

The nemesis of population decline

The recent announcement by the U.S. Census Bureau that Rhode Island was one of only two states (New York being the other) to lose population between July 1, 1994 and July 1, 1995 should come as no surprise. After all, according to Census estimates, we have been losing population for each of the past five years and now have 15,000 fewer residents than we had on July 1, 1990.

On April 1, 1990, the nation's twenty-first decennial census, there were 1,003,464 residents of the state recorded, an increase of 56,310, or 5.1 percent, from that of 1980. This was the first time that Rhode Island topped the one million mark and ranked us forty-third largest in the country. And on July 1 of that year, the month that the census makes its annual estimates of state populations, we had increased by 2,000, to an estimated 1,005,000.

What caused this drop of 15,000 to 990,000 on July 1, 1995 from the 1,005,000 of July 1, 1990? Was it a drop in the number of births? Was it an increase in the number of deaths? Or did people simply move out of the state?

To answer this question, consider the three year period from April 1, 1990 to July 1, 1993 in which the Census Bureau estimated that we declined by 3,000. There were 49,000 births and 32,000 deaths during that time in the state which meant that there should have been an increase of 17,000. Added to that was the excess of 6,000 more immigrants than emigrants and 1,000 more federal workers from abroad, so that there should have been an increase of 24,000 during the period.

Births, deaths and migration numbers are recorded but how do we determine the movement in and out of the state? Using these numbers and such indicators as electric hookups and shutoffs to get the original estimate of the total population (which in this case is a loss of 3,000 yet with an expected increase of 24,000) means that there were 27,000 more people who left the state than moved in. So the loss in population over the five year period is a direct result of people leaving the state to move to other parts of the country. Nearby Massachusetts and Connecticut as well as North Dakota were the only other states to lose population during this time.

So who are these people that leave the state?

The Census Bureau also makes estimates of the ages of the population, starting with the known numbers gathered from the detailed count of the population on April 1, 1990. For example, from that date to July 1, 1993 it was estimated that there was a loss of 3,452 residents in the state, yet four of the five age groups showed an increase in numbers.

The pre-school age group, under 5 years, was larger by 3,474; the school age population, 5-17, was larger by 4,565; the older working population, 45-64, was larger by 3,391; and the biggest increase in numbers over that three year period was the elderly, 65 and older, 4867. In other words, the dependent population of pre-school,

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school and elderly, combined with the older working and early retired population, was larger by 16,297, yet, our total population declined by 3,452.

Those last two numbers combined, represent the total decline of 19,749 for the one group that showed a loss for the three year period — the age group from 18 to 44! Although there were gains for some single ages within this group, the baby boomers, and losses as a result of the baby bust generation, as a group this working age population was smaller by nearly 20,000.

It is the loss of this younger, working part of the population that is most troubling, for they are the more energetic, better educated and career searching part of the population that often comes up with creative ideas and business starts. And

being most mobile, they move to seek out jobs.

It is true that these census numbers are based on estimates and could be off-track but there is the image problem. When we read that North Dakota has now gained population over the past two years as has Massachusetts, and Connecticut has gained over the past year, we have to ask what is wrong here?

Rhode Island has been a consistent loser of its people over the past five years — no other state can claim such a dubious distinction. Further, the numbers indicate that we are losing some of the most productive age groups of the population while the dependent age groups are increasing in numbers. All of this another cause for concern as we look to the future of the state and its economy.

Creating jobs is the single most important and difficult measure to retain certain segments of the population and to again be on the plus side of population change. It is not easy to do, but it must be of major concern if we hope to maintain the generally high living standards that most Rhode Islanders enjoy.

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