with its many attendant public costs) during the last decade was due to an almost 50 per cent increase in the population of those of high-school age and slightly older. Since more than half of all arrested persons are under 21, the stabilizing of that portion of the population should ease crime rates.

The 1970 census reveals another major demographic fact: that the potential for migration of poor people (mostly Southern blacks) to the cities has sharply declined. As Table II shows, the absolute number of blacks outside the metropolitan areas diminished only slightly in the last 10 years. With almost 60 per cent of all blacks now living in the central cities, one of America's historic migrations is coming to an end, at least relatively, and quite possibly in absolute numbers. The lessening of this influx of poor people will reduce the demand on city budgets for public services. This reduced migration, when coupled with declining birth rates for both blacks and whites in the cities, should reduce the pressure for the spread of ghettos.

Finally, a series of court decisions may complement the relief for the city budgets that seems evident in the

demographic statistics. In California, Minnesota, Texas, and New Jersey, the courts have mandated essentially that the burdens of education be equalized throughout a state. And as suburban tax rates are increased, there will be a reduced incentive for both people and industry to leave the city. (Businesses, which move away from population centers largely because of tax costs, would find less advantage in moving if statewide tax systems were adopted in place of local property taxes; and suburbs would have less reason to offer tax advantages if industrial taxes went to the state instead of to local schools.) The costs of city dwellings would also drop compared to the same dwellings in the suburbs, due to the changed tax structure.

Thus, three major determinants in the problems of cities—the proportion of young people in the population, the immigration of poor people, and the high tax rates relative to the suburbs—are undergoing a period of great change. These reversals in trend will hardly bring an urban millenium, but they may well bring considerably greater promise to the future of the cities. ■

TABLE I

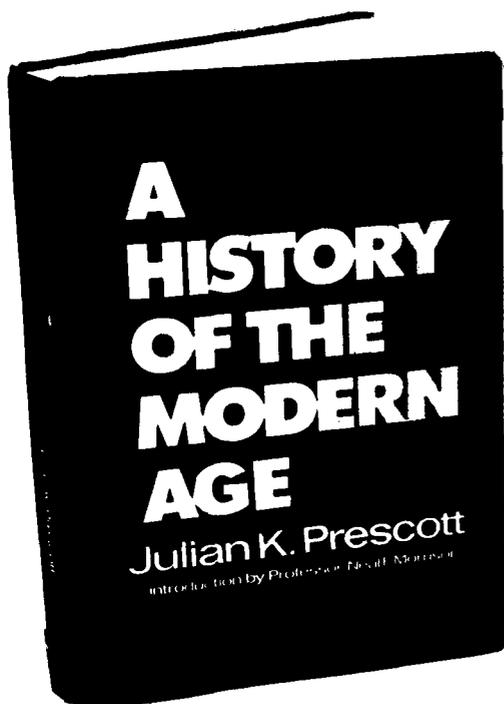
| | Pupils in School in Fall of Year | | (in thousands) |
|------|----------------------------------|--------|----------------|
| | Elementary | High | Total |
| 1960 | 32,441 | 10,249 | 42,670 |
| 1965 | 35,120 | 12,975 | 48,095 |
| 1967 | 36,272 | 13,789 | 50,061 |
| 1969 | 36,647 | 14,553 | 51,200 |
| 1971 | 35,423 | 15,330 | 50,753 |
| 1973 | 34,023 | 15,814 | 49,837 |
| 1975 | 32,832 | 15,939 | 48,771 |

TABLE II
Population by Area

| | 1960 | 1970 |
|----------------------|------|------|
| White | | |
| Central Cities | 49.4 | 48.8 |
| Suburbs | 55.7 | 71.6 |
| Rural and Small Town | 53.7 | 57.2 |
| Black | | |
| Central Cities | 9.9 | 13.1 |
| Suburbs | 2.8 | 3.7 |
| Rural and Small Town | 6.1 | 5.9 |

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