

Population continues to shrink, Census data shows

 By Michael Korsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

ALLEGHENY COUNTY

For the second year in a row, Allegheny County experienced one of the nation's sharpest decreases in population, continuing an overall decline in Western Pennsylvania that poses risks to the region's economic development as it recovers from the pandemic.

According to new Census Bureau data released late last week, Allegheny County lost a total

of 7,780 residents in 2023, one of the 10 largest population losses experienced by U.S. counties between April 2022 and July 2023.

"A lot of folks get very upset about this. But a lot of this is baked in — it's been baked in for decades," said Chris Briem, a regional economist at the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research.

While the trend is significant for the region, experts caution that the county's shrinking population is part of an ongoing demographic change, not a sudden mass exodus.

Western Pennsylvania has steadily lost residents after marquee industries left the region in the 1970s. And according to Alan Mallach, a leading expert in regional revitalization and a senior fellow at the Center for Community Progress, stagnating population has become a dominant trend

across the nation and globe.

"There's not a whole lot of net population growth out there. And for what there is, it's concentrating in these South, Midwest, Southwest and Northwest regions," said Mr. Mallach.

In addition, Mr. Briem pointed to the county's aging population as a driving force of the ongoing shrinkage. Consider: Allegheny County saw more than 1,700 deaths than births this year, the new data shows.

"You can't get around the fact

that being an older region, we suffer from natural population decline. It's not something you can change," Mr. Briem said.

Along with the natural population shifts — the Census Bureau's term for births and deaths — nearly 6,000 residents migrated away from the county last year, which indicates a lack of economic opportunity in the area, local experts say.

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ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette photos

Twins Eliza and Abby Vucic, of Arlington, Va., hug Pittsburgh Penguins mascot Iceburgh during the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Downtown on Saturday.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY AFFAIR

Traditional Downtown gathering proves to be 'a party' for young and old alike

 By Evan Robinson-Johnson
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Despite its reputation as a rowdy, boozy affair, this year's St. Patrick's Day parade on Saturday mostly was full of family-friendly shenanigans.

Take, for example, the Bryan family. They walked from their South Side home to Downtown in matching green top hats, looking forward to "having a good time," said Tina Bryan, who was accompanied by her husband, Mike, and son Michael.

Tim and Maria Campbell, of Pittsburgh, brought their two little ones, with a pair of sound-dampening headphones for 7-year-old Nolan. "He's excited, he just doesn't like sound," Ms. Campbell said.

The shamrock-filled celebration of Ireland's patron saint meant different things to

different folks.

"But for all of us, it's a party," said Rob Tierney, this year's parade grand marshal. He walked the 1.5-mile Downtown route with his mother, who flew in from Ireland to surprise him.

"When I came here [23 years ago], I knew nobody," Mr. Tierney said. "So to be able to come out here and celebrate with my Irish brothers and sisters is so amazing."

His favorite part of the parade was turning from Grant Street onto the Boulevard of the Allies, where walls of celebrants shouted cheers and begged for beads. "It's just epic," he said.

Pittsburgh's parade, said to be one of the largest in the country, got its start in 1950. This year's version included some 200 bands, floats and organizations and drew

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A parade participant unicycles during the St. Patrick's Day celebration on Saturday.

Area districts considering elementary consolidation

 By Megan Tomasic
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Morgan Mihok was considering moving back to Moon, she knew she wanted to live in a neighborhood that would allow her children to attend Hyde Elementary, a small school in a suburban neighborhood.

But now, Ms. Mihok is one of many parents worried about their children's futures as the Moon Area School District considers closing the school and moving students to another elementary building, leading to concerns about class sizes, resources provided to children and transportation.

"I moved here because I wanted them to be part of this community and so we were all very sad," Ms. Mihok said.

Moon is considering the change in response to expected growth in secondary

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

Historic church getting long-awaited renovations

 By Jordan Anderson
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Lionel Cooper doesn't just attend the weekly dinners at Downtown's First Presbyterian Church for the food. Often, it's for the people.

He spent several years living on Pittsburgh's streets. He remembers wandering up and down Grant and Smithfield streets at night sometimes because he was afraid something bad would happen to him if he fell asleep.

This place always felt safe, and though he has more stability now in an apartment, he hasn't stopped attending the weekly event. Mr. Cooper sees the volunteers as a kind of family, especially after losing his mother, and he knows others feel the same.

"They know they can come here, they can relax, they can feel like they're safe, they get some of the necessities that they need," he

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Crescent community mourns as probe in fatal explosion continues

 By Megan Guza
and Jacob Geanous
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

David and Helen Mitchell were fixtures in Crescent — the type of people who just radiated kindness, neighbors say. As the close-knit community continues to grapple with the loss, investigators will work to piece together what exactly happened Tuesday morning that found the Mitchells' home standing one moment and obliterated the next.

The explosion on Riverview Road killed David, 89, and Helen,

87, and rocked the small township of about 2,500. The tragedy, friends say, has left a hole in the neighborhood along the Ohio River where the couple lived for decades.

Through years of community get-togethers and gatherings, those who lived in the orbit of the Mitchells' log cabin recall the warmth and sense of community the couple helped to cultivate.

For Patti Kastriba, who grew up on Riverview Road, the elderly couple felt like a second set of parents.

"You feel like running away from home, you run to the Mitch-

ells," Ms. Kastriba, 68, said. "And if something happened, we were all there to help each other out. These people who are here have been here for ages."

Ms. Kastriba, who described the couple as caring, loving and thoughtful, said a void has been left in the wake of the blast so powerful it knocked photos off the walls of nearby homes, including her own.

"It's kind of almost an emptiness," she said. "You think that they're going to be there forever, that we're all going to be there

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Tim Robbiano/For the Post-Gazette

A massive explosion left two people dead and leveled a home in Crescent on Tuesday morning. The blast in the 1400 block of Riverview Road was "absolutely extreme," township fire Chief Andrew Tomer said, and reverberations rocked nearby homes and businesses for miles.

County population drops sharply for second year

CENSUS, FROM C-1

“When you look at the large employers in Allegheny County, you’re left with the universities and the government. And they’re not drawers for people living in other states,” said Frank Gamrat, the executive director of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, a conservative think tank focused on regional development.

Mr. Gamrat said Pittsburgh’s politicians need to take a much more business-friendly approach to economic policy, such as lowering the corporate net income tax rate and conducting more frequent property reassessments.

He cited South Carolina, which has seen a 15% increase in employment since 2019, as a state whose economic policies are cited by experts as reasons for the state’s explosive growth.

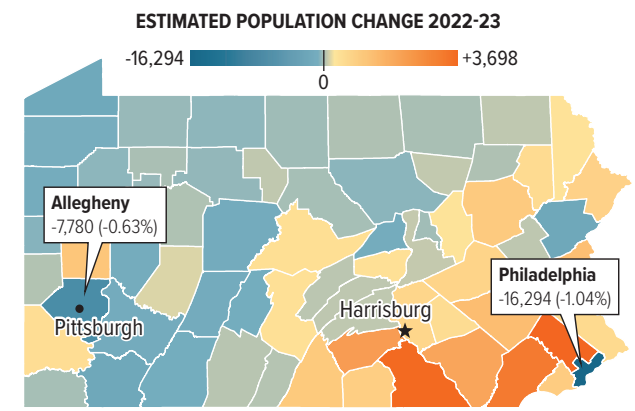
“Your population is what fuels your labor force. And when the labor force starts to decline, so does the economic engine of the area,” he said.

In her January inaugural address, Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato referred to the region’s stagnating population as “real and urgent,” and stressed the need to make the county more immigrant-friendly.

“We’ve known for decades that we need to grow our population, but we still have one of the smallest immigrant populations of any

Western Pa. counties see shrinking population

New data from the Census Bureau shows Allegheny County once again experienced some of the steepest population declines in the country. The county saw a decrease of 7,780 residents from 2022 to 2023, while the Pittsburgh metropolitan area saw an overall drop of 9,807 residents.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division

Research: Michael Korsh
Graphic: Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette

major city,” she said in the address.

Ms. Innamorato’s office declined to provide further comment on any proposed policies to support that goal. Mayor Ed Gainey’s office also declined to comment.

Despite the region’s continuously bleeding population, this year’s data indicates the losses may indeed be slowing: Allegheny County lost more than 12,000 residents in 2022, compared to nearly 8,000 last year.

The change represents just a 0.63% drop in population; the county has shrunk by nearly 2% since 2020.

“To see that the loss is not as significant over the previ-

ous year, hopefully some of the pandemic disruption that happened is settling down a bit,” said Jim Futrell, vice president of market research at the non-profit Allegheny Conference on Community Development.

COVID-19 created massive volatility in urban centers, many of which are still struggling to rebound from surges in violent crime and office vacancies.

Overall, the Pittsburgh metropolitan area lost nearly 10,000 residents last year, a 0.4% decrease in population, according to the new data. Other metropolitan areas, including New

Allegheny County experienced second year of top-10 population declines

TOP 10 COUNTIES IN ANNUAL NUMERIC DECLINE: JULY 1, 2022 TO JULY 1, 2023

COUNTY	JULY 1, 2022 POP. EST.	JULY 1, 2023 POP. EST.	NUMERIC DECLINE	PERCENT CHANGE 2022-23
1 Los Angeles County, Calif.	9,719,765	9,663,345	-56,420	-0.58%
2 Kings County, N.Y.	2,589,531	2,561,225	-28,306	-1.09%
3 Queens County, N.Y.	2,278,558	2,252,196	-26,362	-1.16%
4 Bronx County, N.Y.	1,381,808	1,356,476	-25,332	-1.83%
5 Cook County, Ill.	5,111,566	5,087,072	-24,494	-0.48%
6 Philadelphia, Pa.	1,566,836	1,550,542	-16,294	-1.04%
7 Orange County, Calif.	3,150,372	3,135,755	-14,617	-0.46%
8 Allegheny County, Pa.	1,232,605	1,224,825	-7,780	-0.63%
9 Wayne County, Mich.	1,758,942	1,751,169	-7,773	-0.44%
10 San Diego County, Calif.	3,277,176	3,269,973	-7,203	-0.22%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division

Research: Michael Korsh, graphic: Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette

York, Los Angeles and Chicago, also hemorrhaged tens of thousands of residents last year.

Meanwhile, some suburban counties like Butler experienced a rare influx of new residents — a trend in recent years that’s believed to be fueled in part by a migration of people from Allegheny County.

Last year, Butler added more than 1,000 people, while its overall population has swelled by 2.23% since 2020, the data shows.

According to Mr. Futrell, a bleeding population can pose risks to the region’s tax base, home resale values, job recruitment and other key economic drivers. As a result, the Allegheny Conference has developed new initiatives they hope will create attractive conditions for economic growth.

The conference’s “backyard strategy” — focusing on growing existing companies in Western Pennsylvania — was devised in part from data that shows that more than two-thirds of business investment activ-

ity comes from within the 10-county region, rather than outside employers.

“Job creation tends to feed on itself,” said Mr. Futrell. “If you get a reputation as a region where you can build a career — not just get a job, but build a career — that’s going to serve as a draw for people.”

Mr. Futrell also lauded key provisions in Gov. Josh Shapiro’s economic development strategy, unveiled in February — such as streamlining the state’s notoriously difficult permitting process — which he said will act as a catalyst for job growth.

“We’ve just not been competitive with our surrounding states, in terms of, if a company wants to set up here, here’s what we can do to assist you,” he said.

To Mr. Mallach, a former director of housing and economic development in Trenton, N.J., much attention has been devoted to reversing population declines, but local officials should instead focus more heavily on issues such as quality of life and fostering the region’s human capital.

“The real issue is not how to get back on the growth train, but how to figure out how a place like Allegheny County can thrive without growth,” he said.

Mr. Briem, of the University of Pittsburgh, agreed that managing local infrastructure to account for the region’s shifting population will be much more critical than curbing natural population declines.

The fragmentation of Western Pennsylvania’s local governments, he added, could pose much more sweeping consequences to regional economies that need to better work together.

“When you have a local municipality that is suffering from population decline, they probably do have acute issues — and trying to have them plan for a future is difficult if they have to rely on their own resources, and aren’t integrated into sort of a larger regional plan,” Mr. Briem said.

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ST. PATRICK’S DAY PARADE DRAWS REVELERS OF ALL AGES

PARADE, FROM C-1

thousands into the Golden Triangle.

John Mastriano said he loves the parade, even though he’s mostly Italian. He’s been selling chartreuse T-shirts, toy dogs and shamrock beads at the parade for close to 30 years.

“Even if I wasn’t a vendor I’d still be here,” he said.

Formal festivities kicked off about 10 a.m. at Liberty Avenue and 11th Street with a mounted brigade, Civil War re-enactors, and bagpipers — exactly a dozen distinguished musicians in the first of many cohorts.

Ryan Praskovich has been playing bagpipes in the parade since he was 10. And that was 20 years ago, when his father led the Pittsburgh firefighters’ band.

“I’m basically reliving my youth,” he said after finishing off a lime-flavored Jell-O shot. “It’s a beautiful day, so what more could you ask for?”

The day was marred somewhat by an accident that occurred when a 3-year-old girl was struck by a city police motorcycle at the intersection of Stanwix Street and the Boulevard of the Allies. Witnesses said the girl jumped out of her stroller and into the path of the motorcycle about 1:30 p.m., after the parade had concluded.

Police said the girl was bruised but didn’t appear to be seriously injured. She was taken to UPMC Children’s Hospital for evaluation, according to Pittsburgh Public Safety officials.

One of the mysteries of the day was whether Punxsutawney Phil, the famous Pennsylvania groundhog,



Spectators cheer Saturday during the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in Downtown.

Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette photos

would make an appearance. “I don’t want to miss him,” said one fan as she dashed into a Dunkin’. “I haven’t seen him yet,” said a security guard just outside.

And as the hours progressed, hope of a celebrity sighting drained. Organizers later confirmed that the herald of spring failed to make this year’s lineup, though the exact reason — stage fright? — remained a mystery.

Far more certain were the local mascots and royal court, led by this year’s Miss Smiling Irish Eyes, Madalyn

Byrnes. Beaming with a bouquet of white flowers while she waited to mount a horse-drawn carriage, Ms. Byrnes said she was honored to represent her heritage on such a large stage. “It means a lot,” she said.

The day brought its share of weirdness, too: inflatable T-Rex dinosaurs draped in Ireland’s orange, white and green; an army of Ghostbusters; and a lime-green Santa with a pickup truck for a sleigh. Toward the back of the line, a dozen unicyclists had waited since 8 a.m. to make their mark. By noon

they still hadn’t crossed the starting line, but spirits were high.

“I could do this all day,” one adept balancer boasted.

At the signature bend in the parade route at the Boulevard and Grant Street, a group of pro-Palestinian demonstrators added their flag to the mix, playing drums and a piccolo in their call for a cease-fire in the war

with Israel in the Gaza Strip.

Closer to the start, Bob Kearns was wearing a kilt and had sprayed his white beard orange and green, giving friends who opted for more tame looks a hard time. He was critical of his own appearance, too, however.

“We were rushed today,” the 81-year-old said. “This [stuff] didn’t go on right.”

Step dancers and color guards helped to keep the energy high, coaxing a jig from onlookers including 74-year-old Patrick Bennett, who may be German but still likes to dance. Besides the dancers, Mr. Bennett said his favorite part were the dogs. And that was still hours before the gaggle of corgis waddled by.

Maddy, a 3-year-old black Newfoundland, was a big hit with the college students. She wore a glamorous green collar with the word “Lucky.”

For Dillon Bickerton, the plan for the day was simple: “Drink. Meet people. Experience life,” the 24-year-old said, his lederhosen costume held together with packing tape. After a cold and chaotic introduction to Pittsburgh’s signature Irish event last year, Mr. Bickerton was grateful to have a game plan and some sunshine at this year’s parade.

Mr. Tierney, the grand marshal who works for the Ireland Institute of Pittsburgh, said there’s no reason the celebration had to end on Saturday.

“For most of these people,” he said, surrounded by a group of fraternal brothers joined by their heritage, “this is a 365-day life thing.”

He encouraged people to join one of Pittsburgh’s 40-plus Irish organizations, whether arts, culture, dance or sport.

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Jack Weigel, 4, and his brother George Weigel, 7, of Munhall, hand out beaded necklaces while marching with City of Pittsburgh firefighters during the St. Patrick’s Day Parade.



Sara Brison, of Kittanning, and her corgi, Lexy, 6, wave to parade spectators from the Tri-State Corgi Gathering float during the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in Downtown.