

Where did they all go? R.I. population still shrinking

Just how accurate are the U.S. Census Bureau estimates of the population, done every year between the actual count of population done every ten years? Well, we should soon be able to make comparisons of the recently released estimates for 1999 and the actual state totals when they are released at the end of this year, and when city and town figures are released April 1, 2001, exactly one year after the census of 2000

The recently released census estimates for July 1, 1999 are that Rhode Island now has a popula-

tion of 990,819, down by 12,645 from the 1,003,464 recorded in the census of 1990. Only two other states lost population according to these estimates: North Dakota lost 5,134 and Connecticut lost 5,085, but Rhode Island has the dubious distinction of ranking 50th with its population loss of 12,645 and 50th in percentage of population loss at 1.3 percent. How does one explain this, given the growth in South County and the continuing revival of our capital city?

The first thing to consider is that we are located in a slow

growth region of the country. According to these 1999 census estimates, the Northeast (the six New England states, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania) is the slowest growing part of the nation at 2.0 percent, with two New England states losing population.

Within Rhode Island our cities continue to lose population: 1998 estimates, for example, are that Providence lost over 10,000 people. Some of these folks have opted for the beaches and rural settings of South County and new arrivals to the state have also found homes in that area which is concerned about its 18 percent growth. But overall, the state has more than 12,000 fewer residents than it did nine years ago. What has happened here?

With a tight job market in the early 1990s and Rhode Island unemployment above the national

average, this younger population left the state to look for jobs.

With younger people moving out, the remaining population ages in place. So now one in six persons in the state is 65 and older, making us the third oldest state in percentage of old people.

It would be a real surprise if the Census Bureau estimates are too far off from what the actual count will be, especially since the state is coming in at a loss of population.

Should this be the case, that Rhode Island be one of only three states in the country to record a loss of population over the decade, maps over the next ten years will depict this state with a distinctive color that sets us apart from 47 others as a population loser.

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