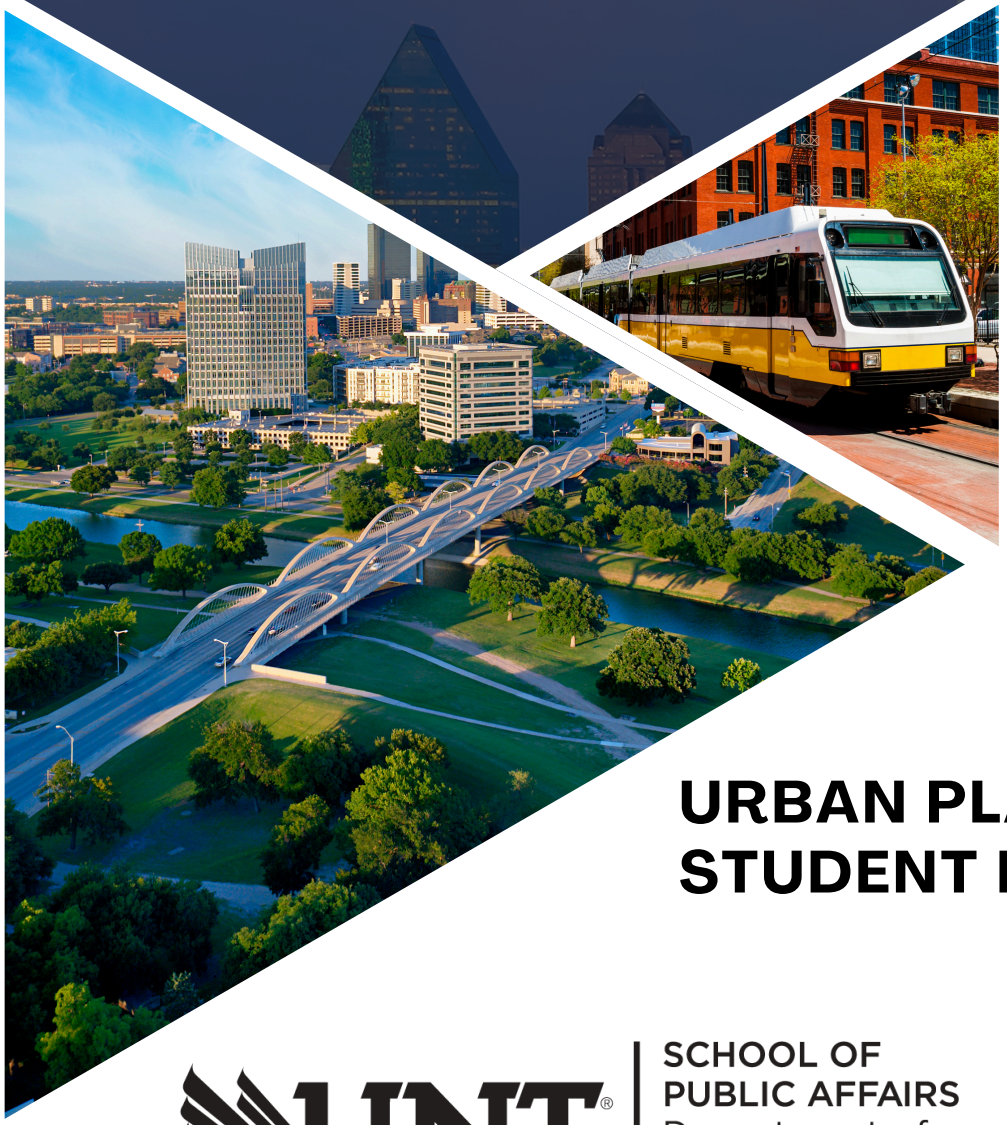
HOW IS DALLAS-FORT WORTH GROWING?

LAND USE, HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, AND COMMUTING PATTERNS





FALL 2026

URBAN PLANNING STUDENT REPORT

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Department of Public Administration

How Is Dallas-Fort Worth Growing?

Land Use, Housing, Employment, and Commuting Patterns

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(*Listed alphabetically by last name*)

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About This Report

This report was developed as a collaborative student research project in PADM 3230 – *Visualization of Urban Place, Space, and Policy*, offered in Fall 2026 by the Urban Policy and Planning Program at the University of North Texas.

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Suggested Citation

Rahman, M. (Ed.). (2026). How Is Dallas-Fort Worth Growing? *Land Use, Housing, Employment, and Commuting Patterns*. School of Public Affairs, University of North Texas.

Contents

Executive Summary 1
Population Growth and Suburban Expansion 3
Land Use Patterns 5
Housing Supply and Affordability 7
Rapidly Growing Suburbs: The Dominance of Single-Family Housing 7
Growing Housing Affordability Challenges 9
Job Growth, Decentralization, and Commuting 11
Changing Spatial Patterns of Employment and Suburban Job Growth 11
Spatial Mismatch Between Jobs and Housing 11
Rise of Long-Distance Commuting 13
Conclusion and Recommendations 22

Executive Summary

The Dallas–Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan region has experienced remarkable population growth over the past several years. Between 2020 and 2026, the region added more than 1.12 million residents, reaching an estimated population of 8.95 million. The region's rapid expansion brings into focus a set of interconnected policy challenges involving housing supply, land use, transportation accessibility, and infrastructure investment.

This report provides a regional perspective on metropolitan growth in DFW, examining population and land use patterns, housing supply and affordability, employment patterns, jobs–housing balance, and commuting trends. It draws on multiple datasets, including U.S. Census population and housing data, American Community Survey (ACS) multi-year estimates, NCTCOG population estimates and land use inventory, and the Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) and Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES).

Our analysis shows that much of DFW's population growth is occurring in outer suburban communities, particularly along the northern and northeastern edges of the metropolitan region. While the region has added substantial housing to accommodate its growing population, development remains heavily dominated by single-family homes. Approximately 80% of DFW's residential land is devoted to single-family housing development. Among the fastest-growing outer suburbs, zoning regulations continue to favor single-family development, limiting opportunities for a wider range of housing types.

Meanwhile, despite substantial housing growth, affordability has become a greater challenge across the region. Between 2015 and 2024, the share of renter households spending at least 30% of their income on housing increased from 47.4% to 52.4%. By 2024, more than half of DFW's renter households were experiencing housing cost burdens, highlighting growing affordability pressures across both urban and suburban communities.

The region's employment geography is also changing. Jobs are increasingly spreading beyond traditional employment centers in Dallas and Fort Worth into northern suburban cities. However, many lower-income households remain concentrated in older urban neighborhoods, creating a spatial mismatch between growing employment opportunities and the communities where lower-income workers live. Limited affordable housing near suburban job centers and inadequate public transit connections have made these opportunities difficult to access. Our commuter-shed analysis also reveals increasingly dispersed residential locations of workers and a growing share of workers living more than 50 miles from their workplaces.

Together, these findings highlight the challenges associated with DFW's outward expansion, including housing affordability, jobs–housing balance, infrastructure costs, longer travel distances, traffic congestion, air quality, and environmental pressures.

As DFW's population and economy continue to grow, further suburban expansion is likely. However, this growth does not have to follow the same sprawling development patterns. There are opportunities to create more compact, connected communities through better growth management and integrated land use and transportation planning. Growing suburbs should provide more diverse housing options and better jobs–housing balance. This calls for zoning reform, mixed-use and transit-oriented development, and improved regional public transit connectivity. More importantly, the findings highlight the need for a coordinated regional approach to managing growth. Housing affordability, transportation, infrastructure investment, and environmental challenges extend beyond individual municipal boundaries and require greater collaboration across the metropolitan region.

Population Growth and Suburban Expansion

The Dallas–Fort Worth (DFW) region is one of the fastest-growing metropolitan regions in the United States. According to the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), the region added more than 1.12 million residents between 2020 and 2026, reaching an estimated population of 8.95 million as of January 1, 2026.

Much of the region's fastest percentage growth is occurring in outer suburban communities, particularly along the northern and northeastern edges of the Metroplex (**Figure 1**). Between 2021 and 2026, Celina's population increased by 311%, from 19,148 to 78,647 residents, adding nearly 60,000 people in just five years. Other rapidly growing communities include Lavon (225%), Princeton (158%), Northlake (127%), and Anna (98%) (**Table 1**). The scale of this growth is also remarkable nationally. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Princeton, Celina, and Anna ranked first, fourth, and fifth, respectively, among the nation's fastest-growing cities between July 2023 and July 2024. The concentration of rapidly growing cities along the metropolitan fringe reflects the continuing outward expansion of the DFW region.

Table 1: Fastest growing cities in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metro Region Between January 1, 2021, and January 1, 2026, With Populations of 15,000 or More as of January 1, 2026

City	2021 Estimate January 1	2026 Estimate January 1	Population change (2021-2026)	2021-2026 percent change
Celina	19,148	78,647	59,499	311%
Lavon	4,664	15,147	10,483	225%
Princeton	18,408	47,530	29,122	158%
Northlake	7,022	15,915	8,893	127%
Anna	18,695	36,935	18,240	98%

Source: NCTCOG population estimate

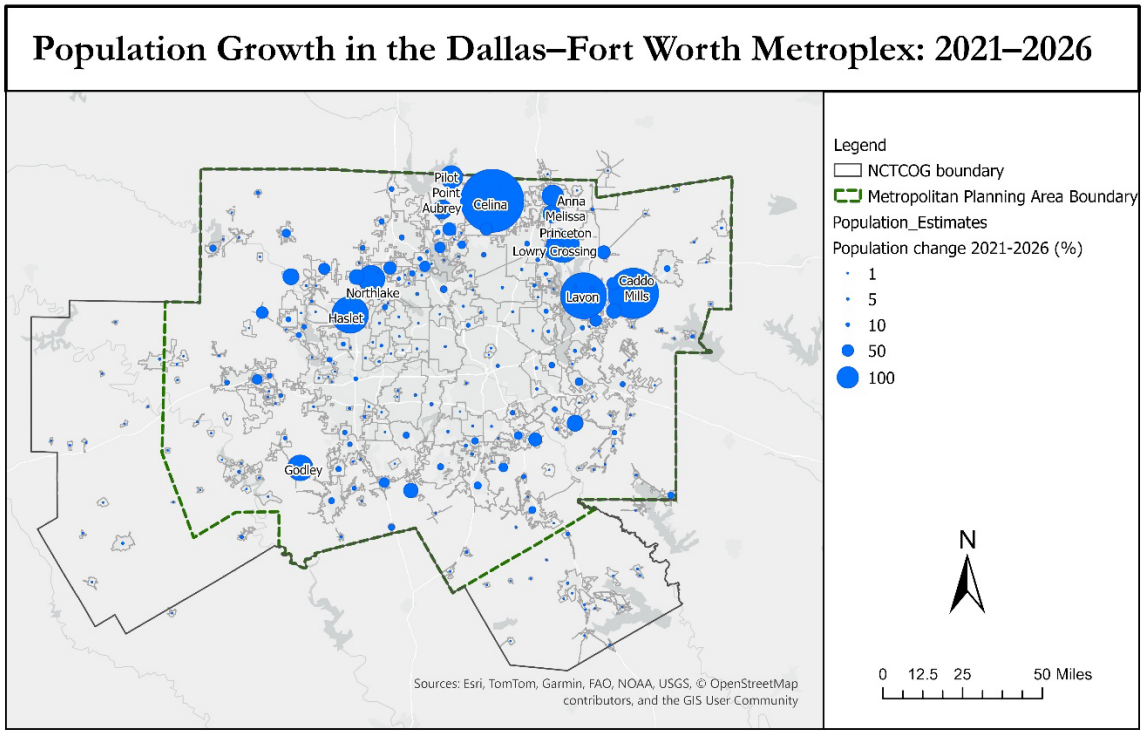


Figure 1: Fastest-Growing cities in the DFW region, 2021–2026 (Source: NCTCOG estimate)

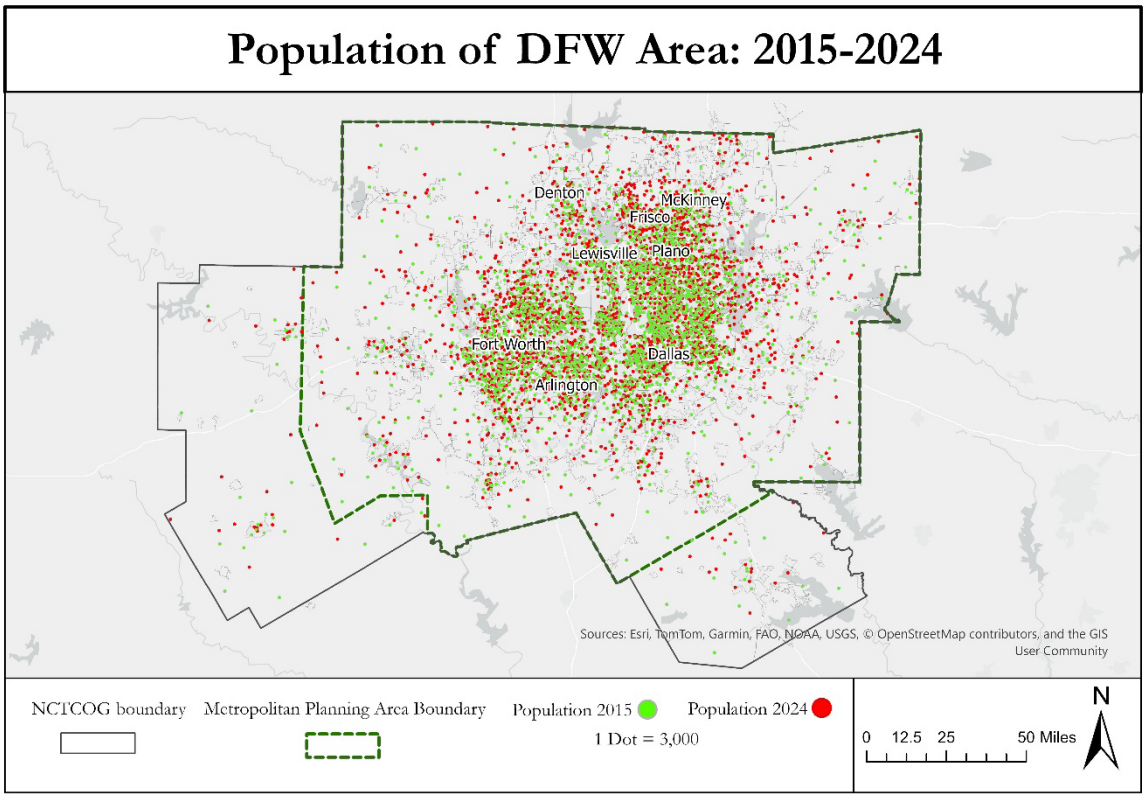


Figure 2: Population Distribution in the DFW region (Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates)

Land Use Patterns

The Dallas–Fort Worth metro's residential landscape is dominated by single-family housing. Our analysis of land use patterns reveals that single-family housing occupies approximately 80% of all residential land in the region (NCTCOG Land Use Inventory, 2020) (**Figure 4**). In many suburban cities, this share is even higher. For example, single-family residential uses account for 99% of residential land in Colleyville, 98% in Watauga, and 97% each in Highland Village, Murphy, and Southlake (**Figure 4**). These figures show how strongly the region's residential landscape is shaped by single-family development.

This pattern is particularly important given the region's rapid population growth discussed in the previous section. DFW added more than one million residents between 2020 and 2026, yet much of its residential land remains devoted to relatively low-density, single-family development. As the region continues to grow, new housing development is extending farther into previously agricultural and undeveloped areas, particularly along the metropolitan fringe. This outward expansion reflects a development pattern commonly associated with *urban sprawl*, characterized by low-density housing, separation of land uses, and leapfrog or fragmented development.

Local zoning regulations also play a role in shaping this pattern. Many cities have large residential areas zoned primarily for detached single-family homes, with limited opportunities for apartments, duplexes, townhouses, or accessory dwelling units (ADUs). Multifamily housing is often restricted to specific zoning districts or requires rezoning or special approvals. These restrictive zoning regulations limit the opportunities to accommodate additional housing within existing communities. With the availability of relatively inexpensive land on the urban fringe, such restrictions can make outward expansion more attractive than redevelopment or infill housing.

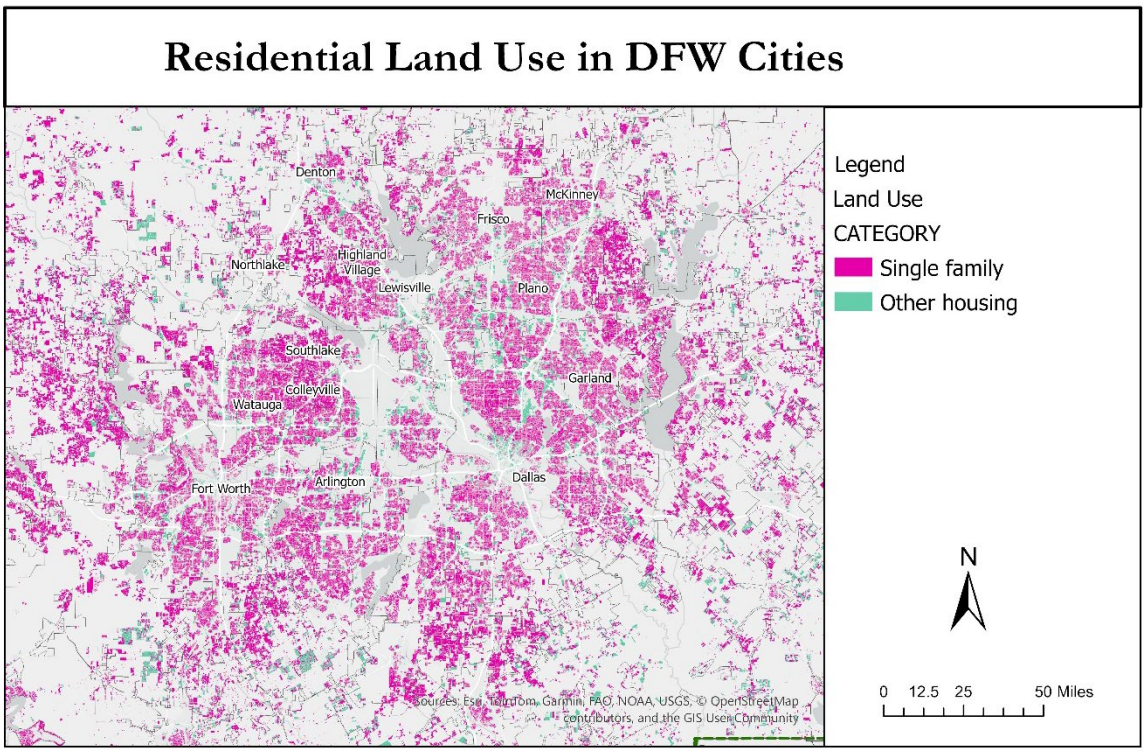


Figure 3: Residential Land Use Patterns in DFW: **80% of Residential Land Is Used for Single-Family Housing** (Source: NCTCOG Land Use Inventory, 2020)

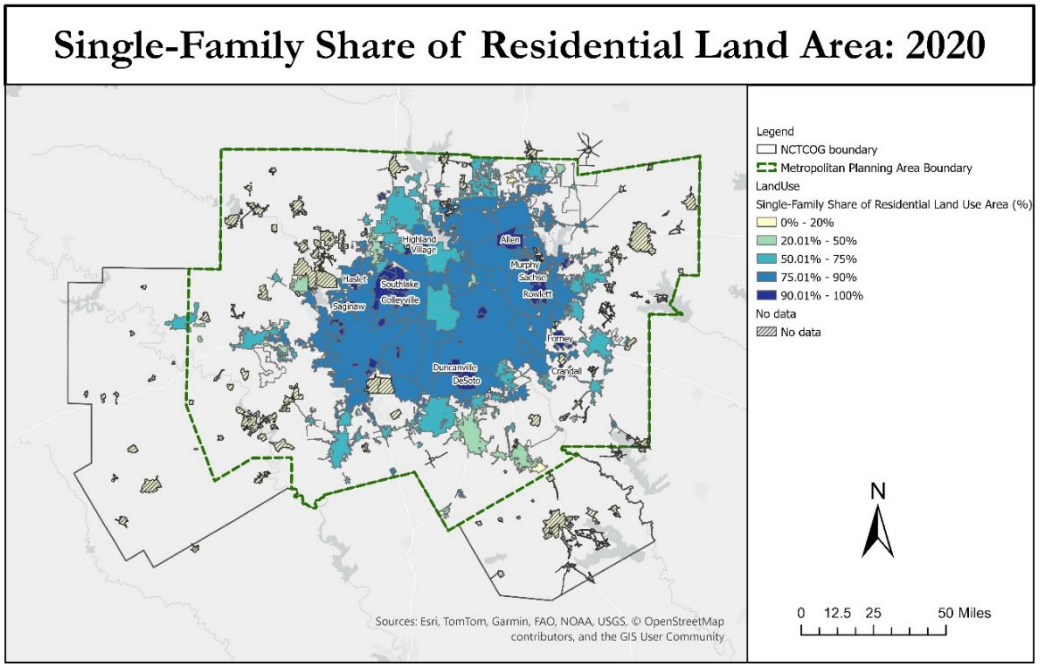


Figure 4: Share of Single-Family Land Use Across DFW Cities (Source: NCTCOG Land Use Inventory, 2020)

Housing Supply and Affordability

Rapidly Growing Suburbs: The Dominance of Single-Family Housing

While the region has added substantial housing to accommodate its growing population, development remains heavily dominated by single-family homes (**Figure 5**). Our analysis of the ten fastest-growing communities between 2015 and 2024 shows that single-family homes dominate the housing composition of these communities, while multifamily housing accounts for a relatively small share (**Table 2**). More importantly, despite their rapid population growth, several of these communities have seen their single-family housing share increase. For example, Celina's population grew by nearly 400% between 2015 and 2024, while the single-family share of housing units increased from 94% to 98%. Similarly, the single-family share increased from 81% to 90% in Prosper and from 80% to 88% in Princeton. In Melissa, single-family homes accounted for more than 93% of housing units in 2024.

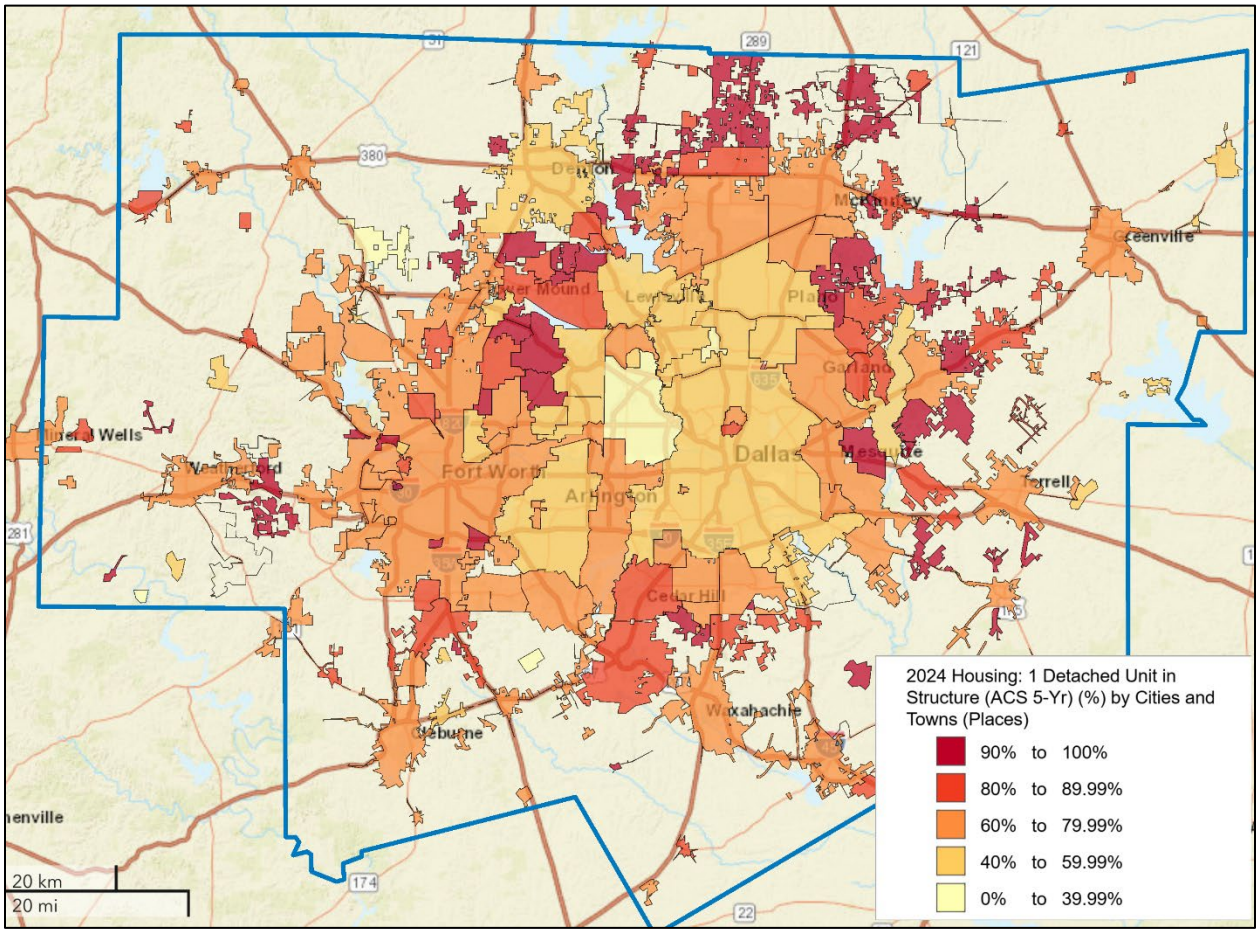


Figure 5: Share of single-family detached housing in DFW cities (Source: 2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates).

Table 2: Housing Unit Composition of 10 Fastest Growing DFW Cities (with populations of at least 5,000 in 2024)

Cities	Population 2015	Population 2024	Population Change (2015-2024) %	Single-Family Housing Units 2015	Single-Family Housing Units 2024	Multi-Family Housing Units 2015	Multi-Family Housing Units 2024	Share of Single-Family Housing Units (%) 2015	Share of Single-Family Housing Units (%) 2024	Share of Multi-Family Housing Units (%) 2015	Share of Multi-Family Housing Units (%) 2024
Josephine	809	5842	622.13%	282	1769	0	0	93.07%	90.53%	0.00%	0.00%
Celina	6894	34268	397.07%	2074	10886	122	135	94.44%	97.61%	5.56%	1.21%
Melissa	6214	20136	224.04%	1771	5842	0	223	98.39%	93.23%	0.00%	3.56%
Princeton	7942	25229	217.67%	2519	7146	550	567	79.94%	87.90%	17.45%	6.97%
Northlake	2655	8283	211.98%	291	1829	847	940	24.91%	63.31%	72.52%	32.54%
Travis Ranch	3021	9025	198.74%	1000	2947	0	0	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Fate	8414	22884	171.98%	2573	7071	0	27	97.61%	99.47%	0.00%	0.38%
Prosper	13939	37869	171.68%	3678	10696	738	1145	81.00%	89.72%	16.25%	9.60%
Aubrey	2852	7396	159.33%	984	2880	115	296	86.93%	90.68%	10.16%	9.32%
Lavon	2507	6498	159.19%	828	2121	0	23	100.00%	98.93%	0.00%	1.07%

Data Source: ACS 2011–2015 and 2020–2024 5-Year Estimates

Growing Housing Affordability Challenges

Despite rapid suburban expansion and the availability of land for new development, housing affordability has become an increasing concern across DFW. The region's heavy reliance on single-family development and restrictions on other housing types may limit housing choices and contribute to affordability pressures.

The number of rent-burdened households – those spending 30% or more of household income on rent and utilities – increased from approximately 432,000 in 2015 to 578,000 in 2024, an increase of nearly 146,000 households, or 34% (**Table 3**). More importantly, the share of renter households experiencing rent burden increased from 47.4% to 52.4%. By 2024, more than half of DFW renter households were spending at least 30% of their income on housing.

The number of severely rent-burdened households, those spending at least half of their income on rent and utilities, also increased, from approximately 205,000 in 2015 to 272,000 in 2024. Their share increased from 22.6% to 24.7%. In other words, nearly one in four renter households in DFW now spends at least half of its income on housing, leaving less income available for transportation, food, healthcare, and other household needs.

The city-level comparison shows that rent burden increased across all ten major DFW cities examined between 2015 and 2024, although the increases varied (**Figures 6-7**). The findings show that rental affordability pressures are widespread across the region, affecting both established urban centers and suburban communities.

Table 3: Rent-burdened households in DFW Metropolitan Area

Rent burdened households	2015	2024	Change
Severely rent burdened *(Spending 50% or more of household income on rent and utilities)*	205,373	272,347	+66,974
Total rent burdened *(Spending 30% or more of household income on rent and utilities)*	431,602	577,914	+146,312
Rent-burdened share (%)	47.42%	52.35%	+4.93 pp
Severely rent-burdened share (%)	22.57%	24.67%	+2.1 pp

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 and 2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B25070. Percentages exclude households for which the rent-to-income ratio could not be computed

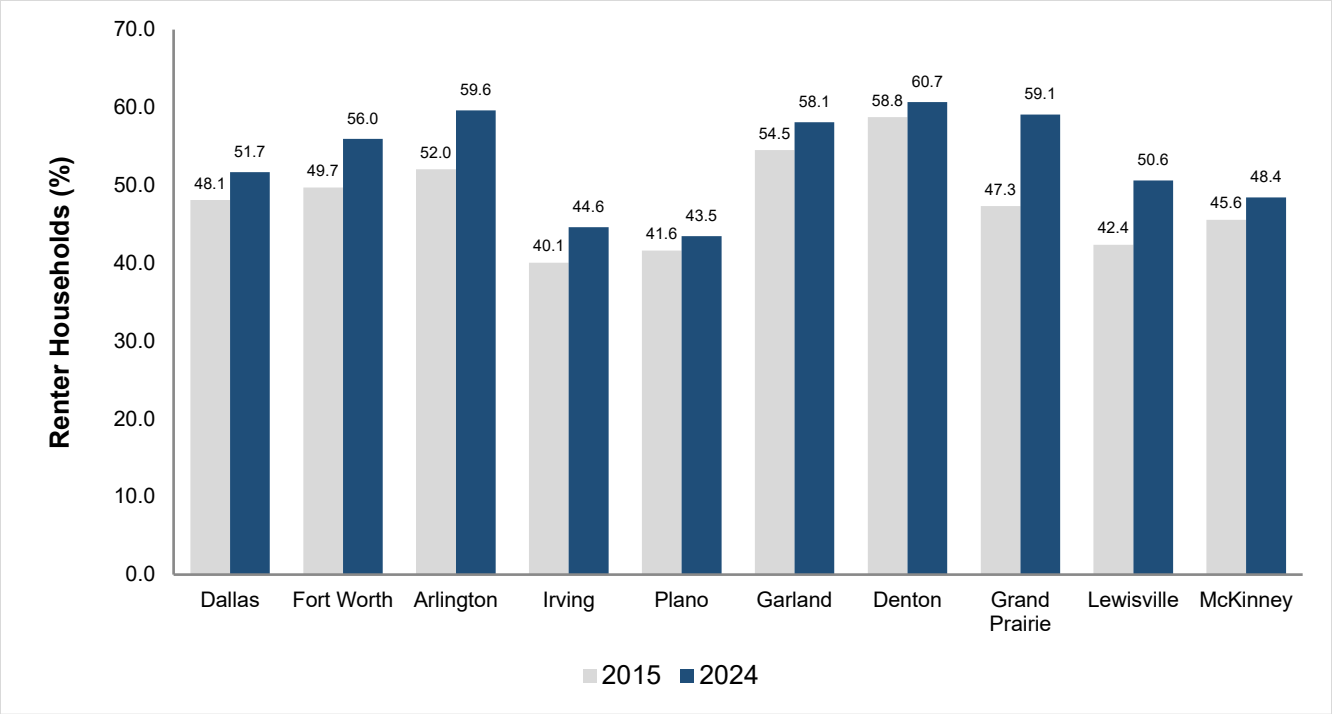


Figure 6: Share of Renter Households Spending 30% or More of Income on Housing (2015 and 2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates)

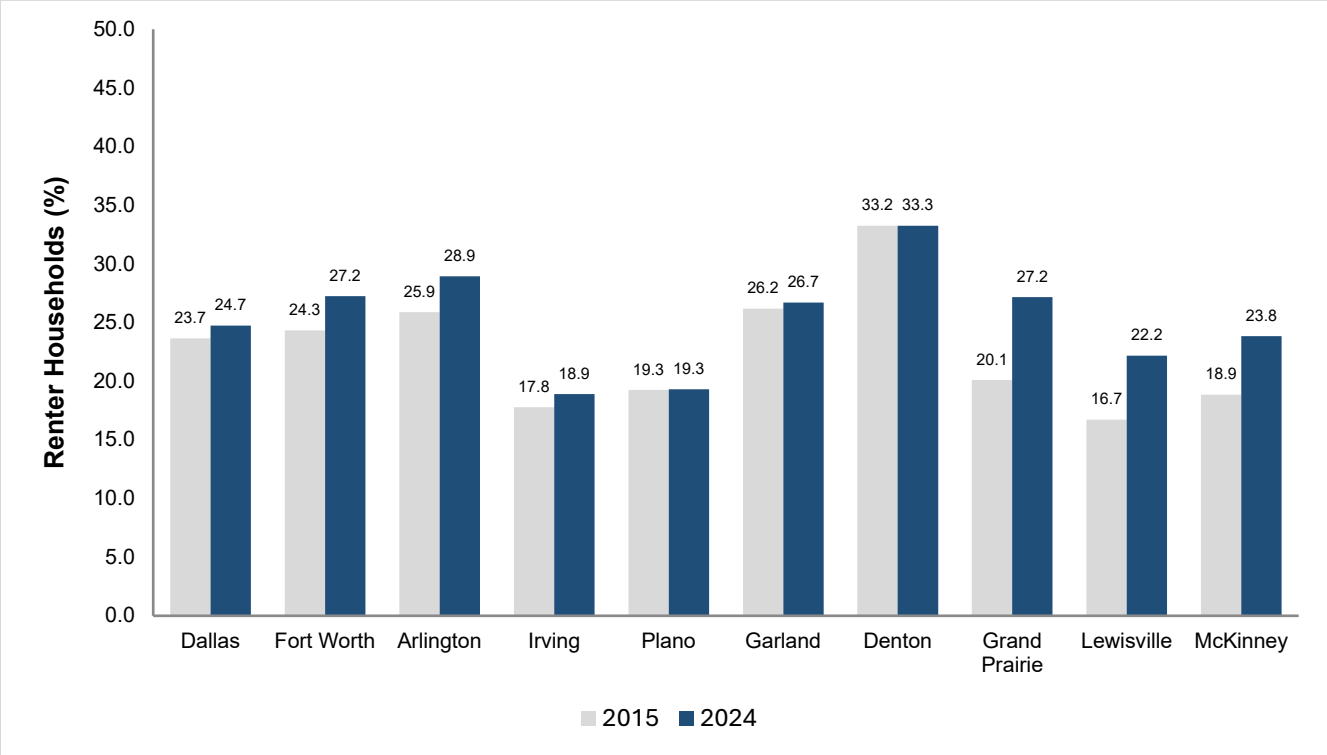


Figure 7: Severely Rent-Burdened Households: Share Spending 50% or More of Income on Housing (2015 and 2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates)

Job Growth, Decentralization, and Commuting

Changing Spatial Patterns of Employment and Suburban Job Growth

As DFW's population continues to grow, its employment landscape is also changing. Our analysis of employment data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) program shows that jobs are increasingly distributed across multiple employment centers rather than being concentrated primarily in Dallas and Fort Worth (**Figures 8–9**). Comparing job locations in 2008 and 2023, we see growing employment concentrations in the northern and northeastern parts of the region, particularly around Plano, Frisco, McKinney, Allen, and Denton.

Dallas and Fort Worth remain major employment centers, but suburban cities are playing an increasingly important role in the regional economy. The northern suburbs, particularly Plano and Frisco, have attracted a wide range of employment, from corporate headquarters, technology, and financial services to lower-wage jobs in retail, restaurants, hospitality, and other service industries.

Spatial Mismatch Between Jobs and Housing

While employment opportunities are increasingly spreading into DFW's northern suburbs, many lower-income households remain concentrated in Dallas and Fort Worth, particularly in older urban neighborhoods (**Figure 10**). This pattern reflects an important issue of spatial mismatch: the geographic separation between where lower-income workers live and where suitable employment opportunities are located.

As jobs expand into suburban cities such as Plano, Frisco, McKinney, and Allen, many lower-income residents may be unable to take advantage of these employment opportunities. Housing affordability is one important barrier. As discussed earlier, much of DFW's suburban development is dominated by single-family housing, with limited housing choices, particularly affordable rental housing. Consequently, lower-income workers may find it difficult to move closer to growing suburban employment centers.

Limited public transportation creates another barrier. Many suburban employment centers are primarily accessible by car, while public transit connections from lower-income neighborhoods in Dallas and Fort Worth to suburban job locations remain limited. Addressing this spatial mismatch requires both a greater variety of affordable housing near growing employment centers and better public transportation connections between existing lower-income communities and suburban jobs.

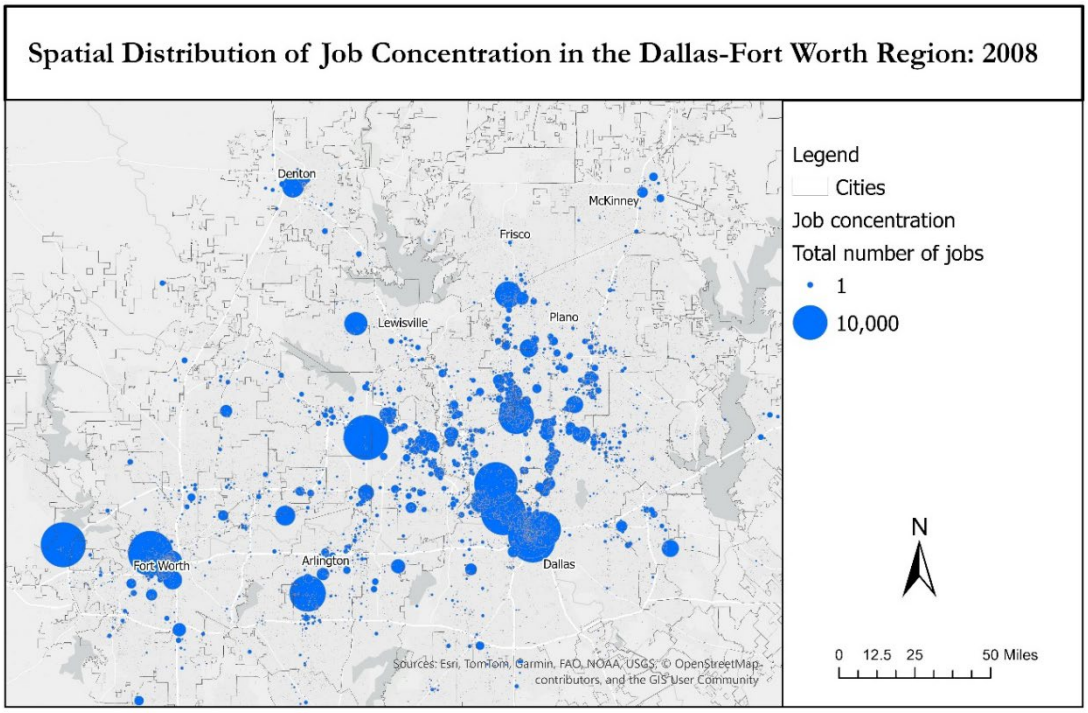


Figure 8: Job concentration in 2008 (Source: LEHD Data, US Census Bureau)

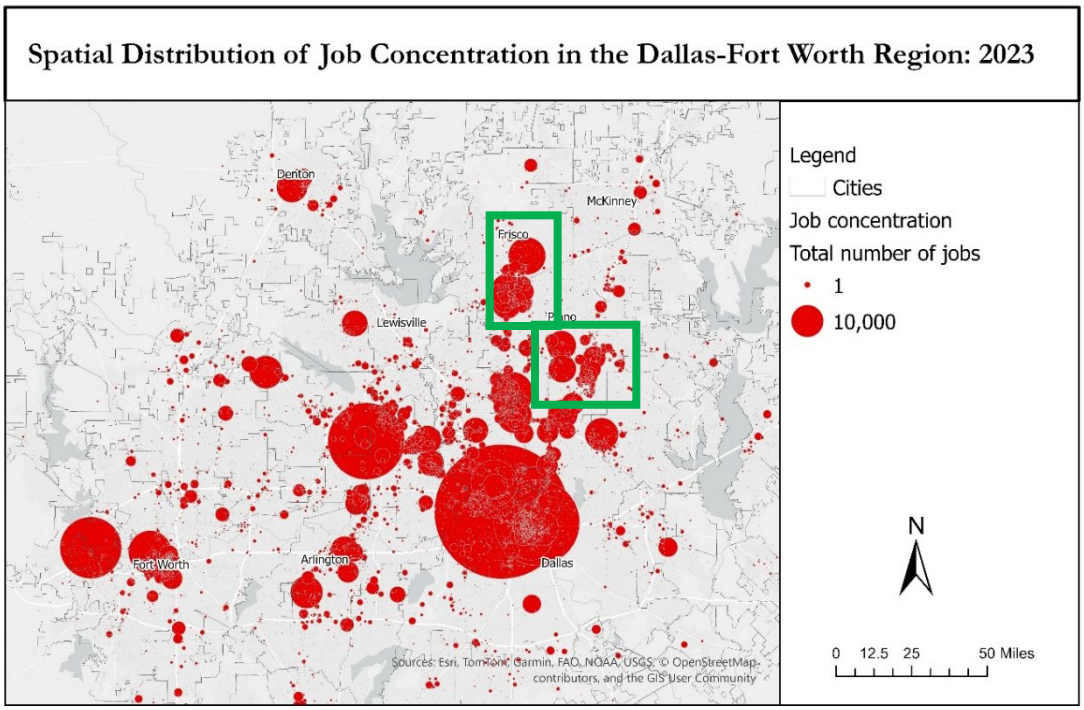


Figure 9: Job concentration in 2023; Green boxes highlight growing employment concentrations in the northern suburbs, particularly Plano and Frisco (Source: LEHD Data, US Census Bureau)

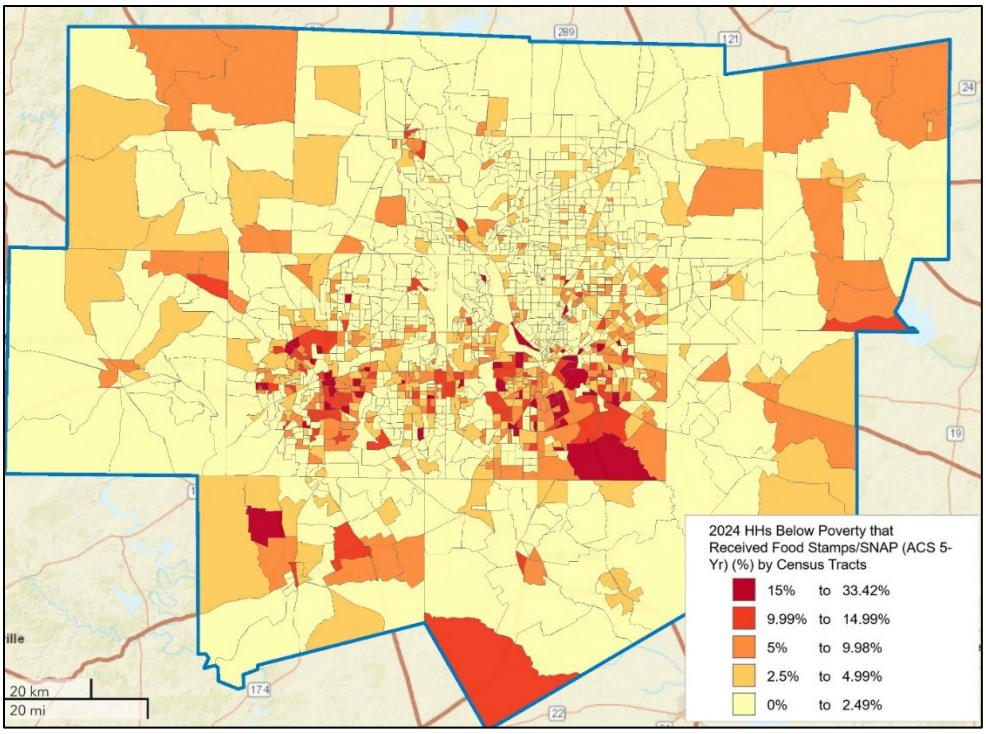


Figure 10: Spatial Distribution of Households Experiencing Poverty or Receiving SNAP/food-stamp in the DFW Region (2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates)

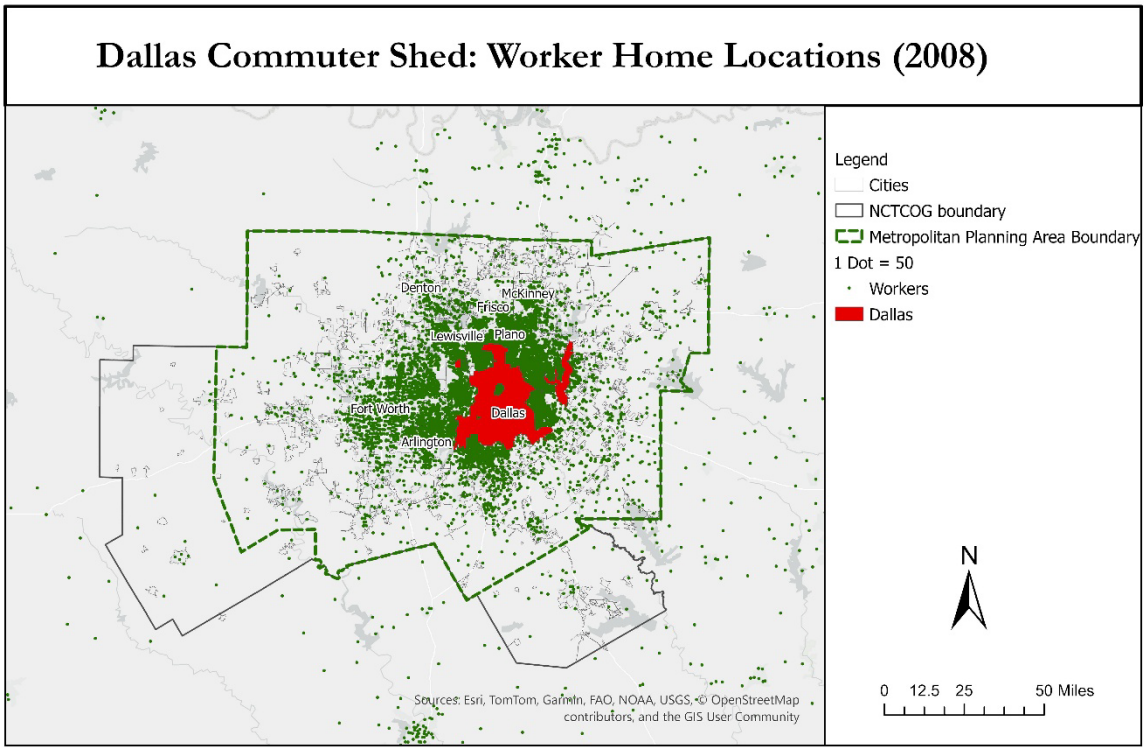
Rise of Long-Distance Commuting

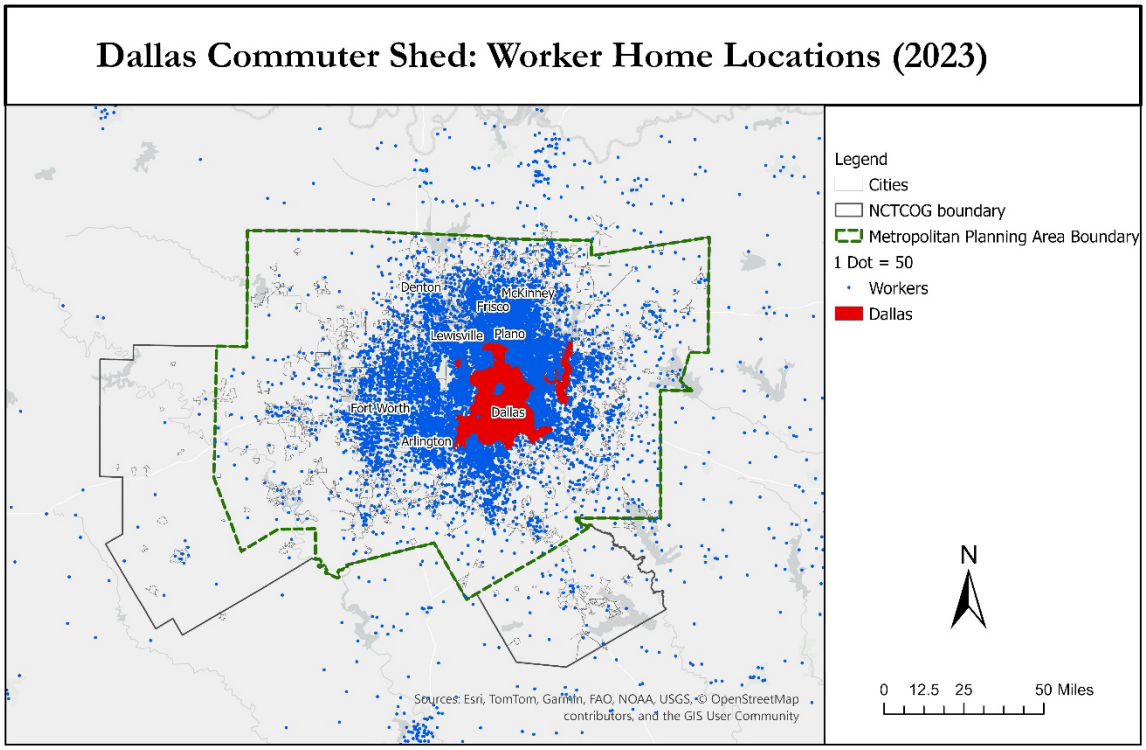
To examine where workers live relative to their workplaces, we used the U.S. Census Bureau's LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) to map the residential locations of workers employed in seven DFW cities: Dallas, Arlington, Fort Worth, Irving, Denton, Frisco, and Plano (**Figures 11–24**). These maps show each city's commuter shed, or the geographic area from which it draws its workers.

Comparing 2008 and 2023, the maps show that commuter sheds have become more geographically dispersed, with employment centers drawing workers from increasingly wider areas across the region. This pattern is evident in both major employment centers, such as Dallas and Fort Worth, and suburban cities, including Frisco, Plano, and Denton.

Our analysis of home-to-work distances further supports this trend (**Figure 25**). The share of workers living more than 50 miles from their workplace increased in all seven cities. For example, this share increased from 11.6% to 15.7% in Irving, 9.4% to 13.7% in Fort Worth, and 9.7% to 13.6% in Plano. Meanwhile, the share of workers living within 10 miles of their workplace declined in six of the seven cities. Although these data measure home-to-work distances rather than actual travel distances, they suggest that long-distance commuting is becoming more common across DFW, highlighting the need for better job-housing balance.

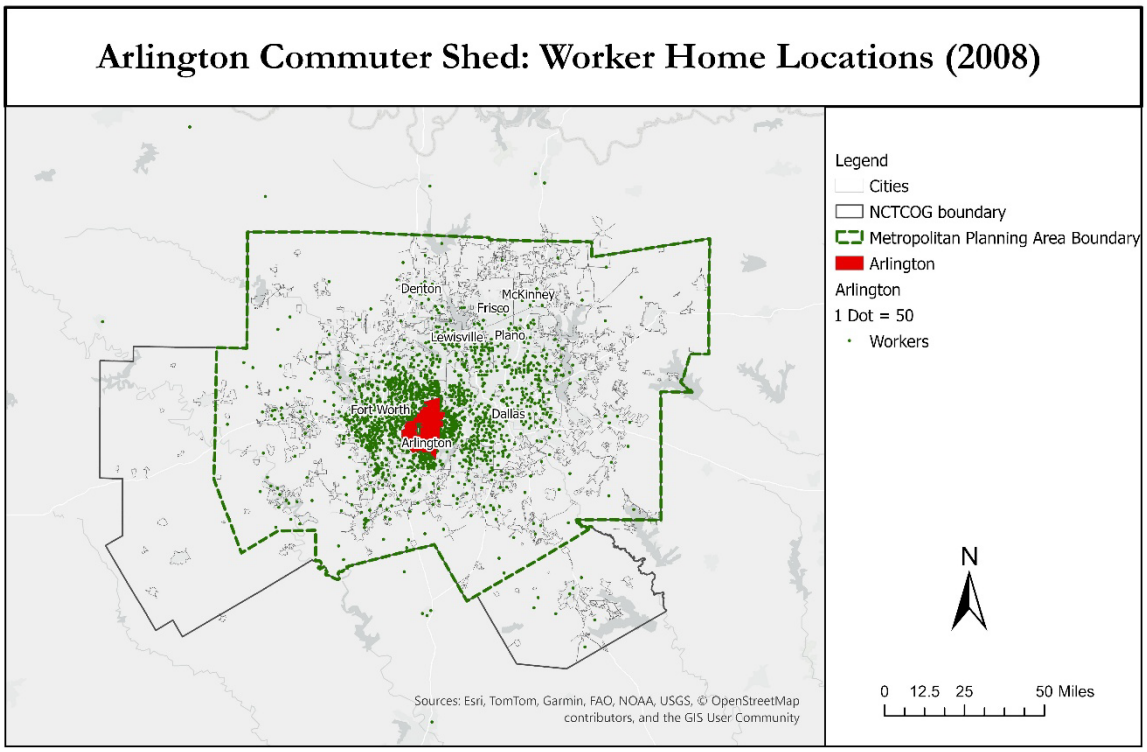
Dallas

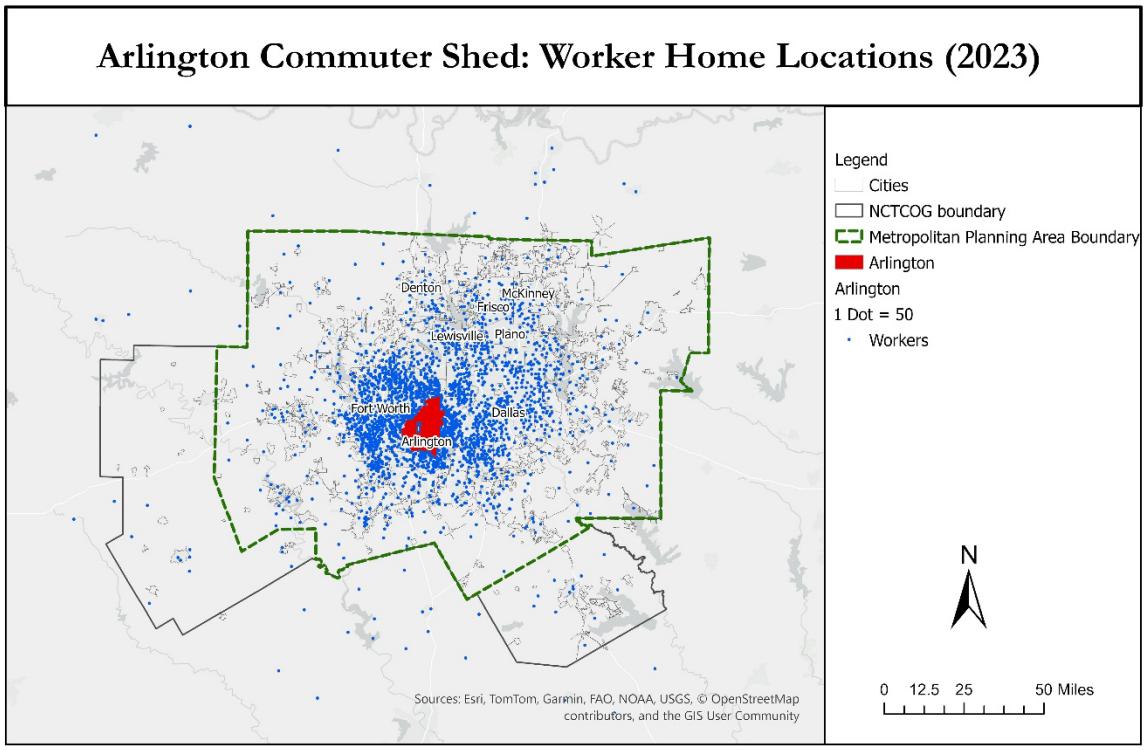




Figures 11-12: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time - Dallas

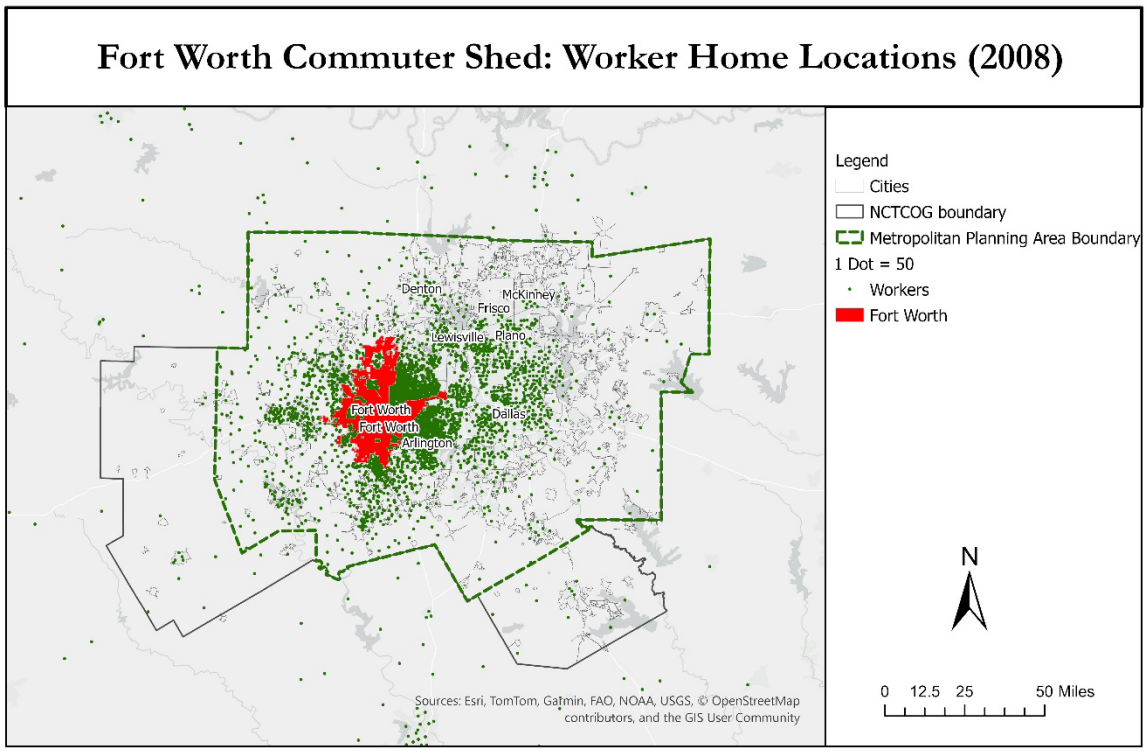
Arlington

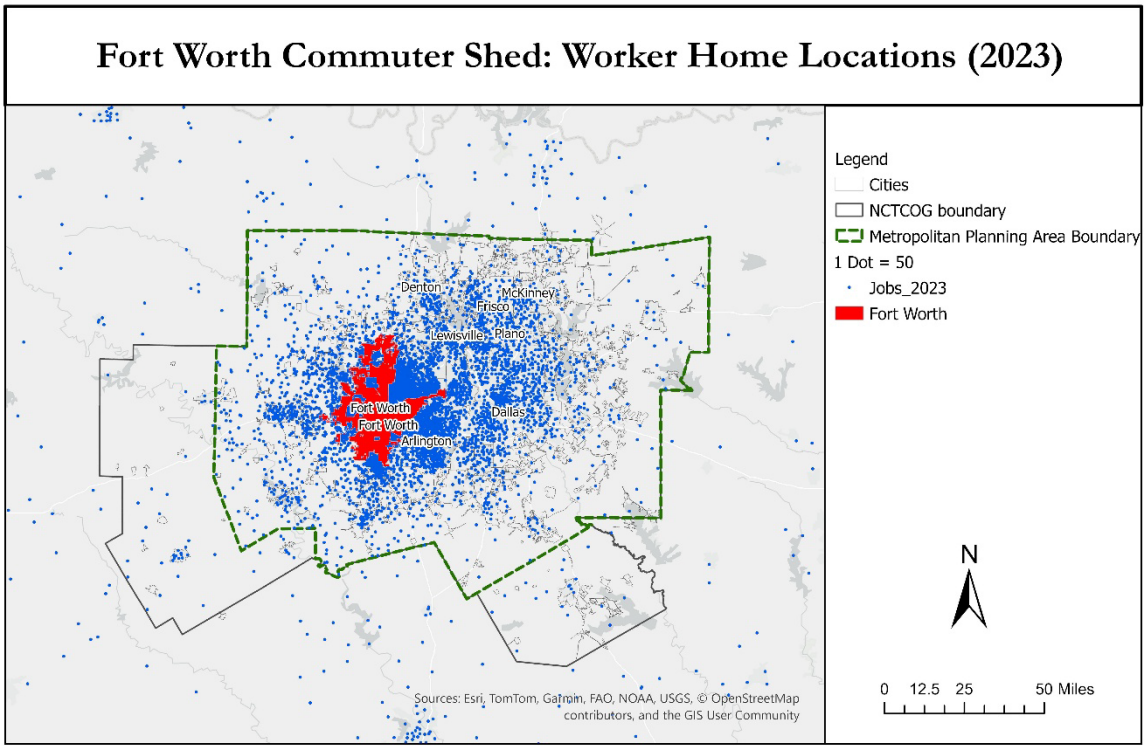




Figures 13-14: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time: Arlington

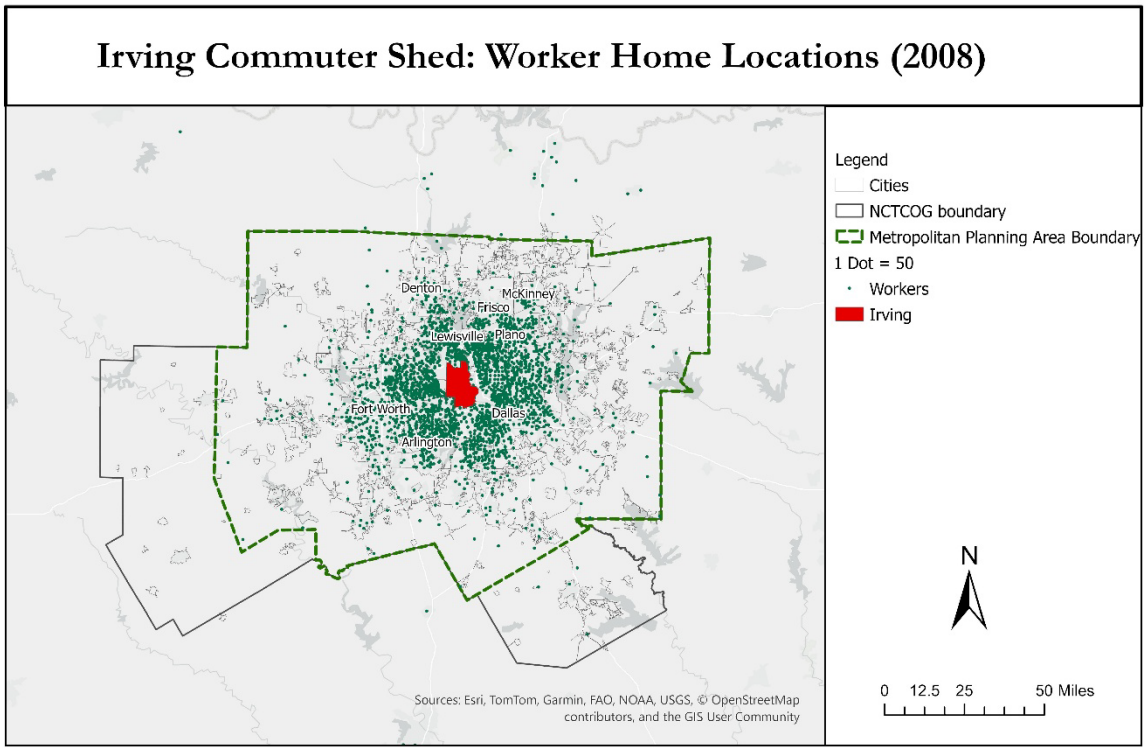
Fort Worth

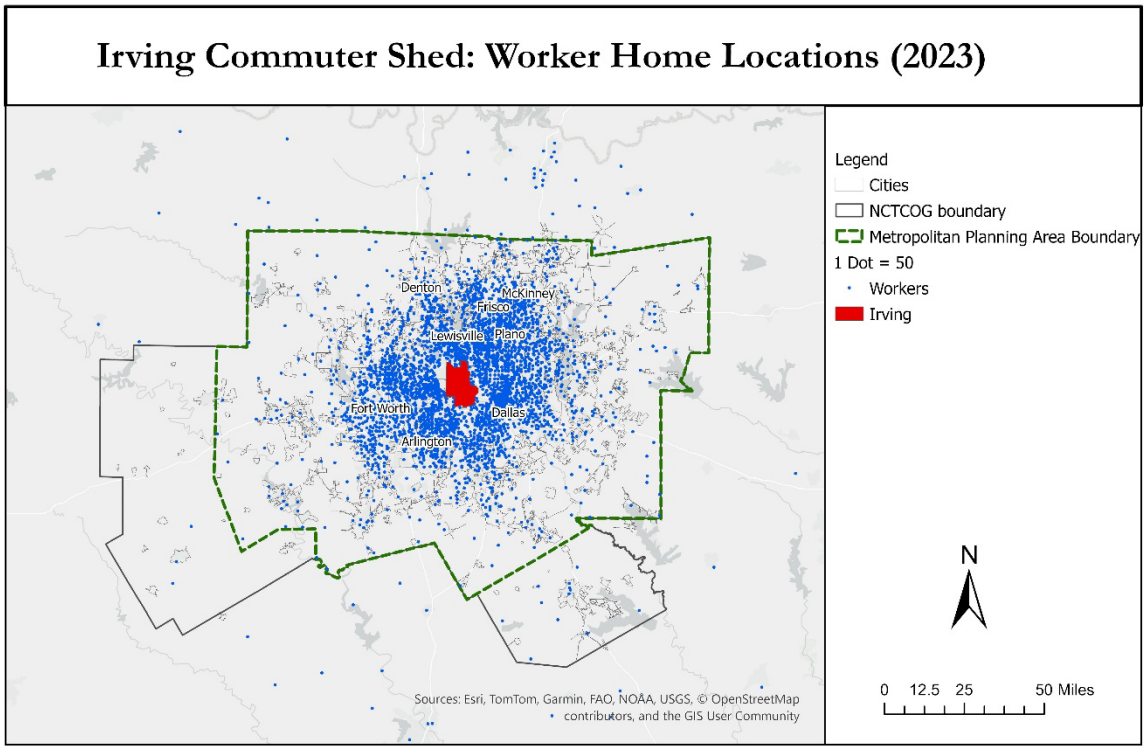




Figures 15-16: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time – Fort Worth

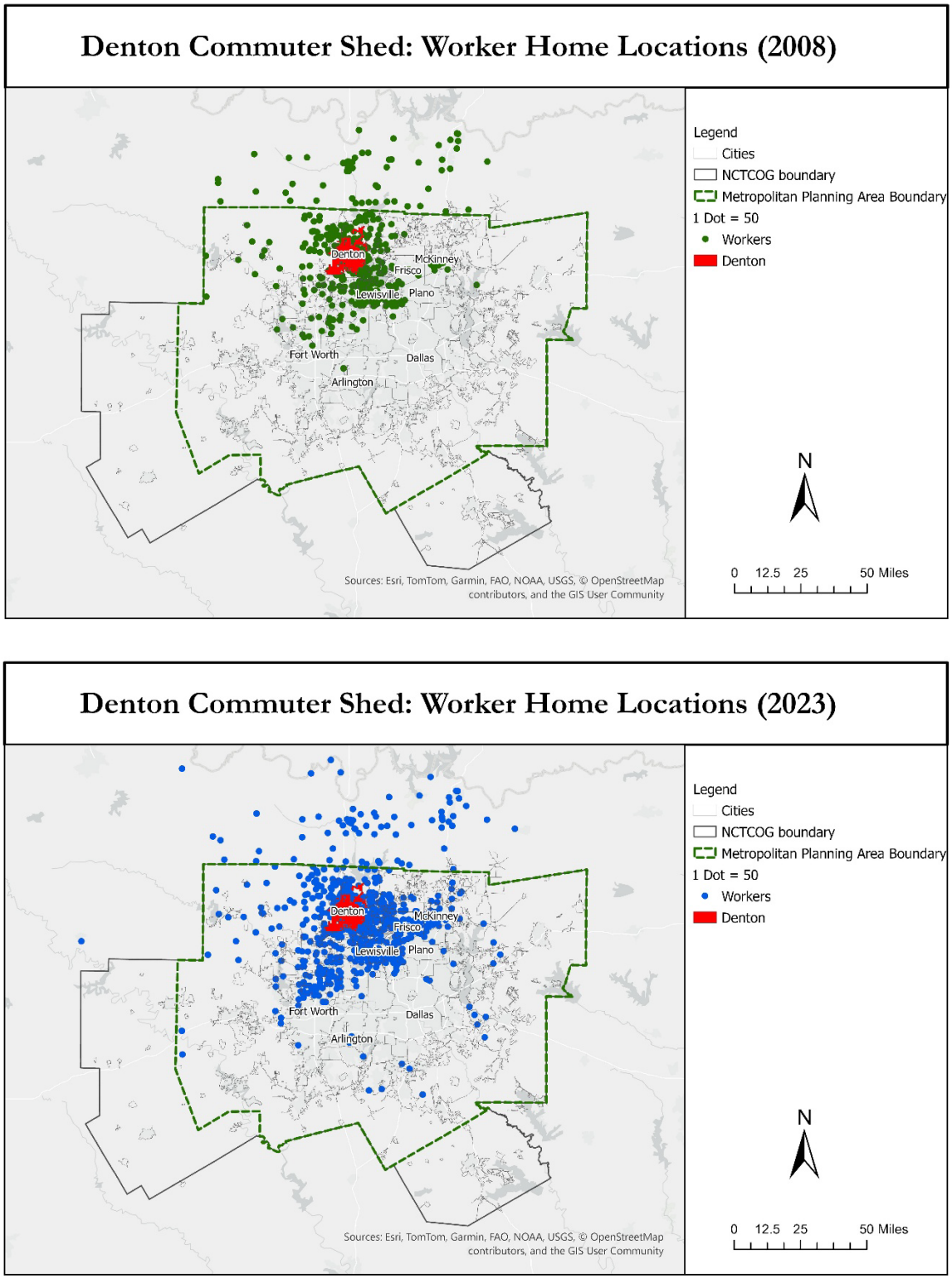
Irving





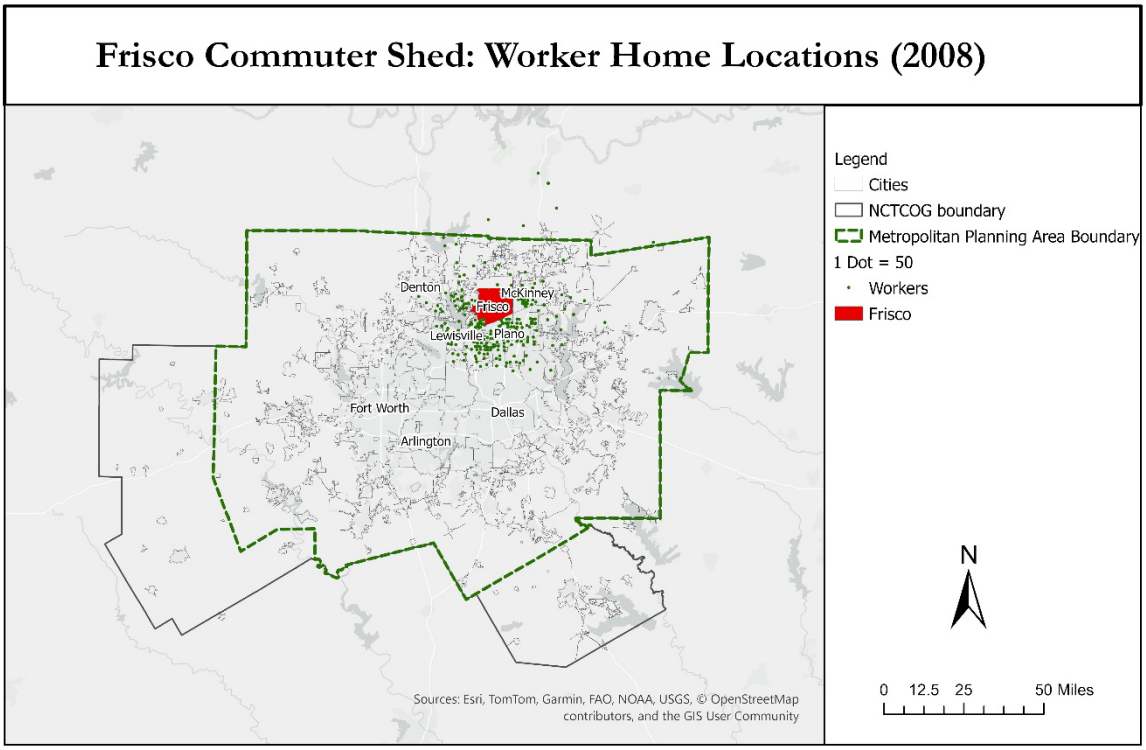
Figures 17-18: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time - Irving

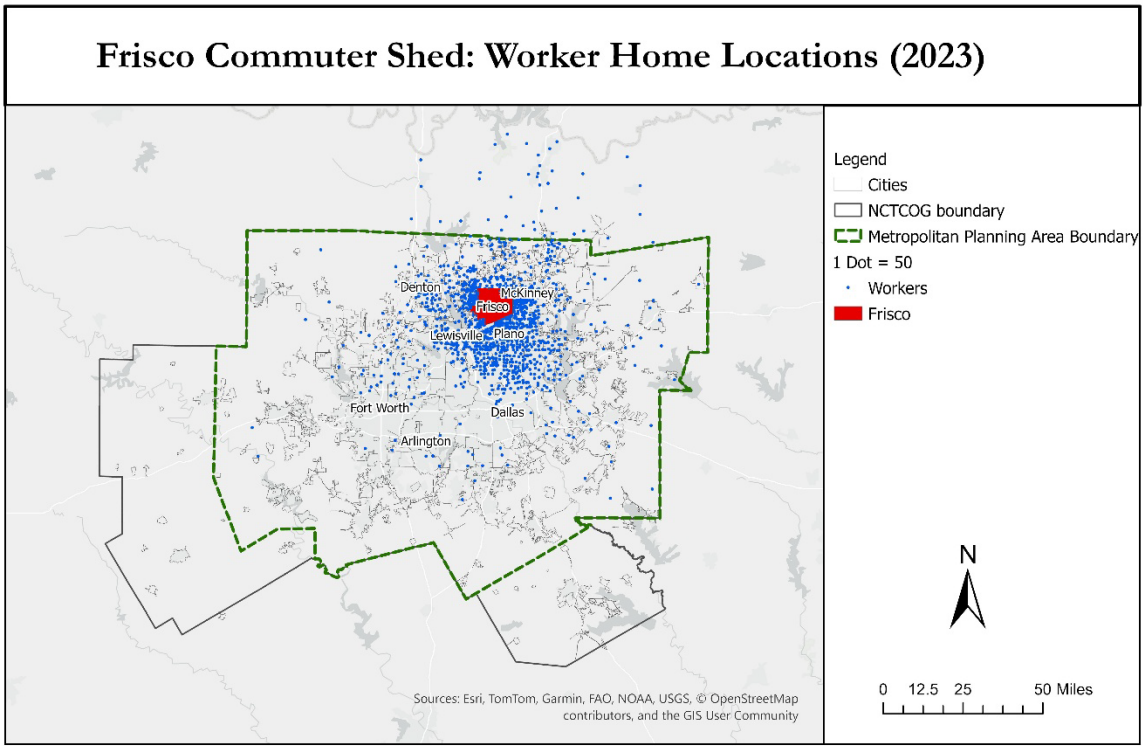
Denton



Figures 19-20: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time - Denton

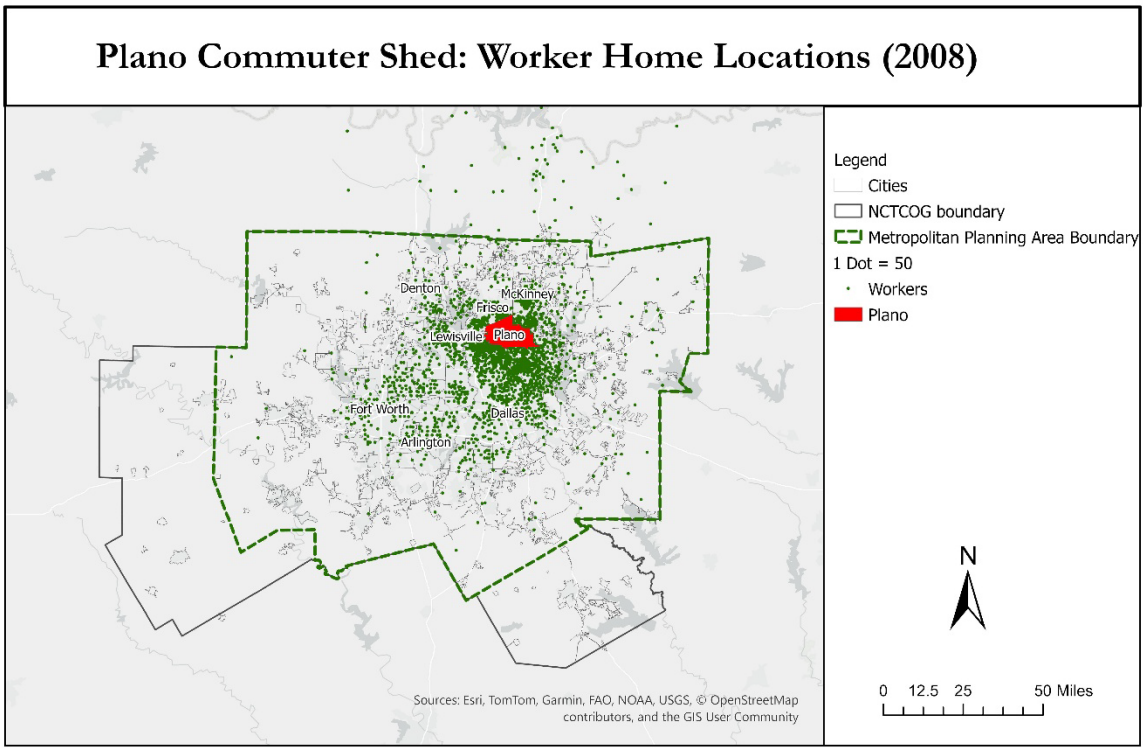
Frisco

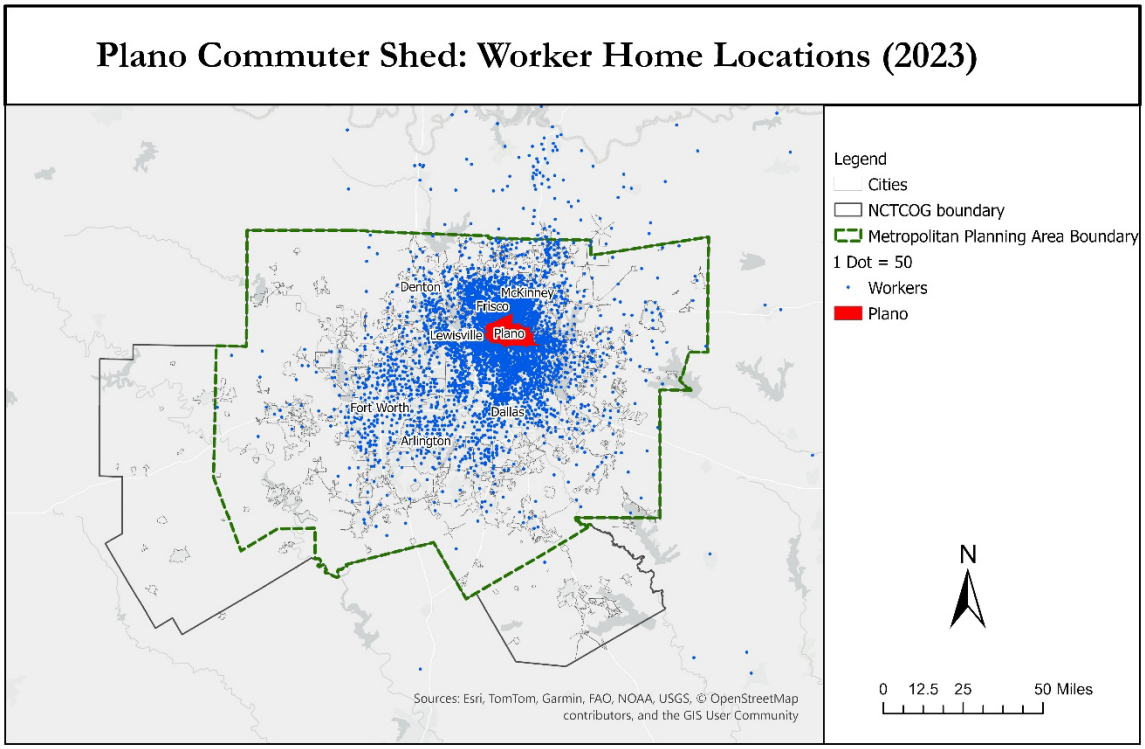




Figures 21-22: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time - Frisco

Plano





Figures 23-24: Change of Commuter Shed Over Time - Plano

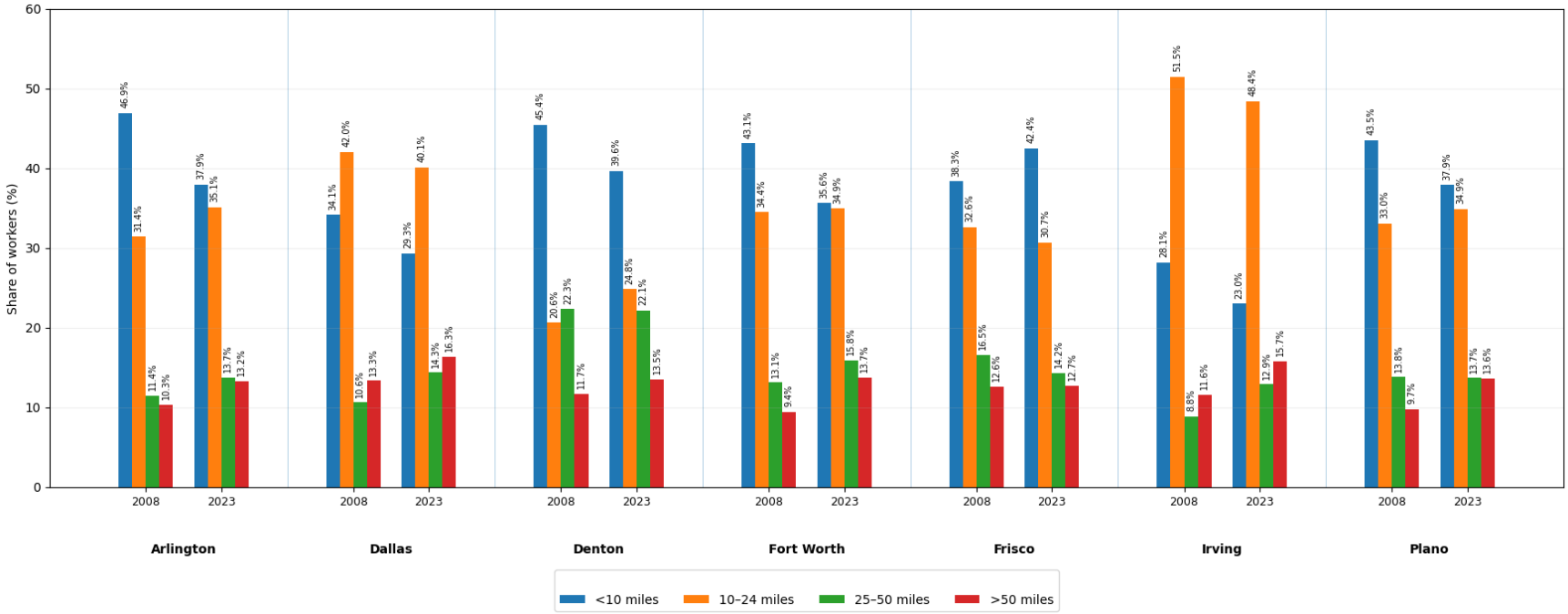


Figure 25: Change of Commuter Zones Over Time (2008-2023)

Conclusion and Recommendations

DFW's rapid growth presents both opportunities and challenges for the region's future development. The region continues to attract residents and businesses while generating new employment opportunities. Much of this growth remains characterized by low-density suburban development, single-family housing, and outward expansion. These patterns raise concerns about housing affordability, jobs–housing balance, infrastructure costs, traffic congestion, and environmental impacts. However, future growth does not have to follow the same sprawling development patterns. Better growth management and integrated land use and transportation planning offer opportunities to create more compact and connected communities.

Our study points to five priorities for managing DFW's future growth.

1. Expand Housing Choices Across Suburban Communities

Suburban communities should accommodate a greater diversity of housing types, including townhomes, duplexes, smaller-lot homes, apartments, and other missing-middle housing options. This is particularly important in rapidly growing suburbs where new development remains dominated by single-family homes. A greater mix of housing types, together with mixed-use development near growing employment centers, could improve housing choices and support jobs–housing balance.

2. Reform Restrictive Zoning Regulations

Zoning regulations such as minimum lot sizes, single-family-only zoning, density limits, minimum parking requirements, and restrictions on accessory dwelling units (ADUs) can increase housing costs, restrict housing development options, and constrain opportunities for more compact, connected communities. Local governments should reconsider and relax these requirements to allow a wider range of housing types, increase housing supply, and make more efficient use of available land.

3. Incentivize Affordable Housing Development

Local governments could use voluntary inclusionary housing programs, density bonuses, tax incentives, and other financial tools to encourage affordable housing development, particularly in high-demand areas and near growing employment centers. Affordable housing should also be integrated into mixed-use and transit-oriented developments, allowing households across income levels to benefit from improved access to jobs, transportation, and services.

4. Improve Regional Public Transit Connectivity

Better regional transit connectivity requires greater public investment and stronger cooperation across municipalities and transit agencies. Expanding transit services

between residential communities and growing suburban employment centers is particularly important for improving job accessibility, especially for lower-income workers.

Transit-oriented development (TOD) offers opportunities to better integrate transportation and land use through higher-density housing, mixed-use development, and pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly streets around transit stations and corridors. This can bring housing, jobs, and services closer to transit while making public transportation a more viable alternative to driving.

5. Promote Regional Planning and Cooperation

Housing, transportation, infrastructure, and environmental challenges extend beyond municipal boundaries. Addressing these issues requires stronger regional coordination and greater cooperation among local governments, particularly in planning for housing growth, infrastructure investment, and transportation services.

In particular, integration of land use and transportation planning deserves greater attention. Although metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) across the United States play a central role in regional transportation planning, their authority over local land use and housing decisions remains limited. Nevertheless, the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), as the region's MPO, can play an important role in bringing local governments together, coordinating transportation investments with land use plans, and supporting mixed-use, infill, and transit-oriented development. State-level policies could also encourage municipalities to accommodate their “fair share” of regional housing needs, promoting a more balanced distribution of housing growth across jurisdictions and housing options for different income groups.

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