



580 words

Troubling comparisons for Pittsburgh

By Colin McNickle

An updated statistical analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy of how the City of Pittsburgh stacks up against four comparable “benchmark cities” should prompt much, and necessarily robust, discussion among local public policy makers.

Since 2004, the Pittsburgh think tank has, every three years, compared the erstwhile Steel City’s pertinent metrics with those of Salt Lake City, Utah; Columbus, Ohio; Charlotte and Omaha, Neb.

“These cities were selected for their varied size and role as a center of regional economic activity,” say Hannah Bowser, a research assistant at the think tank, and Eric Montarti, its research director (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 25*). “Collectively, they provide a benchmark for assessing the City of Pittsburgh’s relative performance.”

But many of the findings should be raising eyebrows.

To wit, Pittsburgh’s population has continued to decline while the benchmark city average has been climbing. Additionally, enrollment in Pittsburgh Public Schools, whose overall academic performance has been abysmal for years, was down by nearly 2,000 students between 2010 and 2018.

“With a total of 75,412 students in the benchmark city, Pittsburgh’s enrollment was lower by almost 70 percent,” the researchers note. “However, and more startling, Pittsburgh’s school enrollment was only 77 students per 1,000 residents compared to the benchmark’s 129 students per 1,000 residents, meaning Pittsburgh was 40 percent lower than the benchmark figure.”

Then there’s total city revenue per capita. In Pittsburgh, that figure, garnered primarily from taxes, was \$2,111 in 2018, 50 percent higher than the benchmark’s \$1,406.

“On a per capita basis, Pittsburgh’s total taxes were almost 70 percent higher than the benchmark city’s taxes (\$1,611 in Pittsburgh vs. \$953 in the benchmark city) and accounted for just over 76 percent of Pittsburgh’s total revenue,” Bowser and Montarti note.

“Overall, Pittsburgh’s tax contribution as a share of total city revenue was 8 percentage points higher than the benchmark’s share, indicating that Pittsburgh relies more heavily on taxes for revenue than its peer cities.”

Troubling, too, is the fact that Pittsburgh’s total expenditures per capita were 51 percent higher than the benchmark average, \$2,238 vs. \$1,478.

Additionally, Pittsburgh’s per capita debt service was 35 percent higher than the comparable average (\$269 vs. \$200) while capital outlay costs in the benchmark city average saw a 66 percent difference (\$185 vs. Pittsburgh’s \$62).

“Subtracting debt service and capital outlay costs puts Pittsburgh’s expenditures per capita at \$1,907 – a staggering 75 percent higher than the benchmark city’s expense of \$1,092 per capita,” Bowser and Montarti say. They remind that the figure was only 30 percent higher in 2005.

Among other findings in the Allegheny Institute’s updated analysis, Pittsburgh’s city employees per 1,000 residents was 47 percent higher than the benchmark average; its police and fire employees per 1,000 were 40 and 38 percent higher, respectively; its debt per capita in 2018 was 18 percent higher (though Pittsburgh’s has been falling while the comparable cities’ debt has been rising) and Pittsburgh’s revenue and spending have grown faster than its peers.

Thus, here’s the bottom line from Bowser and Montarti:

“(W)hile Pittsburgh has made notable strides in lowering its debt per capita, the city’s extraordinarily high levels of spending and taxation, along with its poor schools that depress enrollment, are major hindrances to generating population and business growth.”

Colin McNickle is communications and marketing director at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

*Op-Eds may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.
For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:
www.alleghenyinstitute.org*

<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
