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Flight and Blight

Pennsylvania Senate Urban Affairs Committee

Many Pennsylvania communities have seen population loss over the past 60 years. As a result, the tax base of communities has decreased, and poverty and blight have increased. Other Pennsylvania communities have been able to reverse their population loss and see increased economic opportunity.

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Table of Contents

Background	2
Population Dynamics	2
Effects of Urban Flight	6
Summary & Conclusions	8
Strategic Priorities.....	9
Process	9

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Background

Over the last several decades, many urban cores around Pennsylvania have experienced population loss, or “urban flight.” In most cases, the flight is the movement of city-dwellers to the suburbs. This may be in response to urban problems such as crime, traffic congestion, noise, or pollution, or simply come from a desire to live in a less densely populated environment. After World War II, movement to suburbs across the country accelerated for several reasons, including increasing rates of car ownership, preference for a suburban lifestyle, and a trend toward homeownership, due in part to incentives offered as part of the G.I. Bill. In the middle of the 20th century, the term “white flight” described a pattern of suburban migration of middle-class white families to suburbs, sometimes due to racial prejudices and/or as a response to civil unrest in urban areas.

In many American metropolitan areas, urban population decline peaked between the 1960s and 1980s. Since that time, population patterns among cities have varied. Economic conditions appear to be a key predictor of population change.

Population Dynamics

An analysis was conducted of Pennsylvania’s 20 largest cities (ranked by population). The cities included municipalities with populations of about 20,000 and above. Between 2000 and 2012, the 20 cities saw virtually no change in their total population, compared with a 3.41 percent increase statewide. Thus, population is growing at a faster rate outside of cities than within cities in Pennsylvania. As a result of this shift, Pennsylvania’s largest cities account for about 21.7 percent of the state’s population down from nearly 22.5 percent in 2000.

Population Growth		
	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	20 Largest Cities in PA
Total Population (2000)	12,281,054	2,757,828
Total Population (2012)	12,699,589	2,758,168
Population Growth (2000-2012)	3.41%	0.01%
Percent of Pennsylvania Population in 20 Largest Cities in 2000:		22.46%
Percent of Pennsylvania Population in 20 Largest Cities in 2012:		21.72%

Source: PolicyMap

This evaluation does not demonstrate a clear pattern of growth or decline. Population change in the time period analyzed ranges from a loss of over 12 percent (Johnstown) to an increase of more than 10 percent (Allentown). Thus, it is important to note that each city in Pennsylvania

has unique circumstances that contribute to its population dynamics as well as its economic and social characteristics.

Population Change (2000-2012) by City for the 20 Largest Cities in Pennsylvania	
Pennsylvania as a Whole	3.41%
Allentown	10.61%
Altoona	-6.24%
Bethlehem (Northampton Cty. portion)	2.10%
Bethlehem (Lehigh Cty. Portion)	6.29%
Chester	-7.40%
Easton	2.37%
Erie	-2.19%
Harrisburg	0.61%
Hazleton	8.18%
Johnstown	-12.26%
Lancaster	5.07%
Lebanon	4.23%
New Castle	-11.48%
Philadelphia	0.54%
Pittsburgh	-8.41%
Reading	8.28%
Scranton	-0.52%
State College	9.34%
Wilkes-Barre	-3.85%
Williamsport	-4.12%
York	6.82%

Source: PolicyMap

Even the cities with the largest population declines in the table are experiencing population loss at a slower rate than in the past. For example, Harrisburg saw a population decline of nearly 22 percent between 1970 and 1980. Almost all cities studied experienced a peak rate of population decline sometime between 1950 and 1990. Thus, urban flight is not currently manifesting itself in the form of overall population loss in Pennsylvania’s cities. Rather, population growth in cities is uneven and lagging behind the Commonwealth as a whole.

A class of smaller cities was also analyzed to provide a more complete picture of urban flight. Pennsylvania is home to numerous smaller cities that serve as regional hubs and face urban issues despite a relatively small population size. Data for small cities (defined as boroughs and cities that have a population between 10,000 and 20,000 as of the 2010 census) are presented

in the tables below. The 40 small cities experienced a total population decline of about two percent between 2000 and 2012.

Population Growth		
	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	40 Small Cities
Total Population (2000)	12,281,054	551,311
Total Population (2012)	12,699,589	540,249
Population Change (2000-2012)	3.41%	-2.01%
Percent of Pennsylvania Population in 40 Smallest Cities in 2000:		4.49%
Percent of Pennsylvania Population in 40 Smallest Cities in 2012:		4.25%

Source: PolicyMap

Among the small cities, there is an even greater variation in population change. The change from 2000 to 2012 ranged from declines of over 15 percent (Uniontown, Wilkinsburg, McKeesport) to growth of over 20 percent (Coatesville, Wyomissing). Of the 40 cities examined, 60 percent had a loss of population, while 40 percent saw their population increase.

Though Pennsylvania’s cities are not subject to an ongoing major population loss on the whole, growth and decline of population is uneven and for some cities and towns and population decline over the years has been significant. A number of cities have already begun to reverse the trend and are seeing notable increases in population, such as Allentown, Reading, State College, and Hazleton.

Population Change (2000-2012) by City for 40 Small Cities (2010 Population 10,000 – 20,000)	
Pennsylvania	3.41%
Baldwin	-1.4%
Berwick	-2.8%
Bloomsburg	18.0%
Butler	-8.7%
Carlisle	4.2%
Coatesville	20.2%
Columbia	1.0%
Darby	3.4%
Dunmore	0.4%
Elizabethtown	-2.6%
Emmaus	-0.4%
Ephrata	1.6%
Franklin Park	18.5%
Greensburg	-6.3%
Hanover	5.4%
Hermitage	0.6%
Indiana	-5.8%
Jefferson Hills	10.5%
Kingston	-4.9%
Lansdale	1.3%
Lansdowne	-3.7%
Lower Burrell	-6.7%
McKeesport	-17.3%
Meadville	-2.3%
Munhall	-7.0%
Nanticoke	-4.5%
New Kensington	-10.5%
Oil City	-8.4%
Phoenixville	11.1%
Pottsville	-7.9%
Sharon	-13.9%
St. Marys	-9.7%
Uniontown	-16.1%
Washington	-10.1%
Waynesboro	9.9%
West Chester	4.5%
Whitehall	-3.5%
Wilkesburg	-16.5%
Wyomissing	22.1%
Yeadon	-2.4%

Source: PolicyMap

Effects of Urban Flight

Though urban blight and other issues can be a cause for urban flight, they are also increased by the loss of population and wealth. The result is a cycle of urban distress.

This movement of people also moves wealth, and it causes socioeconomic decline called urban decay. One end result is a high concentration of poverty in urban centers. This then leads to urban blight as properties fall into disrepair due to vacancy, low rates of homeownership, and absentee ownership. While this situation of urban decay may make more housing affordable, the fall in housing values and exit of higher income households decreases the tax base and strains social services and urban school districts. Low income residents lack the financing to maintain already declining homes which lead to eventual vacancies due to both foreclosures and poor maintenance by property owners. These new residents are less likely to participate in the community or own a home. In a worst-case scenario, low-income communities are left devoid of resources such as good schools, libraries, infrastructure, and police forces; and face increasing social problems like teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and high crime rates. Higher income and higher skilled workers leave an area and industry leaves. This relationship also works in reverse. The decrease in the demand for labor creates a spatial mismatch between jobs and workers leading to unemployment in segregated areas. The decreased spending of lower income residents also leads to a decreased retail presence leading to further unemployment. Low tax base and failing infrastructure can do little to generate new sources of employment and social service infrastructure need to have resources to use and improve the community.

The decades of population loss that have affected almost all cities have not been without serious consequences. Pennsylvania's 20 largest cities have a poverty rate double that of the Commonwealth as a whole. In 2012, the civilian unemployment rate was in excess over 13 percent compared to 8.5 percent statewide. Educational attainment is also lower in the larger cities. The residential vacancy rate is higher and the homeownership rate is lower.

Poverty & Unemployment		
	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	20 Largest Cities in PA
People in Poverty (2012)	1,604,464	695,462
Percent in Poverty (2012)	12.63%	25.21%
Civilian Unemployment Rate (US Census Bureau 2012)	8.5%	13.3%

Source: PolicyMap

In smaller communities, the unemployment rate and the poverty rate were also higher than the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This demonstrates that the population loss problem affects communities regardless of their size and status.

Poverty & Unemployment		
	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	40 Small Cities
People in Poverty (2012)	1,604,464	87,596
Percent in Poverty (2012)	12.63%	16.21%
Civilian Unemployment Rate	8.5%	8.8%

Source: PolicyMap

Similarly, vacant housing is higher than the Commonwealth average while owner occupied housing is less than the Commonwealth. Higher education attainment is also a challenge. This correlates to the higher poverty levels.

Housing & Education		
	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	20 Largest Cities in PA
Total Housing Units (2012)	5,563,832	1,228,590
Vacant Housing Units (2012)	10.9%	13.2%
Owner-Occupied Housing Units	62.5%	44.7%
For Population Age 25+ :		
At Least High School Diploma	88.29%	81.35%
At Least Bachelor's Degree	27.05%	22.66%

Source: PolicyMap

In Pennsylvania's smaller cities, a relatively low rate of homeownership is again a challenge, although there is a nominal difference in vacant housing. Educational attainment in the smaller cities lags a bit behind the Commonwealth as well, particularly in the proportion of residents with at least a bachelor's degree. In the small cities, this proportion is even lower than the 20 largest cities, probably due to a higher presence of white-collar jobs in Pennsylvania's largest cities.

Housing & Education		
	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	40 Small Cities
Total Housing Units (2012)	5,563,832	249,339
Vacant Housing Units (2012)	10.9%	10.3%
Owner-Occupied Housing Units	62.5%	54.2%
For Population Age 25+		
At Least High School Diploma	88.29%	84.05%
At Least Bachelor's Degree	27.05%	21.72%

Source: PolicyMap

For the cities that have begun to increase in population, this change has not necessarily resulted in increased wealth or decreasing poverty, however. Urban flight often results in lower property values and significant stocks of unutilized housing. In some cities in Pennsylvania, migrants from other states and countries make up a large portion of population growth. For most cities, a key challenge moving forward will not be how to attract population to the city, but how to attract wealth and economic activity.

Urban blight is one progenitor to gentrification. Gentrification can usually be identified as a renewal of urban areas with higher income residents and increased economic activity. When a community undergoes gentrification, average incomes increase, average family size decreases and poorer residents tend to be displaced by wealthier newcomers. Local governments tend to favor gentrification due to the higher tax revenue generated by higher-income residents.

Summary & Conclusions

- Population growth in Pennsylvania’s 20 largest cities is flat and underperforms the Commonwealth as a whole.
- Small cities, on average, fare worse – the 40 cities and towns analyzed saw a total population loss of two percent between 2000 and 2010.
- Population change is highly uneven. Some cities are still experiencing significant population loss while others have reversed course and are now growing at a steady pace.
- For most cities, population loss peaked decades ago, but the lingering effects of urban flight remains in the form of urban decay or blight.
- More than population growth is necessary to ensure the health and stability of urban cores. Cities should not measure success by population size. Distressed communities must attempt to attract wealth and economic activity.

- Many of the areas on the decline are older industrial areas in southwest, northwest and northeast Pennsylvania where unemployment rates tend to be higher. Many of the cities experiencing population growth are in the southeastern and south-central portions of the state.

Strategic Priorities

The key to community revitalization lies in creating economic opportunity and wealth. Job growth is critical. New job opportunities help to attract new talent. The strategies should include business attraction, expansion, or even creation and will vary by community based on the individual communities' strengths. New job growth paves the way to increased stability for local government which allows government to improve public services and public safety. Redevelopment opportunities increase as governments increase their financial stability and allow for redevelopment or blight removal in key business districts or neighborhoods. Economic growth in communities also helps school districts improve programming and opportunity to enhance educational outcomes. The quality of the school districts play an integral role when families choose where to live. Strong educational outcomes and innovative programming elevate the attractiveness of urban schools. Further, individuals that are more educated earn more income, reduce the poverty level and increase the economic wealth in the community. It is important to note that there is an interdependency amongst all the strategic priorities.

Process

Successful urban renewal strategies have several elements in common. One course of action will not work in every community. Communities that engage all stakeholders – government, business, non-profit, institutional, and individual residents have the most success. Community visioning followed by community planning sessions provide the opportunity for stakeholders to engage in the goal setting and establishing strategic priorities. This planning process also encourages other stakeholders to collaborate with each other and government and direct resources to the problem solving. Government's responsibility is to ensure that the environment conducive to economic growth is in place. A review of zoning, planning, permitting, other ordinances, infrastructure, and public services helps to ensure that the strategic priorities can be achieved. Government is also responsible for taking the lead in creating the toolkit. For example, access to federal and state programs, formation of land trusts, land banks, and redevelopment authorities are examples of the tools. Leaders in non-profit sectors can assist in the formation of business improvement districts and other support programs. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to leverage resources. One by one,

the community elements can be addressed. These include, but are not limited to blight removal, redevelopment/rehabilitation of properties, business development, improved public places, parks and green space and even the development of entertainment or hospitality districts. The strategic plan will determine the priority and the specific strategies to achieve the goals in each area. Communities such as Detroit are working to improve the city block by block using a similar approach.