

# Louis Wirth and Urban Ecology

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of urban ecology, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Urban Ecology
2. Louis Wirth
3. The Blasé Urbanite

## 1. URBAN ECOLOGY

The growth of cities is a fascinating area of study for sociologists. In a sense, cities are laboratories for sociological investigation, because they are a confluence of economic, social, cultural, and political trends, all intermingling. People of all walks of life rub shoulders with one another every day. Where else but in a city do you find people of all different races, classes--even homeless people--genders, and sexual orientations, constantly intermingling?

### IN CONTEXT

Cities are where you are able to observe capitalism and economic trends most visibly. There used to be a manufacturing economy, in which manufacturing production was largely concentrated in cities.

Now these are largely gone, and there is an information economy in which people are processing information with computers. You can observe this change in the very physical, social fabric of the city itself, and in urban, cultural life. All the old manufacturing plants--the old warehouse district of cities--are now being converted by artists into new spaces.

It's possible to see the cultural, economic, and social trends in the very landscape of the city, which is why they're fascinating areas for sociological study. Sociologists have developed a concept to help analyze these trends, known as urban ecology. **Urban ecology** is the study of urban centers as their own ecosystems.



**EXAMPLE** In the same way that the rain forest has its own ecology and its own set of interactions among animals, plants, and the environment, so do cities have their own ecology and interactions among people, the environment in the city, culture and society.



## TERM TO KNOW

## 2. LOUIS WIRTH

Sociologist Louis Wirth deserves much credit for helping to pioneer a study of urban social life at the University of Chicago. He and his department were among the first to hone in on urban sociology, or the sociological study of cities.



### HINT

Recall that people are products of the environment in which they live. The society you grow up in shapes you, and this is no different with an urban space.



### BRAINSTORM

How does the city shape you? How has urbanization changed American culture and American society? Think about this in your life--do you have friends who have primarily grown up in rural areas or who have lived primarily in rural areas their entire life? What about friends--or you, yourself--who live in cities or who have lived in cities most of their lives? Think about their cultural differences. What do these two groups of friends do with their time? What do they like to do? What are their tastes and preferences? What do they believe? What are their politics?

**Louis Wirth** argued that urban life shapes the society, theorizing that it provides negative and positive aspects of social life. On the negative side, cities are impersonal places--people have few ties to each other. They can produce alienation, meaning that people are isolated from each other, even though they're surrounded by each other, because of the impersonal nature of cities. This promotes weak ties, with fewer strong family and community ties. People are simply atomized urban dwellers who deal with each other impersonally, yet they're not satisfied, because they lack those close ties. Therefore, some negative aspects that a city can produce are alienation among its members and decreased communal bonds.

On the positive side, cities promote tolerance. They promote freedom, scientific investigation, inquiry, and innovation. They also promote mass social movements, because of people communing and mobilizing behind their social causes.



### BIG IDEA

City life is a balance between these two positive and negative forces. This balance, this interplay of these two forces of urban life, are what makes cities dynamic, exciting social spaces to be in, yet at the same time they can be very lonely, soul-crushing, hostile, and defeating places.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Louis Wirth

American sociologist from the Chicago school of urban qualitative researchers who studied city life.

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## 3. THE BLASÉ URBANITE

Louis Wirth was influenced by Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, who developed the concept of the blasé urbanite. Urban dwellers--people who habitually dwell in urban space--are bombarded with too much stimuli all the time, Simmel argued. They are subjected to a constant rush of events, objects, people, noises, and even scents. Cities are calamitous places, so habitual urban dwellers develop a blasé and detached attitude from society, which is why the stereotype about urban dwellers is that they are insensitive and impersonal.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If urban dwellers see like a struggle on the street, they are able to simply walk around it--it's not a big deal to them, because they've developed this blasé, detached attitude.



## SUMMARY

Today you explored an introduction to '**urban ecology**, which is the study of human interactions with, and within, an urban environment. You learned about sociologist **Louis Wirth** and his theories on city life, as well as one of his influences, Simmel, and his concept of the **blasé urbanite**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Urban Ecology

The study of human interactions with, and within, an urban environment.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### Louis Wirth

American sociologist from the Chicago school of urban qualitative researchers who studied city life.