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Pittsburgh's population picture

By Colin McNickle

Greater Pittsburgh continued to lose population between July 2016 and July 2017, the latest U.S. Census estimate shows. And while the losses are not as pronounced as they once were, the significance cannot be discounted, caution researchers at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“(T)he recent population losses in (Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh) are a small fraction of the declines from the 1990 Census through 2010,” say Eric Montarti, senior policy analyst, and Jake Haulk, president of the Pittsburgh think tank.

“Nonetheless, the pace of natural increase (births minus deaths) and changing age distribution will hold important implications for the social and economic structure of the county and city in the years ahead,” the pair remind (*in Policy Brief Vol. 18, No. 22*).

Based on Census estimates as of July 1, 2017, the seven-county Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) had 2,333,367 people. Over half of the population of what is the nation's 26th-largest MSA – 1,223,048 people – is based in Allegheny County; a quarter of the county's population – 302,407 residents – lives in the City of Pittsburgh.

Census estimates show the Pittsburgh MSA's population fell by 8,169 people, or 0.3 percent, between July 2016 and July 2017. It is one of 11 MSAs with July 2017 population counts of between 2 million and 2.5 million.

Nine of those MSAs (including Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Kansas City) posted population gains. But besides Pittsburgh, Cleveland was the only comparable MSA that lost population. It registered a 0.1 decline.

Population declined in six of seven of Pittsburgh's MSA counties. Armstrong and Fayette counties paced the losses with 0.7 percent drops. Allegheny County's population fell 0.4 percent, or 4,505, from July 2016's 1,227,553. Butler County's population stood at 187,108 last July, a 0.5 percent increase.

Pittsburgh proper itself lost 2,610 residents from July 2016 to July 2017. “But it is worth noting that the 2016 estimate for the city was revised upward in the latest data,” Montarti and Haulk note. “Due to this upward revision to 305,017 the fall to the 2017 estimate of 302,407 made the year-over-year loss appreciably higher than it otherwise would have been.”

In terms of numbers, the latest county and city population declines pace all counties in the Pittsburgh MSA.

And what of the future? Montarti and Haulk ponder what longer-term demographic trends might affect the size and makeup of the local population.

To wit, deaths continue to outpace births in Allegheny County. But instead of the 11,585 difference in the 2000-2007 period, it was 3,264 in the 2010-2017 period.

Additionally, the county saw a negative net migration of 45,419 in the 2000-07 period, with international migration of a positive 14,334 vs. domestic migration of negative 59,753.

But for the 2010-17 period, international migration was a positive 24,646 while domestic migration was a negative 20,888, for a net positive of 3,758.

Yes, the City of Pittsburgh’s gains in the 20-34 age group from 2010 to 2016 – more than 30 percent of the city’s total population in both years – might be encouraging. After all, that’s well above the national average for this age range. But that’s due in large part to college and university students in the city.

By that same 2010-2016 measure, however, those aged 35-54 and 0-19 fell in Pittsburgh proper. “That strongly indicated that people in prime working years, likely with school-age children, were leaving the city.”

Of course, a continuation of that trend would be troubling.

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