



## Michigan birth rate down 21 percent since 2000

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**Rick Haglund**



Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids Press

Mary Wieber, of Grand Rapids, holds her newborn daughter, Avery, in the maternity ward at Metro Health Hospital on Friday. Statistics show Michigan birth rates are down by 21 percent since 2000. But births at Metro are up more than 5 percent in its fiscal 2009 year compared to 2008, a spokeswoman said.

Whenever my wife and I go to a restaurant, a street art fair, or other public event, one of us inevitably observes that there seems to be a bounty of babies these days.

In fact, the social highlight of my early summer was attending a birthday party for my neighbors' 2-year-old son, where babies were crawling around like ants at a picnic.

Kurt Metzger noticed the same thing during Memorial Day weekend. But while his eyes told him "it seemed like there were babies everywhere," his numerical mind knew his eyes were deceiving him.

Metzger, a veteran demographer and director of Data Driven Detroit, says Michigan births have been falling precipitously over the past decade, tracking the decline in the state's economy.

Combine fewer births with the fact that Michigan leads the nation in out-migration and we're faced with the prospect of a slack economy for years and maybe decades to come.

Metzger calls it a "double whammy for a state that is clamoring to retain its talent and its tax base."

Not only is the state experiencing a brain drain, it's not creating enough new brains that will someday start new businesses, innovate new products, produce new jobs, stimulate the economy with their spending and pay taxes.

There were 121,231 babies born in Michigan in 2008, according to new state figures. That's a decline of 21 percent from the 153,080 births recorded in 2000.

For a little additional perspective, 208,488 babies were born in the state in 1957, the height of the post-World War II baby boom. There truly were babies everywhere in those days.



Metzger says the decline in births during the past decade belies the conventional wisdom that young people leave Michigan after high school or college and return when they are ready to raise their families.

"I think it harkens to the ideas that we've lost a lot of younger people in their child-bearing years," he told me. "They're leaving and they're staying wherever they end up."

Declining births also pose serious challenges for the state's public school system.

Closing schools and merging districts will be inevitable in future years, Metzger says.

"We have too many school districts for the number of kids we've got," he said. "It's ridiculous the way we're operating."

Michigan has several options to reduce its shrinkage of births and population.

It can attract young people of childbearing age and others by improving the economy and the overall desirability of living in Michigan.

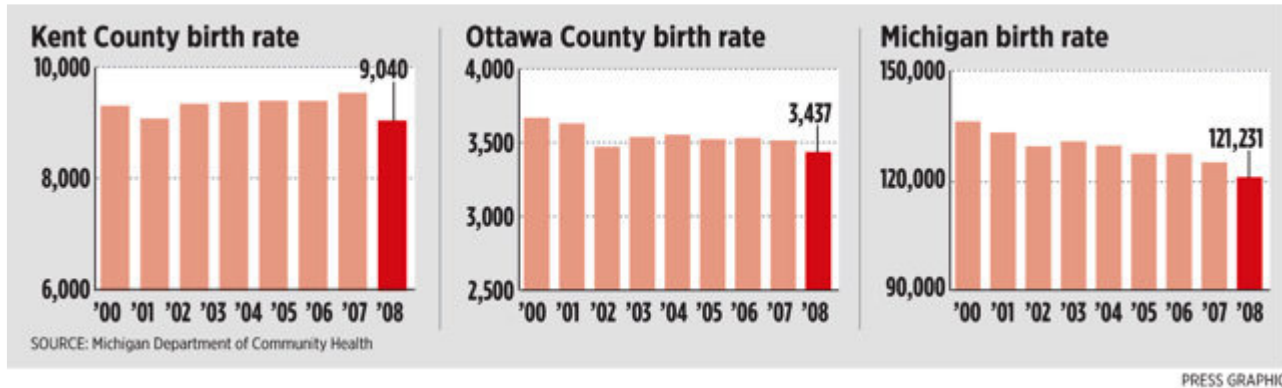
Some experts, including Metzger, say Michigan should undertake an aggressive effort to attract more foreign immigrants, as well.

Metzger says foreign immigrants tend to have higher birth rates than U.S.-born citizens. And contrary to popular notion, immigrants coming to Michigan are well educated and entrepreneurial.

A recent study by Global Detroit, a pro-immigration group, found that immigrants started one-third of all new high-tech companies in Michigan from 1995 to 2005.

And immigrants began new businesses at three times the rate of native-born residents in the state between 1996 and 2007, the study found.

Of course, there's one more way Michigan can increase the number of new residents: Those of childbearing age could get more productive in the bedroom.



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