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FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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May 8, 2019

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

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660 words

## Reversing Greater Pittsburgh's population decline

By Colin McNickle

As the population continues to decline in Greater Pittsburgh's seven-county region, sound public policies that could help to remedy the losses go unimplemented, remind scholars at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

Based on the U.S. Census Bureau's estimates as of July 1, 2018, the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) had 2,324,743 people. That's down by 5,540 people, or 0.2 percent, from July 2017. Among nine comparably populated metro areas (populations of 2 million to 2.5 million), Cleveland was the only other to lose population in the same year-over-year period.

Allegheny County, which is home to more than half of the Pittsburgh metro's population -- at 1,218,452, roughly what it was between 1920 and 1930 and a shadow of its 1960 peak population of 1,628,587 -- lost 2,204 people between 2017 and 2018, Census estimates show. That accounted for just over a third of the metro's losses.

Sadly, past proved to be prologue -- in those declines and the failure to implement policies to reverse them.

"An Allegheny Institute 2007 report on Allegheny County's population losses argued that the availability of quality, good-paying jobs and the quality and cost of living were key factors in an area's attractiveness," recount Eric Montarti, director of research at the Pittsburgh think tank, and Jake Haulk, its president-emeritus and senior advisor (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 18*).

"That is just as true today. Economic factors, specifically jobs and the business climate that produce the job gains, remain the keys to luring new residents and encouraging existing ones to stay," they say, reminding that myriad public policy changes suggested by the think tank consistently have gone unheeded.

Among those remedies, many of which must originate with the Pennsylvania General Assembly, are ending public school teacher and mass transit strikes; prevailing wage reform; ending economic development subsidies and voter approval for all local tax increases.

“Instead there is even more emphasis locally on government-driven development,” Montarti and Haulk say, citing, as one example, a Westmoreland County proposal to build an amphitheater to help stem population losses.

“Ending public sector union strikes are not even being proposed let alone being voted on,” they add. “And taxpayers are no closer to having the right to vote to approve all local tax increases.”

As for property taxes, those in Allegheny County were much higher in 2007 than those in neighboring counties. These days, citing another example, the combined millage rate (county, municipal and school) in Upper St. Clair (in Allegheny County) is twice that of Peters (in Washington County), communities that border one another.

“Someone considering a property that is assessed at \$150,000 in one of the two municipalities would see a difference in total taxes of just over \$2,500 more in Allegheny County, with \$1,800 of that resulting from differences in school taxes,” Montarti and Haulk note.

“(A)t current millage rates, a property with an assessed value of \$295,000 could be purchased in Peters with the same total tax bill of a \$150,000 assessed property in Upper St. Clair.”  
Back to those Census numbers.

Greater Pittsburgh’s MSA population was 2,356,285 in 2010, 31,542 higher than the latest head count. Allegheny County’s population was 1,223,348, or 4,896 higher, with the years of increases or negligible losses lasting until about 2013.

Since then the population in the MSA and Allegheny County has fallen each year, which has serious implications for the labor force, tax base and political representation as the 2020 Census approaches.

“While there are areas of modest strength in the MSA, there can be no gainsaying the fact that, overall, the county and region are losing ground relative to the country and many comparably sized metro areas,” the Allegheny Institute researchers say.

“This, despite the region’s great good fortune of being a major beneficiary of having natural gas deposits.”

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