

### **Pittsburgh MSA population registers very little growth**

**Overview:** As the nation was dealing with the pandemic in 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau went about its business of collecting population data. This *Policy Brief* reviews the 2020 decennial data for the counties of the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and compares that to the 2000 and 2010 counts. It also looks at similar metro areas. This *Brief* examines natural population changes—births and deaths—as well as domestic migration and international migration trends.

---

#### *Pittsburgh MSA population changes since 2000*

In 2000, Pittsburgh MSA's population stood at 2.43 million. The MSA's 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 (-6.0 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 gain of 0.47 percent over 2010 but is still 2.6 percent lower than the 2000 count. Three counties: Allegheny (2.0 percent); Butler (5.4 percent) and Washington (0.6 percent) all posted increases while the others lost population.

Note that in comparison 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 MSA's loss over the 20 years stands in stark contrast to the nation's substantial growth.

#### *Natural population changes*

Natural population changes refer to the net number of births over deaths. From 2000-2009 there were 229,854 births recorded in the MSA but 258,848 deaths. The difference was a loss of 28,994 people to natural causes. In the second decade, 2010-2020 the number of births increased by 5 percent to reach 241,354. However, the number of deaths increased by a greater rate, 9.5

percent (283,356). Thus, the net natural population change was a loss of even more people (42,000).

Considering that 2020 was the first year of the pandemic and deaths were higher, they were not much higher than normal. In 2020, the Census Bureau estimated 29,221 deaths. From 2011 through 2019 the annual average was 27,551—a difference of 1,670. The number of deaths were higher in 2021 when 32,704 were estimated.

Births did not keep pace in either 2020 or 2021, with 22,676 and 21,866, respectively. The average from 2011 through 2019 was 23,614.

Keep in mind that these are just the annual Census Bureau estimates and may not necessarily match up with official population changes. But it indicates that, from natural processes, the Pittsburgh MSA's population was steadily declining.

### *International and domestic migration*

Since the Pittsburgh MSA population has not grown through natural changes, how did it fare with migration, both international and domestic?

The Pittsburgh MSA hasn't been very successful in attracting international migrants. In the first decade of this century, 2000-2009, only 19,792 international migrants were recorded as moving to the area. From 2010-2020, that number picked up a bit to reach 32,408—the bulk of these (19,481) coming between 2013 and 2017, averaging nearly 3,900 per year. In 2019 it began to slow down with fewer than 1,800 international migrants and, of course, in 2020 that number fell even further to 1,477 and then to 865 in 2021.

The analysis of domestic migration provided a much different challenge.

The challenge stems from the fact that the Census Bureau data is collected at the county level and not the MSA level. The data show that from 2000-2009, the counties that comprise the Pittsburgh MSA, in total, lost just over 52,000 residents to out-migration. But how many just moved from county to county within the MSA or completely out of the MSA?

For example, Allegheny County had domestic net out-migration every year from 2000-2008 averaging a loss of almost 6,700 people each year. In 2009 the county posted a positive in-migration of 400 people. Only Butler and Washington counties had domestic net in-migration every year from 2000-2009. But it wasn't enough to offset the losses in Allegheny and the other counties as Butler only averaged an in-migration of 812 people each year and Washington averaged 841. Armstrong, Beaver and Fayette counties had annual losses every year averaging -281, -618 and -228, respectively. Westmoreland had a mix of gains and losses with an average annual gain of 247.

The county out-migration did slow a bit in from 2010 through 2020 when only a total of 35,600 people were estimated to have left their respective counties. Allegheny County had positive annual counts early in the decade from 2010 through 2013 averaging 835 net domestic in-migrants. The domestic migration trend again turned negative each year thereafter with an average annual loss of 5,037. Again, Butler and Washington counties had net domestic in-migration during the decade, averaging an annual amount of 510 and 357, respectively. Once again Armstrong (-242), Beaver (-284) and Fayette (-371) had negative annual averages this time joined by Westmoreland (-336).

Thus, it is safe to say that since most of the counties in the MSA suffered domestic out-migration losses that far out-paced the counties with in-migration totals, a large number of people left the MSA entirely, contributing to the loss of population in the first decade and the lackluster gains in the second.

*Comparisons to other metro areas*

For perspective on the Pittsburgh region’s scant population growth, this analysis compares the Pittsburgh MSA to the populations of the MSAs associated with the benchmark city the Allegheny Institute has used to evaluate the economic and financial performance of the City of Pittsburgh over the last 16 years beginning with Institute *Report. No. 2004-05*. The comparison cities in the benchmark are Charlotte, Columbus, Omaha and Salt Lake City. To keep the comparisons straightforward, only MSA counties that are in the same state as the city were included. This eliminated three counties for both Charlotte and Omaha as these metros straddled two states.

The Pittsburgh MSA includes seven counties. Without the three South Carolina counties, the Charlotte MSA also includes seven counties. The Omaha MSA, without the three Iowa counties, covers five counties. The Columbus MSA is the largest at 10 counties and Salt Lake City the smallest MSA covering just two counties. Results are in the table below.

<b>MSA</b>	<b>2010 Population</b>	<b>2020 Population</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Pittsburgh	2,356,285	2,367,293	11,008	0.47
Charlotte (NC only)	1,881,147	2,234,808	353,661	18.8
Columbus	1,901,974	2,141,042	239,068	12.6
Omaha (NE only)	742,205	845,982	103,777	14.0
Salt Lake City	1,087,873	1,259,517	171,644	15.8

In 2020, the Pittsburgh MSA was still the largest metropolitan area in this five MSA group. But both Charlotte and Columbus have significantly closed the gap. It is very likely that by the next official census, each will have surpassed Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh MSA’s growth of 0.47 percent is woefully short of the others. Charlotte grew the fastest at almost 19 percent followed by Salt Lake City (15.8 percent) and then Omaha (14 percent) and Columbus (12.6 percent).

From the Census Bureau’s estimate of the natural change (births minus deaths) shows an area that is a problem for the Pittsburgh MSA. As noted above, the cumulative total for the years 2010-2020 shows the Pittsburgh MSA had 42,000 more deaths than births. Every other metro gained a substantial portion of their population growth through natural changes: Charlotte (110,863); Columbus (116,863); Omaha (62,708) and Salt Lake City (117,736).

While the Pittsburgh MSA had a net decline in the net number of migrants (international and domestic), the other metros in the sample had positive gains over the decade. Charlotte and Columbus each added more migrants on net to their population than they did through natural changes. Salt Lake City and Omaha added a substantial number of net migrants as well.

*Summary and implications*

The population estimates are not encouraging for the Pittsburgh metro area. As the population struggles to increase, the implications are many. It will be more difficult to grow the economy, and jobs, with fewer people. As the pandemic waned, many businesses began the process of adding employees attempting to return to normal, and unfortunately, many have found that to be a very difficult task. The lack of population growth is an undeniable factor. Note that many areas (see *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 17*) have far surpassed pre-pandemic employment levels, all of which have enjoyed sustained increases in population.

As has been pointed out many times, the core MSA City of Pittsburgh has an extremely high cost of government—especially legacy costs and very high levels of employment compared to the 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. The result is 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. 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.

The region witnessed this process in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. 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. They might enhance the quality of life, at great monetary cost, but are not a main draw for migrants; jobs and a welcoming economy are.

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.

---

**Frank Gamrat, Ph.D., Executive Director**

---

*Policy Briefs 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](mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Website: [www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)