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Census to reveal Detroit's decline

City's population may fall below 800K as suburban shift moves to Macomb

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Later this week, Detroiters will get a cold dose of reality: They're not No. 11 anymore.

When the U.S. Census Bureau releases detailed counts for Michigan cities, townships and counties, it looks as though the city's population will plummet nearly as much as it did in the 1970s, with several demographers predicting an official count below 800,000. If so, the now-11th largest city in the country will surely fall to 14th, possibly 15th — even down to 16th, below Columbus, Ohio.

The steady decline, revealed first in emptying neighborhoods and falling enrollment in the Detroit Public Schools, will be officially documented just as Mayor Dave Bing embarks on yet another plan to revitalize the city.

Limited data on race, ethnicity and age will be released for the state, counties, school districts and municipalities, as well as at the census tract and block level. The information will allow legislators to craft new congressional districts, with Michigan forced to trim a district.

More detailed demographic information will be released later this year.

Census data for most states has already been released, and they have shown substantial growth for the cities nearest Detroit in size: Austin, Texas, grew by a fifth, and Columbus, Ohio, and Jacksonville, Fla., added 10 percent. Meanwhile, perhaps the best bellwether for Detroit may be the 17 percent drop seen in Cleveland.

If Detroit sees a similar plummet, it will hit just less than 790,000 people.

But that decline won't necessarily reflect the fate of the city, said Xuan Liu, manager of the data center for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

"I truly believe that smaller doesn't mean worse and bigger doesn't mean better," he said.

Shifting trend

What the data will likely reveal is an update on a well-worn path to the suburbs. Decades after mostly white residents flowed out of Detroit and into the suburbs, tens of thousands of African-Americans followed them in greater numbers than before, to places like Southfield, Oak Park and western Oakland County.

In the 2000s, the migration shifted east, to Macomb County.

African-Americans, many from Detroit, made the move, taking advantage of housing costs lowered by the foreclosure crisis and the weakened economy. The 2000s saw substantial movement into southern Macomb County — the black population of the county was 8 percent in 2009, up from just 2.7 percent in 2000 — as the black population more than tripled.

Many moved into the once nearly all-white communities of Warren, Roseville and Eastpointe. The driving force was the drop in the cost of housing in the region, said SEMCOG's Liu. Indeed, in Eastpointe the number of rental units leased by African-Americans jumped from 60 in 2000 to more than 1,600 in 2009.

In 1970, just 129 of Warren's 179,246 residents were black. Now it is home to more than 14,000 African-Americans, more than 10 percent of the population, according to 2009 data.

"Eight Mile is no longer what it used to be," said Kurt Metzger, a demographer and director of Data Driven Detroit, a nonprofit that analyzes and collects data to help area leaders in future planning. He said he hopes long-time residents do not fear the changes and see the transformation as part of a nation trend that is affecting much of the region.

"You can't change the dynamics," Metzger said. "You can either cover your head and pretend it's not happening... or you can acknowledge the changes and make the best of it."

Demographer William Frey of the Brookings Institution called these migrants "another generation of blacks" who are more educated and more aware of their options than their predecessors. "The city (Detroit) doesn't look attractive (to them) anymore."

Some see gains

For many, the decision to uproot and move was based on the simplest things, Metzger said. "You feel safer, you get better services, you get better access to food, to employment," he said.

Despite the anticipated losses in Detroit and a number of other communities, there will likely be bright spots. SEMCOG has estimated that Livingston and Washtenaw counties have experienced healthy gains since 2000 and that communities like Macomb and Canton townships had huge gains, adding more than 30,000 and 15,000 people, respectively.

The data also will show that Detroit's challenge of its population losses produced only a mythical — and temporary — victory. After the census estimated the city's population at 871,121 in 2006, it appealed, saying the census hadn't taken into account new construction, including the addition of hundreds of loft units.

The Census Bureau agreed and added 47,728 people, to 918,849.

Now, after that same agency employed thousands to go door-to-door counting noses is likely to indicate that number was too high and that the city lost, on average, more than 10,000 people a year, most of whom are African-Americans who have decided they can move into once-segregated suburbs.

After 40 years as the most segregated big city in America, the changes may prove the biggest revelation of the 2010 census.

"It says something that even Detroit is changing," Frey said.

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