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Population and employment change in the Pittsburgh Metro Area

Introduction: This *Policy Brief* reviews the population and employment changes in the eight-county Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) over the period 1970 to 2024 and from 2000 to 2024. The review includes a look at changes for the eight-county total and for each of the eight counties.

For comparison purposes, it also reviews the population and employment changes over the same periods for the United States as well as for Mecklenburg and Wake counties in North Carolina.

In short, the region has fallen far short in all comparisons. The Pittsburgh MSA's eight counties include Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Lawrence (newly added in 2025), Washington and Westmoreland. Population data and 2024 estimates are taken from the U.S. Census Bureau. Employment data are from the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics.

Pittsburgh MSA 1970 to 2024

The eight-county region suffered a loss of 437,000 people (rounded to nearest thousand) from 1970 to 2024, a decline of 15.3 percent. Population losses varied widely among the eight counties. Allegheny was hit hardest with a loss of over 373,000 (-23 percent). Five other counties in the MSA also had losses: Armstrong (-16 percent), Beaver (-21 percent), Fayette (-20 percent), Lawrence (-22 percent) and Westmoreland (-7 percent).

Meanwhile, in a stark contrast, Butler's population rose 71,000 or 56 percent over the period. Washington's population was essentially the same in 2024 as in 1970. It was down slightly through 2000 but has since regained those losses. Absent Butler's strong growth the region would have seen a loss of more than 500,000 people since 1970.

Pittsburgh MSA and county population changes

<i>County</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>2024</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>% Change</i>
Allegheny	1,605,133	1,231,814	-373,319	-23.3
Armstrong	75,590	63,679	-11,911	-15.8
Beaver	208,418	165,540	-42,878	-20.6
Butler	127,941	199,341	71,400	55.8
Fayette	154,667	123,941	-30,726	-19.9
Lawrence	107,374	84,233	-23,141	-21.6
Washington	210,876	210,434	-442	-0.21
Westmoreland	376,935	350,735	-26,200	-6.9
MSA Total	2,866,934	2,429,717	-437,217	-15.3

It is also worth mentioning that the City of Pittsburgh has lost 213,000 people (-41 percent) since 1970's count of 520,000 and had a much greater drop since the peak reading of 677,000 reading in 1950. It now stands at just over 303,000, less than half its 1950 level.

Obviously, the City's loss has greatly impacted the Allegheny County population count and the region's total.

While Allegheny remains the second largest Pennsylvania county in terms of population, its losses, along with major declines in most of the other counties in the region, have significant implications for employment totals and demand for services such as air travel and mass-transit use.

MSA population changes 2000 to 2024

Since 2000, the MSA has lost another 96,200 people or 3.8 percent of its population. Again, the loss was led by a decline of 50,000 (-3.9 percent) in Allegheny. Fayette had the second largest drop at 24,000 (-16.7 percent), followed by Westmoreland at 19,300 (-5.2 percent). Over the 24-year period Armstrong (-12 percent), Lawrence (-11 percent) and Beaver (-8.7 percent) continued their long-term declines. However, Butler continued its long-term gains, posting a pickup of 25,300 (14.5 percent). Washington's population also rose by 7,500 or 3.7 percent.

Meanwhile, the City of Pittsburgh posted a net loss of 32,300 or 9.6 percent to fall to just over 303,200 from 335,600 in 2000. All numbers are rounded to the nearest 100.

Again, the City's loss was a major factor in Allegheny County's declining population and, to a lesser extent, the MSA total since it is much smaller now than in 1970.

Comparisons with U.S., Mecklenburg and Wake counties

Population changes by area

<i>Area</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>2024</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>% Change</i>
Pittsburgh MSA	2,866,934	2,429,717	-437,217	-15.3
Mecklenburg County	354,700	1,206,300	851,600	240
Wake County	229,000	1,213,000	984,000	430
U.S.	204.9 million	340.2 million	135.3 million	66

From 1970 to 2024 the U.S. population rose 66 percent from 204.9 million to 340.2 million. This contrasts sharply with Pittsburgh MSA's 15.3 percent decline. Between 2000 and 2024 the U.S. population climbed 21 percent from 2000's 281 million count. Again, these increases are a far cry from the population losses posted in the Pittsburgh MSA with the decrease of 3.8 percent with six counties down and two higher.

<i>Area</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2024</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>% Change</i>
Pittsburgh MSA	2,525,917	2,429,717	-96,200	-3.8
Mecklenburg County	700,460	1,206,300	505,840	72
Wake County	633,207	1,213,000	579,793	91
U.S.	281 million	340.2 million	59.2 million	21

Meanwhile, Mecklenburg County (home of Charlotte) recorded population growth of 240 percent between 1970 (354,700) and 2024 (1,206,300) and 72 percent from 2000 (700,460) to 2024. Wake County (home of Raleigh) posted a 430 percent rise in residents between 1970 (229,000) and 2024 (1,213,000) and saw an increase of 91 percent between 2000 (633,207) and 2024.

Job changes

Such rapid increases are obviously not driven by natural gains (births minus deaths); there has been massive in-migration to both these counties. And that reflects the growth in jobs and job prospects. For example, people employed in Wake rose 79 percent from June 2000 to June 2024. In Mecklenburg, over the same period, the number employed climbed 69 percent.

Contrast those figures with Allegheny's employment loss of 2.4 percent over the 2000 to 2024 period and Beaver's loss of 7.7 percent. Butler, with its population growth of over 14 percent, also managed to increase the employment count by 12.4 percent during the time frame. Similarly, Washington posted an 8 percent employment gain along with its population increase.

In short, both MSA counties with population gains since 2000 had employment increases, although not necessarily by the same percentage. Likewise, all six counties with population declines had accompanying employment losses over the last 24 years.

Conclusion

The obvious question about the vast differences in population and employment growth—or loss—between the Pittsburgh MSA and the North Carolina counties is: Why such enormous disparity? Obviously, a major factor was the loss of industry jobs in Pennsylvania during the period as a result of a massive increase in imports and movement of manufacturing to other states.

The other ongoing hindrance factor is that the business climate in Pennsylvania with strong labor unions, including public sector unions, is not attractive compared to Right-to-Work states. Public-sector unions are especially powerful politically and they have little worry about job losses because of compensation and workplace-rules demands. Pennsylvania is one of only a handful of states that allow public sector unions to strike.

Moreover, Pennsylvania is one of only five states that does not mandate regularly scheduled property assessments. Over time, massive inequities in property taxation develop. And since property taxes are high due to having three taxing bodies (school district, county and municipality), any inequities in assessments get magnified. Then, too, the core City of the Pittsburgh MSA has very high government costs per capita and its schools, with a few magnet school exceptions, are poor in terms of academic achievement test scores. None of which enhances migration into the city.

Washington County has benefited significantly from the presence of Marcellus Shale gas development. But the region needs to be able to attract business. And that means lower taxes, less regulation and a far more friendly business environment.

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