



May 11, 2022

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

760 words

What Pittsburgh's population malaise portends

The population malaise in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) has been well-documented for decades. Yet iteration after iteration of political leaders and their acolytes have tried to “solve” the problem with political scheme after political scheme.

“In short, absent a shift to a much friendlier business climate, less labor conflict and domination of the public sector, lower-cost government and lower taxes, the Pittsburgh region is unlikely to share proportionally in the nation’s growth and fall further behind its counterparts across the country that are moving ahead rapidly,” says Frank Gamrat, executive director of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 18*).

Pittsburgh MSA’s population was 2.43 million in 2000. Its most populous county, Allegheny, had 1.28 million people or 53 percent of that population. Westmoreland County ranked second at 369,993, followed by Washington (202,897); Beaver (181,412); Butler (174,083); Fayette (148,644) and Armstrong (72,392).

By 2010, the MSA had lost 3.1 percent of its population, dropping to 2.36 million. Allegheny’s population fell to 1.22 million, losing 4.6 percent of its population over the decade. Only Washington and Butler counties gained population during this time, 2.4 and 5.6 percent, respectively. The others lost population: Armstrong (-4.8 percent); Beaver (-6 percent); Fayette (-8.1 percent); and Westmoreland (-1.3 percent).

The 2020 census showed a minor increase in the MSA population from the 2010 level. The new tally of 2.37 million represents a tiny gain of 0.47 percent over 2010. But that’s still 2.6 percent lower than the 2000 count. Three counties -- Allegheny (2 percent), Butler (5.4 percent) and Washington (0.6 percent) -- all posted increases while the others lost population.

But here’s the nub of the rub: The U.S. population grew by 9.7 percent between 2000 and 2010 and by another 7.4 percent from 2010 to 2020. The 20-year gain from 2000 to 2020 was 17.8 percent. Thus, the Pittsburgh MSA’s loss over the 20 years stands in stark contrast to the nation’s substantial growth.

The same holds true for comparable metropolitan statistical areas. Over the 2010- to 2020-period, the Pittsburgh MSA’s miniscule 0.47 percent population gain was dwarfed by MSAs associated with the institute’s benchmark.

“Charlotte grew the fastest at almost 19 percent followed by Salt Lake City (16 percent) and then Omaha (14 percent) and Columbus (13 percent),” the Ph.D. economist says.

And the Census Bureau's estimate of natural population change – births minus deaths – pinpoints a significant problem: The cumulative total for the years 2010-2020 shows the Pittsburgh MSA had 42,000 more deaths than births.

“Every other [comparable] metro clearly gained a substantial portion of their population growth through natural changes,” Gamrat says.

And while the Pittsburgh MSA had a net decline in the number of migrants (international and domestic), the other metros in the sample had positive gains over the decade.

As the Pittsburgh MSA population struggles to increase, the implications are many. “It will be more difficult to grow the economy, and jobs, with fewer people,” Gamrat says.

As the Allegheny Institute has pointed out, repeatedly, the core MSA City of Pittsburgh has an extremely high cost of government -- especially legacy costs and very high levels of employment compared to a comparable benchmark city. Those burdens are being borne by fewer people.

“Moreover, the seven-county region struggles under the weight of a poor business climate driven by state laws and regulations as well as heavily unionized public-sector work forces that add to the cost of public services,” Gamrat says.

The result? High tax burdens as governments and school districts across the Pittsburgh region scramble for money to pay for a government and/or school district that had been designed for a significantly larger population.

“This is not a problem that will be easily solved,” Gamrat reminds. “The state and area have not been very friendly to the business community and jobs are growing at a very slow pace. Jobs attract migrants, both domestic and international and keep people from leaving to seek employment elsewhere.”

Those relocating to the region will typically be young and have children.

“Migrants will not move to an area because there's a shiny new airport facility, spurs on a light-rail line or trails that circle the region,” Gamrat says, stressing that while they might enhance the quality of life, and at great monetary cost, “they are not a main draw for migrants; jobs and a welcoming economy are.”

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.

Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079
E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org
Website: www.alleghenyinstitute.org
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)