

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Debunking Demographic Hype in the ‘Burgh**

Giddy editorial writers at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette nearly hyperventilated recently upon learning the City’s median age had declined from 35.5 years in 2000 to 33.2 years in 2010. As they portrayed it, the reason for the significant decline in the median age was a 7,642 increase in the number of people aged 20 to 24 and a nearly 13,000 person drop in the over 65 population. The editorial lauded the decadal shift in age opining that new stadiums and other attractions around the City are finally paying big dividends.

But the paper’s enthusiasm is misplaced as a more thorough look at the population changes will show. First of all, taking comfort in the median age shift is very questionable when the City suffered its sixth straight decade of population decline, losing 28,859 people in the 2000 to 2010 period. Second, for the median age to decline from 35.5 years to 33.2 years, the number of people under age 35 must have risen compared to the population over 35.

Here’s what happened in Pittsburgh. The population under age 35 fell by 5,545 while the population over 35 fell 23,314, about four times as much as the younger age group. Little wonder the median age slid. The point is population fell for both the below 35 group and the over 35 group. Moreover, the details of the population declines by age group point to reasons to be very concerned rather than elated.

Consider the decade change in two very key age groups, the under 15 years of age bracket and the 35 through 54 years of age bracket. The under 15 population count tumbled by 14,535 youngsters. The 35 to 54 population fell 18,068 over the ten year period.

The drop in the younger age brackets bodes ill for school age populations over the next five years. Absent a very large and highly unlikely influx of 10 to 14 year olds into the City, the number of children of high school age will slide by roughly 6,000 compared to the ten year earlier figure. Similarly, the number in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade age bracket will drop by nearly 6,000. Finally, the K through 4<sup>th</sup> grade age group will fall by 2,498 resulting in a net loss of school attendees. Absent a dramatic turnaround in these youngest age groups, Pittsburgh’s school age population overall is headed much lower in the coming decades.

In 2010, the under ten age group had 8,476 fewer people than in 2000, a 23 percent drop. Two explanations are possible. Either the birth rate fell significantly or parents with young children moved out of the City—or some combination of both. The evidence suggests there was substantial out-migration. For instance, the under 5 age group in 2000 had 17,607 children. In 2010, those children, now in the 10 to 14 age bracket, numbered only 12,848, a loss of almost 5,000. And, while a small number might have been lost unfortunately to mortality, the near 5,000 drop points very strongly to out-migration of families with children. This pattern dates back several decades as indicated by the substantial enrollment declines in City schools.

Here's a key finding regarding the growth in the 20 to 24 age group that has aroused so much interest. In 2000, the City's population in the 10 to 14 bracket was 18,907. In 2010, there were 42,212 in the 20 to 24 age bracket, a gain of 23,305. That is possible only if many thousands of people in this age group have come into the City. And of course, given the presence of several large universities and colleges, we know that must be the case. Indeed, college enrollment continues to expand in Pittsburgh.

Meantime, many, but an unknown number, of Pittsburgh natives who are now in the 20 to 24 age group are away at school or in the military or have left for other reasons. So, the 23,305 figure is a net of the inflow less the outflow. But the key point here is that the City's current population of 10 to 14 year olds is 6,000 below the 2000 figure. That means if college and university enrollment stays about the same, and the number of Pittsburghers going away to school or the military, etc., stays the same, the age group 20 to 24 will experience a drop of 6,000 by 2020. Or said another way, to maintain the current count in the 20 to 24 group, enrollees, or in-migrants for other reasons, will have to rise by 6,000.

Now consider what has happened in the two age brackets 35 to 44 and 45 to 54, crucial age groups as parents of school age children, property owners, income earners and contributors to the community and its tax base. As noted above, these two groups experienced a combined decade population drop of over 18,000, or 20 percent. Again, out-migration appears to be a major factor in this decline. In 2000, there were 48,860 residents in the 25 to 34 age bracket but ten years later in 2010 there were only 31,990 in the 35 to 44 age group, a loss 16,870 people or 35 percent. Of course, some of the loss is mortality related. Absent off setting in-migration, every age group will lose population between census periods due to deaths. Inevitably, a cohort will be smaller as 35 year olds than it was ten years earlier as 25 year olds. However, for the 25 to 34 age group a 35 percent cohort decline in ten years cannot be exclusively or even principally due to mortality rates. So out-migration must have been a very important determinant of the huge fall off in the numbers of people aged 35 to 44 between 2000 and 2010.

Similarly, but not as dramatic, the movement of folks from the 35 to 44 bracket in 2000 to the 45 to 54 bracket resulted in a loss of 8,976 people. While we cannot say for sure absent detailed mortality calculations, it appears likely that much of the loss of this age cohort was related to out-migration.

Hefty population losses in the 35 to 54 age group portend further declines in the 45 and older brackets over the next ten years. The City simply must find a way to counter these losses in order to maintain and grow its tax base. Moreover, the City's shrinking population in its youngest age groups points to serious problems in retaining families and suggests difficulties in the decades ahead in maintaining its population. Bringing in college students is great and the colleges provide jobs in the City. However, unless the age groups who are out of school, working and bearing much of the tax burden are being maintained or growing, Pittsburgh is in trouble for all its nice amenities, ball parks, etc.

Pittsburgh will continue to rely heavily on folks in the region for attendance at the sporting events and at other entertainment venues as well as commuters who pay parking taxes, local service taxes and amusement taxes. It will rely heavily on property taxes paid by commercial properties, the payroll preparation tax, which both depends on a lot of commuters to generate current revenue levels. But, a City that is unable to keep or increase the number of people in age groups other than college and graduate school age must quickly figure out what it is doing wrong.

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