

THE ISSUE: Allegheny County's Population Crisis

Summary: Allegheny County and the entire Pittsburgh region is suffering from a population crisis that is unprecedented anywhere in the U.S., and how the community deals with it will have an impact for decades to come.

Candidate Responses | Allegheny County Executive Race

What one or two specific steps would you take in your first year to help address the declining population in Allegheny County? *

Joe Rockey: Allegheny County can only reverse its population loss by becoming what it was for so many of our parents and grandparents: a beacon of economic opportunity that draws industry here from across the country and from around the world. As employment opportunities expand in our region, population growth will follow.

Sara Innamorato: A few things I will do that will make a huge difference are. 1) Attract several multi-billion-dollar investments in high-tech manufacturing facilities, creating hundreds of new union jobs making the things that will make us competitive in the new global economy. 2) Make significant investments in housing accessibility and affordability to help us get back to being a place where a young family could afford to buy a home and thrive here. 3) Improve our air and water quality and health outcomes. Who wants to move their family to a place in the top 1% for cancer risk in the country? People have choice and mobility, and we have to compete with much cleaner, safer places to live. 4) Meaningfully invest in our main streets and small business economy.

* Candidate responses from May 1, 2023, Pittsburgh Works questionnaire

Background: There is no place suffering from population decline in the United States quite like Allegheny County and the Pittsburgh region, according to a **Pittsburgh Works** analysis of census data. In the decades since the great industrial collapse and outmigration of the 1970s and 80s, the region has seemingly become desensitized to the issue. So much so that the unprecedented nature of our challenge has gone largely unnoticed.

The Pittsburgh region is an example of where much of the country is headed, with an aging population and migration flows to the South and the West. We have just arrived here sooner.

Chronic declining population can have an impact on the economy, government services, and quality of life. There is no model of how to deal successfully with the challenge. If the Pittsburgh region is to prosper in the future, we will have to discover the answer ourselves.

To understand the magnitude of the problem, we must start with the basics. Population change is driven by two components:

- How do annual births compare to annual deaths?
- How many people move into an area compared to how many leave?

Among the country's 50 largest metro regions, Pittsburgh is the only one with a central urban core county (Allegheny) where deaths outnumbered births between 2010 and 2020. This is a legacy of the outmigration of the 1970s and 1980s when families left the region looking for jobs. The children and grandchildren that otherwise would have been born here are instead living in Charlotte and Houston and elsewhere.

But the problem does not end at the Allegheny County border. **Each of the other six counties in the metro region¹ also experienced more deaths than births during the decade, a combination not seen anywhere else in the country.**

Between 2010 and 2020, 42,000 more people died in the Pittsburgh region than were born, more than the combined populations of Uniontown, Greensburg, and Butler.

Among the Top 50 metro regions, there was only one other where deaths outnumbered births in the decade: Buffalo, which suffered a gap of just 1,600.

Those numbers point to another trend unique to the Pittsburgh region: The shrinking of the outlying suburban/rural counties.

There were three Top 50 markets where the central urban core county lost population in 2020: Cleveland (Cuyahoga), Detroit (Wayne), and Milwaukee (Milwaukee.) In each of those markets, nearly all the outlying counties grew during the decade, providing a buffer against the shrinking core.

Allegheny County does not have that luxury. Two-thirds of the outlying counties in the Pittsburgh MSA lost population between 2010 and 2020, with only Butler and Washington enjoying enough in-migration to offset their death rate.

¹ The seven-county Pittsburgh MSA as previously defined by the federal Office of Management & Budget (Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington, Westmoreland.) Lawrence County was added to the Pittsburgh MSA on July 1, 2023, but is not included in any of the "regional" analysis unless noted.

This is a phenomenon unlike anywhere else in the county. There are 358 outlying suburban/rural counties that are included as part of the 50 largest metro regions as defined by the federal Office of Management & Budget. Only 59 of them lost population during the decade.

Four of the Pittsburgh’s six outlying counties landed on that list, and all of them were among the counties with the largest population loss.

| Suburban/Rural Counties with Greatest Population Loss, 2010-2020 | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Among 50 Largest Metro Regions | | | |
| Region | County | Population Loss | % Change |
| St. Louis | St. Clair County, IL | -12,656 | -4.7% |
| Pittsburgh | Westmoreland County, PA | -10,506 | -2.9% |
| Pittsburgh | Fayette County, PA | -7,802 | -5.7% |
| New York City | Sussex County, NJ | -5,044 | -3.4% |
| Charlotte | Anson County, NC | -4,893 | -18.2% |
| Chicago | DeKalb County, IL | -4,740 | -4.5% |
| Buffalo | Niagara County, NY | -3,803 | -1.8% |
| New Orleans | St. John the Baptist Parish, LA | -3,447 | -7.5% |
| St. Louis | Madison County, IL | -3,423 | -1.3% |
| Memphis | Marshall County, MS | -3,392 | -9.1% |
| Pittsburgh | Armstrong County, PA | -3,383 | -4.9% |
| Hartford | Tolland County, CT | -2,903 | -1.9% |
| St. Louis | Macoupin County, IL | -2,798 | -5.9% |
| Memphis | Crittenden County, AR | -2,739 | -5.4% |
| Detroit | St. Clair County, MI | -2,657 | -1.6% |
| Pittsburgh | Beaver County, PA | -2,324 | -1.4% |
| New York City | Putnam County, NJ | -2,042 | -2.0% |
| New Orleans | St. James Parish, LA | -1,910 | -8.6% |
| Virginia Beach | Gates County, NC | -1,719 | -14.1% |
| Indianapolis | Madison County, IN | -1,507 | -1.1% |

The seven-county Pittsburgh region grew by 0.6% between 2010 and 2020, lagging far behind Pennsylvania’s 2.4% growth and the U.S. overall growth of 7.4%. It was the third-slowest rate among the Top 50 markets.

And if the most recent census estimates are to be believed, Pittsburgh is among the major metros that have lost population since 2020, alongside places such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Baltimore.

This list underscores the greatest challenge facing the Pittsburgh region: In each of those other places, all or most of the population loss is from more people leaving than arriving.

If those shrinking places can find a way to convince people to stay by lowering taxes, or fighting crime, or offering more economic opportunity, or providing a better quality of life, they can reverse the trend.

In Pittsburgh, according to census estimates, 94% of the population loss is a result of people simply dying off.

Combatting this demographic trend is far more difficult. You need to attract people, including younger people and families who in turn will raise children here.

Consider Detroit and Wayne County. Between 2010 and 2020, so many people left the county – more than 77,000 net decline – that the county would have shrunk by more than 4%. But because of the birth rate of the remaining residents, most of those departures were offset by new babies.

Contrast that to Westmoreland County. More people moved to the county than left in the last decade. But because of the overwhelming number of deaths, the county's population shrunk by nearly 3%.

If there is one glimmer of hope, it's possible that the current census estimates are not as bad as they appear to be.

In the years leading up to the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau estimated that Allegheny County had shrunk during the decade, not attracting enough new residents to offset the birth-death imbalance.

But when the 2020 numbers came out, Allegheny County had gained population for the first time in 60 years.² According to a **Pittsburgh Works** analysis of census data, rather than seeing a net decrease of 3,800 from people moving out, the county welcomed 35,000 net new arrivals,³ more than offsetting the number of deaths.

Still, it's impossible to ignore that Allegheny County and the Pittsburgh region face a uniquely challenging population crisis. If policy makers cannot reverse the trends, then they will have to develop plans to deal with a shrinking but aging population and a smaller economy.

No one has spent more time studying the region's population trends and their significance than Chris Briem, a regional economist with Pitt's Center for Social & Urban Research. Earlier this year [he tweeted](#):

² <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/news/allegheny-county-gains-population-for-first-time-in-six-decades-says-census-20001909>

³ The net migration numbers are determined by subtracting the birth-death (natural change) estimates for 2010-2020 from the population totals from the 2020 Census.



chris briem @chrisbriem · May 18



This new book is REQUIRED READING for absolutely every public official across southwestern Pennsylvania! I've talked repeatedly about the need for policies that build prosperity without population growth, but Alan **Mallach** will explain it better than me:



governing.com

Shrinking Towns and the Riddle of Resurgence

It's not easy to get a smaller city that's been losing population growing again. Every town can't be a high-tech hub. But an urban scholar has ...

The book is *Shrinking Cities in a Shrinking World: Learning to Thrive Without Growth* by urban scholar Alan Mallach. In it, he writes:

I will explore what these forces mean for the future of shrinking cities in the United States and the challenges they will face...How will a country for which growth has always been central to its identity accept the reality of population loss, of becoming a smaller country?

*The **Our County. Your Vote. Allegheny's Future** initiative is designed to call attention to the pressing issues that face the residents of Allegheny County and the next county executive.*

***Pittsburgh Works Together** is a nonpartisan business-organized labor-workforce-economic development alliance working to grow jobs and expand the industries that are the foundation of our economy, including energy, manufacturing, and construction, to provide opportunity for all residents.*

Ken Zapinski
Director of Research & Public Policy
ken@pghworks.com
412-352-4364