



City Planning: Overview

A crowded street. A packed bus. A full subway car during rush hour. This is daily life for billions around the world, all living in cities. A city is a large, permanent human settlement defined by high population density, physical infrastructure, and a local system of government. The United Nations reports that 45 percent of the global population currently lives in cities and this number is increasing as Earth's population grows. So how do we ensure our cities preserve culture and the environment while providing food, water, shelter, transportation, and economic benefit for all their residents?

Cities come in all shapes and sizes: Shanghai, China is densely populated with around 24 million residents, while Houston, Texas, USA is home to around 2 million spread across a larger area. Here's an eye-opening statistic: all the cities around the world only cover 2 percent of the world's land surface, but they consume more than [75 percent of the planet's material resources](#).

Cities are incredible places, giving residents space to live, work, and play. Still, we can't ignore the challenges they pose to the environment, wildlife, and residents themselves. As urban sprawl continues, natural lands are plowed and paved to create homes, buildings, and roads. Residents produce everything from noise pollution to wastewater throughout their day-to-day lives. Even with the many resources they consume, some cities fail to provide all their residents with what's needed to live healthy and safe lives. Environmental injustice is common in urban areas where some communities are left behind or bear a bigger burden than others. Housing is part of the problem as well, with 300 million people experiencing homelessness worldwide.

Making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable is [Goal 11 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). But meeting this goal becomes increasingly important, and difficult, as global population continues to increase. Creating sustainable urban areas is no easy task, but city planners have many examples to learn from: take Chandigarh, a city of 1.4 million in India. [Chandigarh is far from perfect, but it does show the potential of a well-planned city](#) with passive cooling designed into buildings, green spaces for residents, and smart transit infrastructure.

Picture waking up one day as the manager of your own city. What would you do? How would your city provide for the needs and wants of your residents? How can your city grow smartly when new people move in? Urbanization is expected to continue into the foreseeable future. So get creative, put your problem-solving skills to work, and explore the subtopics below!

Narrow Your Focus

City planning is a broad topic that encompasses a lot of challenges, but your video can only be 60 seconds. Rather than taking on the entire topic, we recommend focusing on one part of the topic (a subtopic).

We've put together a list of suggested subtopics and credible sources. Each subtopic has a thought-provoking question to get you thinking. But there are many other subtopics, questions to think about, and credible sources on city planning, so don't limit yourself to what is included here.

As you conduct your [research](#), make sure to keep a [works cited list](#) of where you get each fact. Be sure to check that your [sources are credible](#). We will ask for your sources if you are a finalist.

As a reminder, your video must do three things:

- **Explain your subtopic focus and how it relates to city planning**
- **Connect how human population growth impacts your topic**
- **Provide a sustainable solution**

Click on the example subtopics below to start your research and spark ideas for your video.



Looking for more resources to help you plan your video?
Check out the [video project organizer](#) (full version) or the [video project guide](#) (shorter version).

Affordable Housing

Thought-provoking question: *How does a person's ability to have a stable and affordable place to live impact their own life and the community around them?*

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers housing affordable when it costs 30 percent or less of a person's income. When people can't afford housing, they are forced to relocate or live in overcrowded slums. Housing demand increases as the population grows, and cities around the world are struggling to keep up.

- Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya is the largest slum in Africa and showcases the harsh reality for many around the world when housing options aren't available. (Watch: [CGTN Africa/YouTube](#))
- Single-family zoning laws inhibit multifamily units from being built. These laws are common in wealthier areas and are used to exclude low-income households. (Read more: [Urban Institute](#))
- Gentrification is the phenomenon where wealthier individuals move to lower-income areas. It is a complex topic that revitalizes neighborhoods while also displacing residents already living there. (Watch more: [TVO Today/YouTube](#))
- On April 5th, 2025, tens of thousands of people marched across 39 different cities in Spain to protest rising rent in recent years. (Watch more: [Al Jazeera/YouTube](#))
- The average cost of rent compared to a person's income looks very different from country to country. (Read more: [World Population Review](#))

Urban Sprawl

Thought-provoking question: *How does building infrastructure outward affect people, wildlife, and the planet?*

The areas people live in today have been developed and now look very different than many years ago. Part of this development is called urban sprawl, which is the movement of residents from city centers into nearby rural or undeveloped land. To support a growing population, new homes, roads, and shops must be built, and this often comes at the cost of destroying natural habitat or farmland.

- Many developers construct modern suburban neighborhoods on undeveloped land because it is cheaper to buy and build on. This often results in the creation of single-family, low-density housing, or suburbs. (Read more: [University of the Built Environment](#))
- Forest and wetlands serve as habitats for critically endangered Florida panthers, whose numbers have dropped due to the expansion of cities into panther territories. (Read more: [The Nature Conservancy](#))
- As rent and city living become more expensive in Philadelphia, millennials are more likely to move to the suburbs. (Read more: [Natural Lands](#))

- In Ontario, Canada, 175 acres of farmland are being lost every day to develop single-family homes. This hurts farmers and the local food supply. (Watch: [CTV News/YouTube](#))
- As suburbs and cities grow, transportation infrastructure grows with them. On average, in U.S. cities with over 1 million people, 22 percent of city center land is used for parking. (Explore the map: [Parking Reform Network](#))

Access to Public Infrastructure

Thought-provoking question: *What do residents need to live happy and healthy lives?*

Resilient, sustainable, and inclusive city infrastructure (meaning a city's buildings, systems, and physical structures) is critical to ensure residents have access to basic needs. Residents must be able to move from place to place safely, be able to access and afford nutritious food, have reliable energy and water, and more. As city populations grow, current infrastructure may not be able to support the increasing number of residents, leaving some behind.

- What is the longest you have ever waited in traffic? How does your experience compare to some of the worst traffic jams in the world? (Read more: [World Atlas](#))
- Food deserts are areas where people face daily obstacles that stop them from purchasing fresh, nutritious foods. (Read more: [The Humane League](#))
- Aging infrastructure can have devastating impacts. Pakistan faced major blackouts, leaving many without water or transit and disrupting daily life. (Watch: [World Is One News/YouTube](#))
- In Wellington, New Zealand, an outdated wastewater treatment plant is causing an environmental disaster. (Read more: [The Guardian](#))
- Chennai is a coastal city in India where residents don't have access to clean drinking water. The local government is building desalination plants to provide fresh water while residents are harvesting rainwater. (Watch: [PBS NewsHour/YouTube](#))

Environmental Health Issues

Thought-provoking question: *Why is it so difficult to reduce pollution in cities and urban areas?*

Supporting millions of people in one area comes with consequences like pollution and ecosystem damage. Though density can be a good thing for the natural world, it can also condense and amplify local environmental problems. As city populations continue to grow, these consequences will likely increase.

- From disrupting circadian sleep cycles to bird migration, light pollution significantly harms people and wildlife. (Watch: [Britannica](#))

- Noise pollution is a serious health problem that can lead to stress, sleep deprivation, and cardiovascular issues. (Watch: [Global News/YouTube](#))
- Impervious surfaces like roads, parking lots, and rooftops dominate urban landscapes, causing flooding and runoff to enter the water system. (Read more: [Chesapeake Bay Program](#))
- Cities tend to be much hotter than their rural counterparts, a pattern known as the urban heat island effect. (Read more: [Heat.gov](#))
- Cities are hotspots for air pollution caused by gas-powered cars, industrial facilities, and construction sites. (Read more: [Clean Air Fund](#))

Environmental Injustice and Discrimination

Thought-provoking question: *Why are some groups more likely to live in areas with unhealthy facilities and structures than other groups?*

Industrial sites, including landfills and chemical plants, are often built near low-income and minority communities. This is what has happened in [Cancer Alley](#), where residents are 50 times more likely to get cancer than the average American. In other parts of the world, people can't view an apartment simply because of what their last name is. As the population continues to grow, planning equitable cities is increasingly important.

- Waste incinerators in the U.S. are often placed by low-income and minority neighborhoods, increasing health and other risks for their residents. (Watch: [The Guardian/YouTube](#))
- The German housing crisis is making it difficult to find affordable housing in cities, and racism in the housing market is growing. (Read more: [Deutsche Welle](#))
- The U.S. Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 built a 41,000-mile interstate highway system connecting the nation like never before, but often it was at the expense of minority homes and communities. (Read more: [History](#))
- Access to healthy food is crucial for a healthy population to thrive, yet in many minority communities, healthy food isn't easily accessible. These communities see higher rates of food insecurity and chronic illnesses. (Read more: [The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#))
- During the 1800s, racial deeds were used to stop black and brown individuals from buying homes. This practice led to segregated cities and suburbs in the United States, which are still seen today. (Watch: [TED](#))

Social and Cultural Impacts

Thought-provoking question: *Why is it important to preserve a city's culture and social environments while welcoming new residents?*

Cities can provide inclusive spaces for diverse populations to interact, helping combat social inequities. They are also places rich in culture and historic background, but that culture can be

lost if not intentionally preserved. As more people move into cities and tourism increases, cities must work to preserve their culture while creating spaces for residents to connect.

- Third places are locations other than your work or home where you can socialize, unwind, and build a sense of community. In the U.S., many third places are disappearing. (Read more: [Project for Public Spaces](#))
- Cities often prioritize residential and commercial development over green spaces. (Read more: [Evergreen Infrastructure](#))
- How a city is planned can shape its residents' lifestyles. In many cities, people are completely dependent on cars for transportation. (Read more: [UC San Diego Today](#))
- The Olympics is an international multisport event enjoyed by 5 billion people, but the tradition has drawbacks. Host cities spend billions of dollars building stadiums, many of which are decaying today. (Watch: [Front Office Sports/YouTube](#))
- A UNESCO World Heritage Site is an area granted legal protection under an international treaty for having special cultural, historical, or natural significance. However, this status comes with benefits and consequences. (Watch: [Deutsche Welle](#))

Choose Your Own Subtopic

Thinking of your own subtopic can be challenging if you don't know where to start. We've put together a guide to help spark some ideas. Follow the path below to come up with a subtopic that is personal and meaningful to you, so it stands out from other entries.



What do you already know?

Before doing your research, write a prior knowledge list of everything that comes to mind when you think about city planning. Include any books, articles, podcasts or videos where you learned about city planning and anything you remember from them.



What is happening in your community?

Do you wish you could change anything about the city you live in? How is the way your city is planned affecting you safety, happiness, and health? Are there any other cities around the world that you wished you lived in? What elements, features, or traits in those cities makes them desirable?



How can you start your research?

Look back at your prior knowledge list about city planning. Is there anything else you want to know? What questions do you have about how city planning impacts your local and global communities? Start looking for credible sources, search for answers, explore more about city planning, and see where your research takes you!

The 60 Second Check



Your video can only be a maximum of 60 seconds. Can you:

- Explain the problem clearly?
- Show how population growth is connected to the subtopic?
- Propose an innovative, realistic solution?