

JEAN-PHILIPPE AURAMBOU

*The Future of Cities policy briefs:  
a webinar series*

# Shrinking cities

WEDNESDAY 31 MAY 2023



# Policy brief



Continuation of Future of cities

<https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/thefutureofcities/>

Its main aim is to raise open questions and steer discussions on what the future of cities can, and should be, both within the scientific and policymaker communities.

The cover of the policy brief features the European Commission logo at the top center, with the text 'European Commission' and 'SCIENCE FOR POLICY BRIEF' below it. On the right, it says 'The Future of Cities Series'. The main image is a photograph of a street scene in a city, showing a mix of old and new buildings. Below the image, the title 'Shrinking cities' is prominently displayed. The content is organized into a 'HIGHLIGHTS' section with three key points, followed by a quote and a detailed paragraph. The bottom right corner includes the 'Joint Research Centre' logo.

European Commission  
SCIENCE FOR POLICY BRIEF  
The Future of Cities Series

## Shrinking cities

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Shrinkage will become **more important in the future** – due to demographic change every country in Europe will be confronted with some level of shrinkage in cities.
- Shrinkage is not something cities can fix on their own: there is a need for further research into appropriate measures and **large-scale policy incentives**.
- Even currently stable or growing cities should **anticipate and plan** for possible shrinkage in the future.
- Shrinkage can be an **opportunity to reshape urban spaces** to be more sustainable and inclusive.

*'Dealing with the results of demographic, economic and physical contraction processes and planning for the future of considerably smaller but nevertheless liveable cities is one of the most challenging tasks for urban Europe in the near future.'*<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of history, cities, influenced by various historical, social, economic, demographic or political factors, have gone through cycles of growth and decline. While the world population has been increasing and is continuing to concentrate in cities, the idea that all cities are continuously growing is false. As population ages and fertility rates fall or as the result of outmigration, an increasing number of cities are shrinking, particularly in the USA, Europe and Japan

but also in the developing world. In fact, shrinking may well become the new normal for many cities and the populations that inhabit them. Shrinking is a complex process that affects multiple aspects from the physical structure of the city to its social and demographic fabric. The definition of a shrinking city used in this brief is that formulated by the Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCIRN): 'a densely populated urban area that has on the one hand faced a population loss in large parts of it (for at least 5 years, more than 0.15% annually), and is on the other hand undergoing economic transformation with some symptoms of a structural crisis'<sup>2</sup>. In what follows, trends are assessed for Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)<sup>3</sup>, corresponding to urban centres and their commuting area'<sup>4</sup>.

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Joint Research Centre

# The work of many...

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- Italy



- Lithuania



- Czech Republic

# Outline

- Global trends
- Why are cities shrinking?
- How does shrinkage affect cities?
- What are cities doing about it?
- Common needs and opportunities
- Conclusions and way forward



# The world population is getting more urban...

Increasingly more population is moving from rural areas to cities.

- 75% of the world population currently live in urban areas

Perception that all cities are growing...  
False

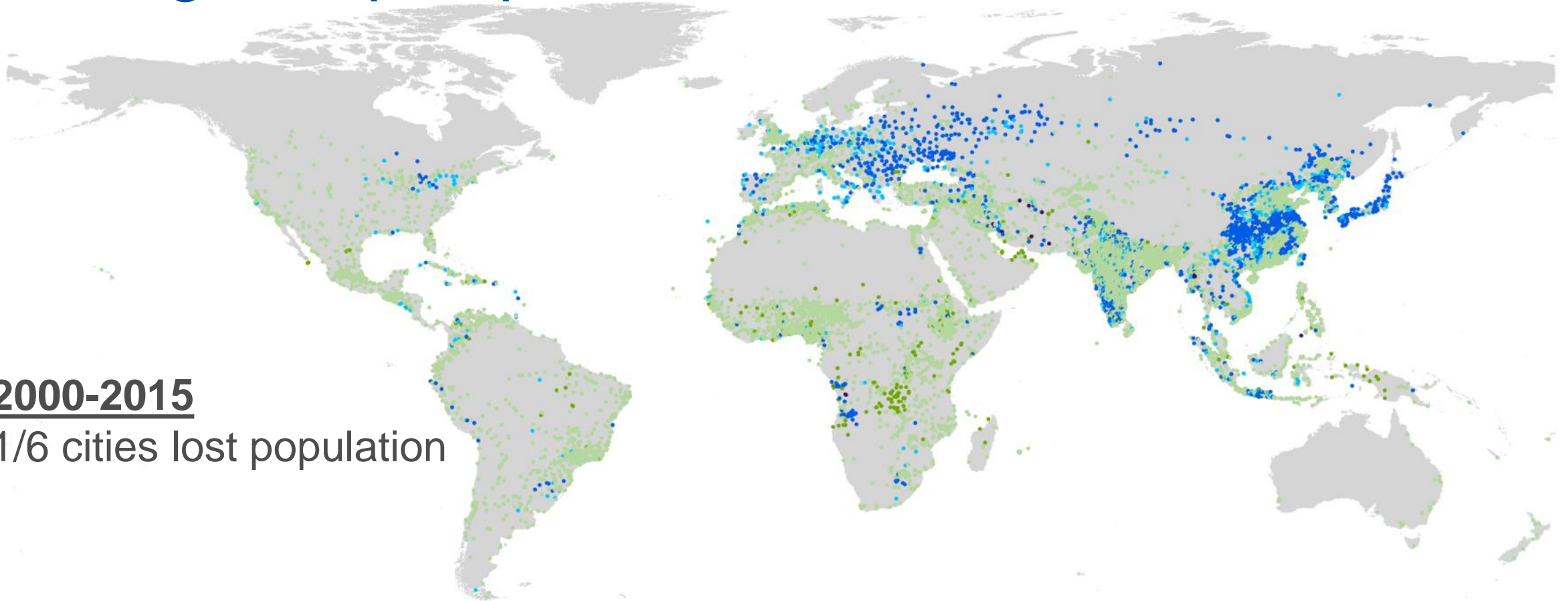
An increasing number of cities are now losing people in the USA, EU and Japan but also other countries.



# A global perspective

**2000-2015**

1/6 cities lost population



● < - 0.5%   ● - 0.5 - -0.15%   ● -0.15 - 0.15%   ● 0.15 - 0.5%   ● > 0.5%

Annual rate of population change between 2000 and 2015 at FUA level at the global scale

# At the European scale

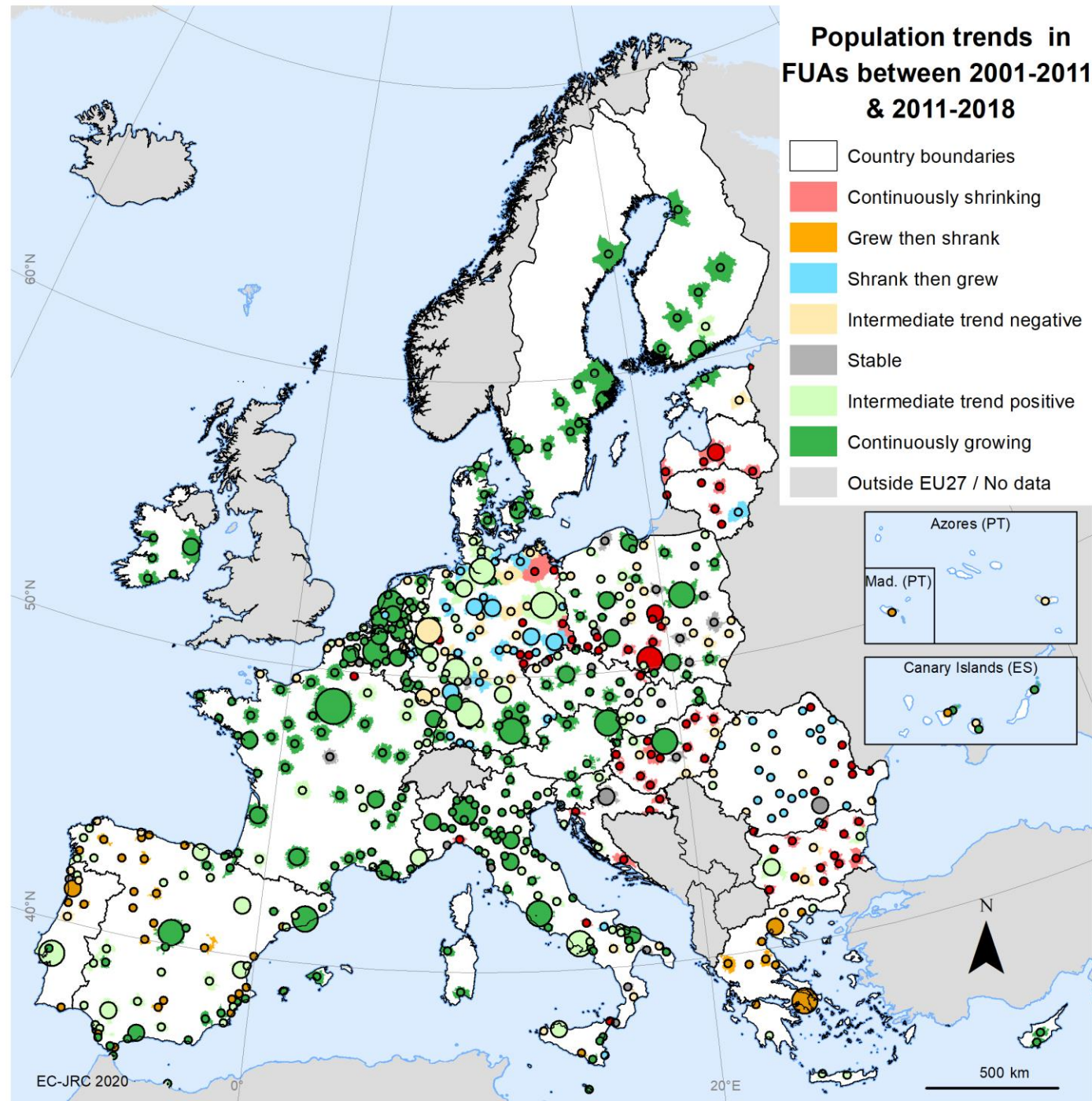
2001-2011 and 2011-2018

~ ¼ cities lost population

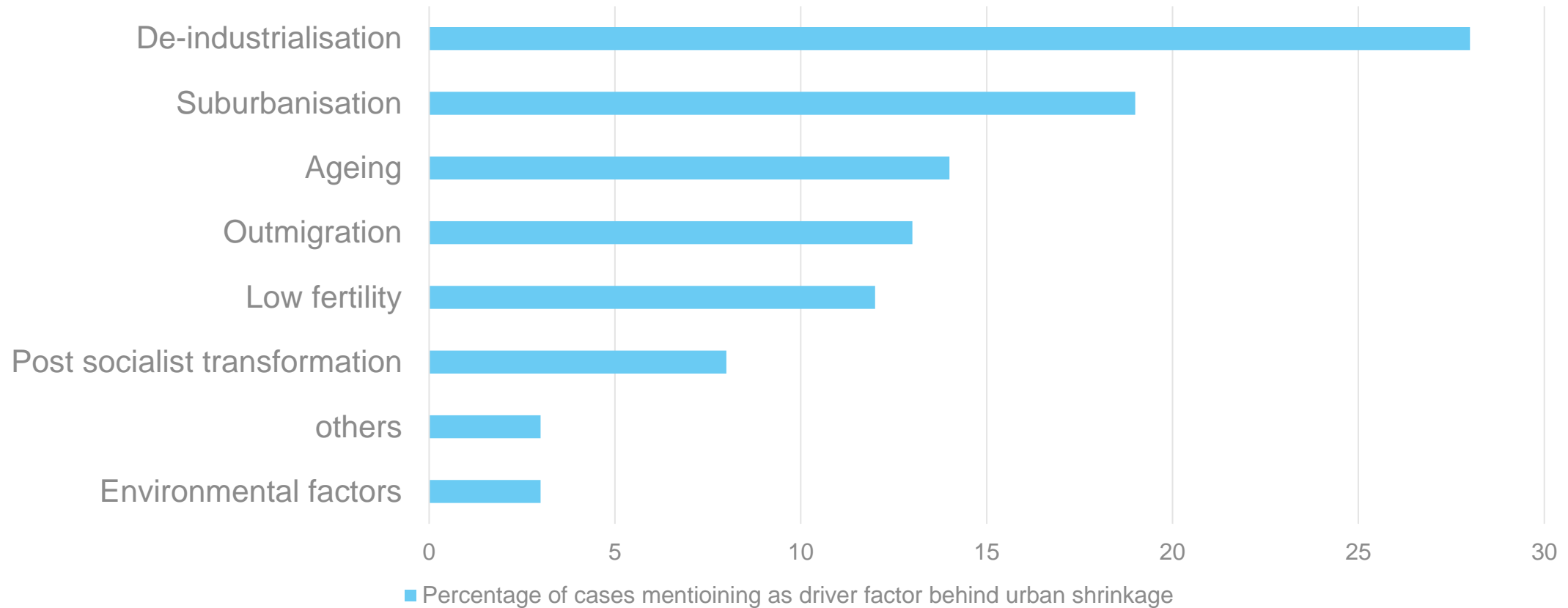
- Continuous shrinking
- Shrinking and growing
- Growing and shrinking

~12% of EU population in shrinking cities

Shrinkage could affect 45% of FUA by 2050...

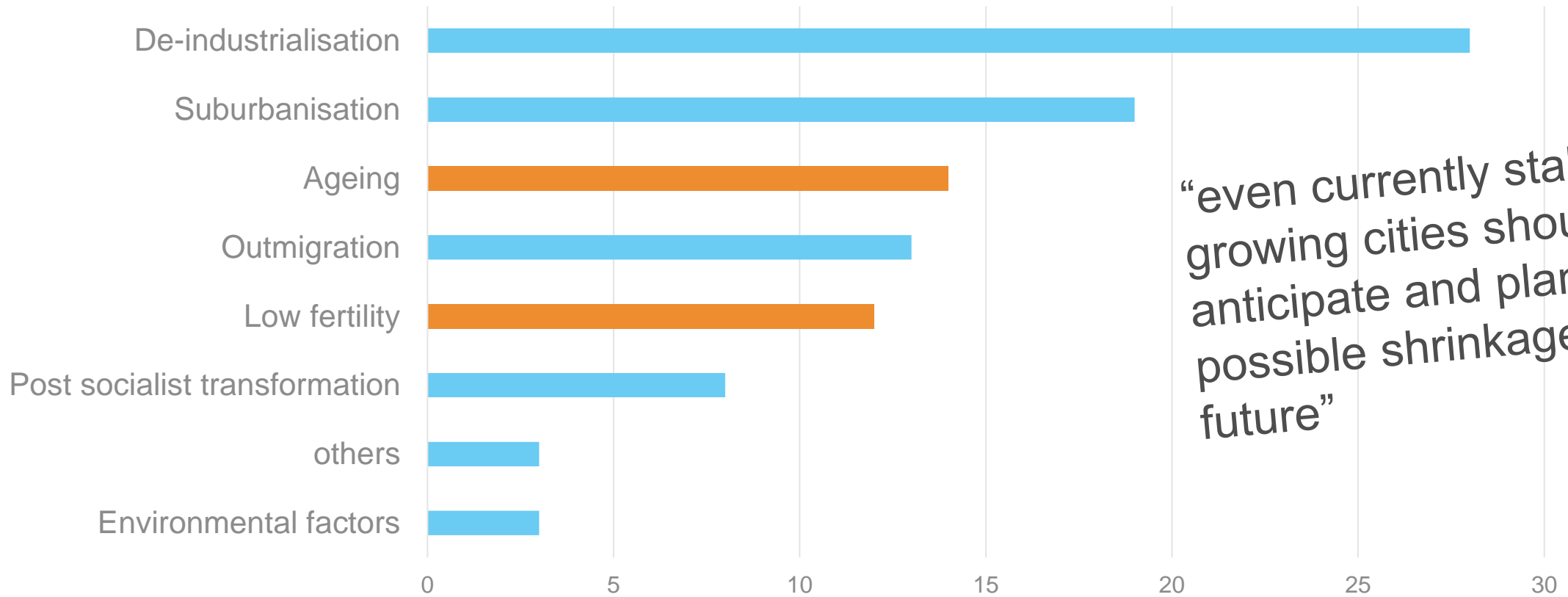


# Why are cities shrinking?





# Why are cities shrinking?



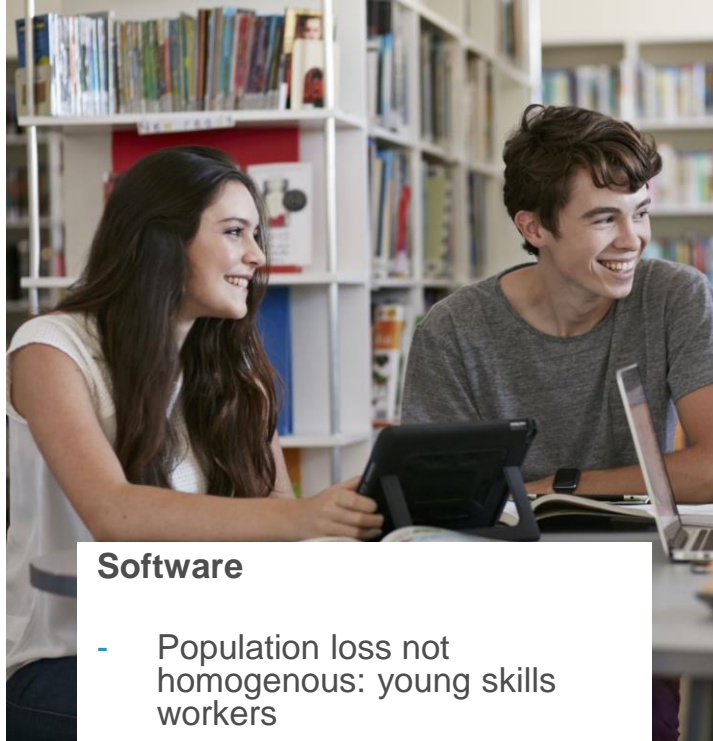
“even currently stable or growing cities should anticipate and plan for possible shrinkage in the future”

# What are the effects of shrinkage on cities?



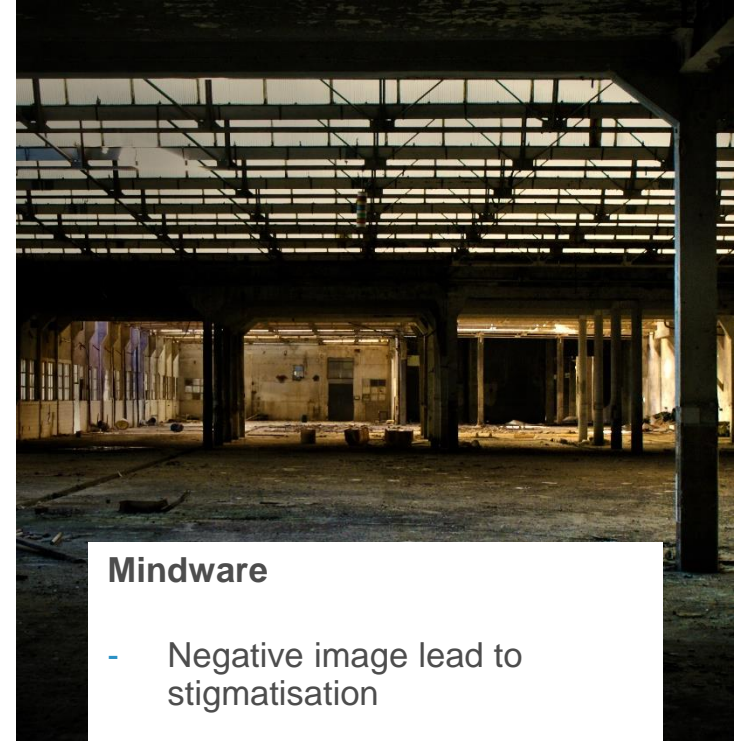
## Hardware

- Housing supply exceeding demand. ↓ property value ↑ vacant properties (abandonment & urban blight)
- Closure of local businesses and services
- Less income for city administration



## Software

- Population loss not homogenous: young skills workers
- Higher proportion of older and lower income population



## Mindware

- Negative image lead to stigmatisation
- Lower attractiveness

# Examples of measures taken

- **Urban renewal:** renovate and/or repurpose vacant downtown housing or buildings.
  
- **City Branding:** change the image of the city and make it more attractive





# Examples of measures taken

- **Rightsizing:** buy off and demolish abandoned buildings, converting to other purposes such as green space.

Consolidation of infrastructure and services + incitement for people to relocate to more central locations.

*\$\$\$ + mostly  
focused on visible  
symptoms....*

# Examples of measures taken

- **Economic diversification:** reorientation of the economic base, focusing on emerging economic sectors such as technology, creative industries and/or tourism.
- **Culture led regeneration:** promote cultural and artistic creative activities to attract and retain talents and residents and tourists.



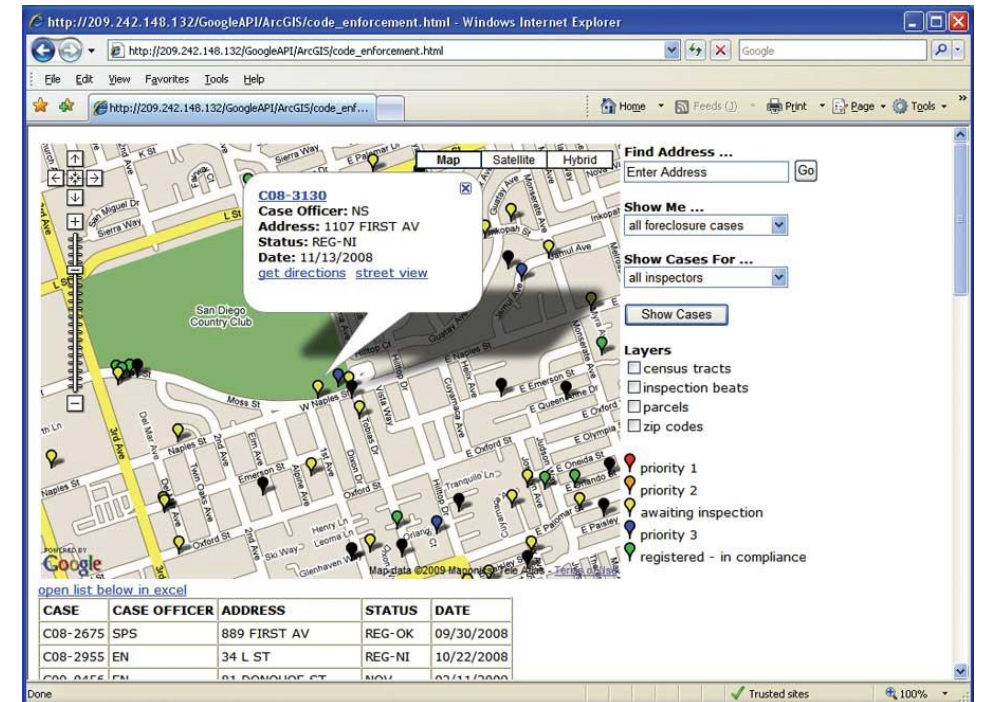


# Examples of measures taken

**New governance, bottom-up initiatives:** active engagement of local citizens (community projects) to increase quality of life. social capital, adapt services to local needs (retirees, families), rejuvenate public spaces...

# Common needs

- **Database of vacant or abandoned building:** identifying abandoned buildings and contacting their owners is a common issue.
- **Social housing:** building renewal or demolition may lead to gentrification. Need for measures to promote affordable housing,



The screenshot shows a web application interface for code enforcement. It features a map of San Diego with several colored pins indicating different case statuses. A pop-up window for case C08-3130 is visible, showing details for Case Officer NS, Address 1107 FIRST AV, Status REG-NI, and Date 11/13/2008. Below the map is a table with the following data:

CASE	CASE OFFICER	ADDRESS	STATUS	DATE
C08-2675	SPS	889 FIRST AV	REG-OK	09/30/2008
C08-2955	EN	34 L ST	REG-NI	10/22/2008
C08-3130	NS	1107 FIRST AV	REG-NI	11/13/2008

# Opportunities

- **New jobs and technologies:** need for technologies and businesses in the areas of building material recycling and re-use as well as in brownfield remediation and conversion to green spaces.
- **Post growth laboratories:** unique environments for empirical observations and experimentation to identify alternative systems focused on well-being and cohesion.





# Tools, programmes & funding opportunities

- Targeted urban strategies (promoting social inclusion) in shrinking FUAs were supported **European Structural and Investment Funds** + upcoming (ERDF CF) regulation to support areas which suffered from severe demographic handicaps and for which some shrinking cities may be eligible.
- Activities under the **URBACT** programme: transfer networks of good practices to activate unused and decaying housing stock, revitalise public services and the economy, regenerate the urban fabric and develop civil society, etc.

# Conclusions and way forward

Shrinking cities will become more important in the future.

Shrinking is poorly understood and we don't yet know how to plan for it:

- Effectiveness of measures unknown.
- Unintended consequences

Not all shrinkage is necessarily associated with a decline in happiness or quality of life of residents. Opportunity for cities to select a development path centered around quality of life, environmental protection, social equity and sustainability



*“Dealing with the results of demographic, economic and physical contraction processes and planning for the future of considerably smaller but nevertheless liveable cities is one of the most challenging tasks for urban Europe in the near future”*

*Martinez-Fernandez et al. (2016)*



# Keep in touch

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# Thank you



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