



## **Pittsburgh's Population Drop in 2014: What Does It Mean?**

From July 2013 to July 2014, the date of the latest estimate, the City of Pittsburgh's population fell by 1,314 people. This decline followed two years of gains that lifted the count to 1,000 higher than the April, 2010 Census figure of 305,704. On a net basis, the City now has 300 fewer people than four years earlier. Essentially, the population is probably flat within the margin of statistical error. All data are taken from the Census Bureau's American Fact Finder report on the Community Survey.

This four year flatness in the City's population is interesting considering that although the County population fell by 1,700 between 2013 and 2014 to 1,231,255, the 2014 figure was nearly 8,000 above the 2010 Census number, a rise of 0.65 percent. That represents reasonably good growth for the County but it is still well below the 2.4 percent gain recorded by the national population over the same period. If the County had grown at the national rate, its population would have reached 1,252,708, a rise of 29,500. Likewise a growth of 2.4 percent would have placed the City population at 313,040, a pickup of 7,300.

The City's population, while fairly steady since the 2010 Census, has now dropped to 62<sup>nd</sup> highest among U.S. cities, a far cry from the number 12 ranking in 1950 when there were 676,000 inhabitants. It is worth noting several cities have fared as badly or even worse. For example, Detroit's decline from just under 1.9 million people in 1950 to less than 700,000 now provides some perspective on how bad things could be. Cleveland has also been very hard hit with a decrease of well over half of its population count during the period.

It is also interesting to note the comparison of the City's recent population changes with those in the seven county Pittsburgh metro area. After tacking on about 4,500 people between 2010 and 2012, the region saw back to back declines in 2013 and 2014 that completely reversed the earlier gains, dropping the latest count about 300 below the 2010 reading. Over the period, Westmoreland, Fayette, Beaver and Armstrong were down measurably led by a significant drop in Westmoreland, while Butler and Allegheny posted gains and Washington was essentially unchanged from 2010 to 2014 after a small rise in 2011 and 2012. Indeed, according to the Census estimates, most western

Pennsylvania counties have struggled to maintain their population levels during the last four years.

Among the U.S cities with 200,000 or more people in 2010, nine, including Pittsburgh, showed population declines over the four-year span from 2010, some were fairly dramatic when contrasted with Pittsburgh's small 300 person drop. Detroit continued its long slide posting a four-year drop of 34,000. Other sizable falloffs were seen in Cleveland (-7,000), Toledo (-6,000) and Montgomery, Alabama (-5,500). Smaller but no doubt worrisome dips were recorded for Buffalo (-3,000), St. Louis (-2,000) and Akron (-1,200). Rochester and Baton Rouge had measurable but not overly frightening decreases of around 500. Note too, that New York City and Chicago managed to grow over the period despite weakness in the rest of New York and Illinois. The data indicate that in all likelihood, international migrants are heavily responsible for much of the net population gains in these cities.

Pittsburgh is not alone in its troubles of trying to grow population. And certainly the gain in Allegheny County takes away some of the sting of its failure to post gains.

One of the oft-repeated explanations for the City's inability to grow rests on the claim that the City's population is very old and has a high ratio of deaths to births because of the elderly population. But that argument does not hold any more. In fact in 2013, the latest data for age distribution shown on the Census website, the City has a lower median age (33.4 years) than the nation as a whole (37.6 years). How can this be? It is true that the over 75 age group in Pittsburgh represents a slightly higher percentage of the population than in the nation, 7.3 to 6.2 percent. However, from 65 to 75 years, the national percentage was 8.0 compared to the City's 6.7 percent.

The real, substantial gaps between the national age distribution and the City's distribution occur in the younger age groups. From birth to 14 years of age, the share of population in the City was 13.6 percent and the national was 19.3. The Pittsburgh share of population was 20 to 30 percent lower in every five-year age group in the fifteen year span from 0 to 14. This suggests a much lower birth rate or a preferential out migration of young children from the City as compared to the national behavior.

But a dramatic shift happens when the 20 to 34 year age category shares are compared. This group accounts for 30.5 percent of the City's population while the national percentage is only 20.9. That is an astounding gap and reflects, in all likelihood, the college and graduate school students as well as a substantial number of other in-migrants to the City in this age group—certainly well above the national norms.

Then something very interesting happens. The age group from 35 to 65 accounts for a substantially higher portion of the national population than it does in Pittsburgh, 39.0 to 33.8 percent. This is the age group that by and large represents the highest income earners (those at the top end of this age range) and accounts for the lion's share of those with middle and high school age students (in the middle portion of the range).

These statistics point to an almost indisputable fact. As people get married and start to settle down by their mid-thirties, their focus shifts to concerns about children, especially education. And for quite a long time Pittsburgh schools, with a few rare exceptions, are failing to deliver the quality of education responsible parents want and expect for their children. There may be other factors affecting Pittsburgh's favorability toward families as well: taxes, government services, and safety come to mind. In any event, there can be little doubt that parents who cannot afford high quality private schooling, while also paying high property and wage taxes in Pittsburgh, are voting with their feet.

Finally, it appears that the birth rate among Pittsburgh childbearing age groups could be running below the national average. It could be a lot of factors, delayed marriage, career concerns that prevent having babies, or simply life styles that delay or downplay having children. Combine that with out-migration of families with school age or nearing school age children and the outlook for enrollment in City schools is far from rosy. This is occurring despite the enormous spending per student and the Promise Program that was supposed to fix this problem.

The big question: Can a population that is not growing and has an increasingly large share of its population concentrated in the late teens through early thirties age category be sustained at its current level unless birth rates for this age group increase and the City's public schools improve sufficiently to stem the decline in the share of the population represented by 35 to 65 year olds? Attracting young people will not be enough if a high percentage leave when they get older.

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