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Assessing the District's Population Loss

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The District's population declined an estimated 65,100 from 1990 to 1996. During the same period, it also lost 17,000 households. These losses continue a trend that has persisted in the District since 1960, and it is a trend that has been common for many older central cities that are ringed by suburbs. The decline is often portrayed as a flight to the suburbs by city residents who are fleeing bad schools, crime, taxes, or other features of central cities. The evidence to support such conclusions is mixed at best. This paper explores the ways in which population loss occurs and reaches conclusions about the significance for District policies.

How Population Decreases Occur

When assessing the District's population decrease, it is important to understand two features of population loss. First, it is not a matter of 65,000 identifiable District residents leaving the city. At any given time there are both people moving out and people moving in. In fact, an estimated 34,000 households moved into the District from 1990 to 1996. Population decreases occur because residents leaving the city are replaced by fewer people moving in. Second, except for the homeless and those in institutions, residents are part of households that consist of a single person or several persons, related or unrelated, living together. Each household must occupy a dwelling unit.

When we put these two features together, it is apparent that most population loss occurs under four circumstances:

1. A household moves out of a housing unit and no household moves into the permanently vacated unit. This decreases the population by the number of persons in the household that moves out.
2. A household moves out of the city, but the household moving into the vacated housing unit is smaller than the one leaving it. The result is a net decrease in the population of that unit, but no change in the number of occupied housing units in the city.
3. A household moves out of the city, but there is a delay in the replacement household moving into the vacated housing unit. This causes the inventory of unsold houses and unrented apartments to increase. As a result there is a temporary decrease in the number of households and a resulting temporary decrease in population.
4. A household does not move, but a person in the household moves out or dies.

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient information available to determine the extent to which each of these factors was responsible for the population decrease from 1990 to 1996, but some data suggest what may have happened. The loss of 17,000 households probably resulted in about that number of

vacant housing units. The Census Bureau's Housing Vacancy Survey reports that the District's vacancy rates increased from 2.4 percent to 3.5 percent for homeowners and from 7.7 percent to 13.4 percent for rentals between 1990 and 1996. The data do not differentiate units that are permanently vacated from those that are expected to be reoccupied.

The average household size in the District decreased by 0.11 persons from 2.27 persons in 1990 to 2.16 persons in 1996. While this is a small decrease, it accounts for about 25,500 of the population loss. What the data do not show are the exact causes of the smaller family size. Information from tax returns shows that those moving in from 1989 to 1996 reported an average 1.45 persons per return, while those moving out reported 1.75 persons per return. Over that same period, households that did not move may have increased or decreased in size.

Policy Implications

For the District's public policy, it makes a big difference which of these circumstances caused the population decrease. Population decreases that occur because of the failure of the District government to meet its responsibilities for government services signal a need to change those policies. However, population losses that occur for natural reasons unrelated to the government should not cause concern. Not all types of population loss are harmful to the city. A closer examination of the effects of each factor causing losses suggests that much of the loss may not be caused by government policies and may not be harmful to the city.

Vacated Dwelling Units

Permanently vacated dwelling units that reduce the number of households may be caused by units that are undesirable for continued occupancy. Some housing is old and in bad physical condition, with conditions such as substandard plumbing, leaking roof, or non-working heating system. Other units may be vacated because of an unacceptable environment, such as a nearby drug market or adjacent vacated housing. In some instances, the unit could have intentionally been left vacant to permit its demolition and conversion to a non-residential use.

The households leaving substandard units would usually have low incomes. Housing units that become permanently vacant are not usually occupied by middle income residents.

Population losses resulting from abandonment of substandard units should be addressed by the construction or rehabilitation of housing units to replace those that are lost. In some parts of the District, the reduction in housing units may be desirable because it reduces density in congested neighborhoods. In these instances, the vacated units could be replaced by new housing in other parts of the city that are not over congested.

Smaller Households Moving In

The second reason for population loss, a small household replacing a larger one, has been characterized as typical of many central cities and is not necessarily the result of public policies. Young unmarried or childless couples frequently move into a central city to enjoy the urban environment. As they marry and have families, they move to the suburbs to get open spaces and larger housing units.

Families may also move to get better schools. However, because the household is replaced by another smaller one, there will be an overall loss of population only if the proportion of smaller households increases relative to all households. While the District may want to enact policies to retain larger households, such as improving schools, such measures may not overcome the natural demands to move from congested urban neighborhoods to obtain more space for growing families.

Temporary Vacancies

An increased inventory of temporarily vacant, but habitable, housing units may result initially from environmental conditions, such as bad neighborhoods or poor city services that discourage potential homebuyers. Over the longer term, however, market forces will reduce the inventory as sale or rental prices are reduced to realistically reflect market demand. While population losses for this reason may reflect failures in the ability of the government to maintain an attractive environment and may have a depressing effect on property values, the population losses are likely to be small and temporary.

Decreased Family Sizes

Decreased family sizes of households that do not move seldom reflect any circumstances that should be seen as harmful to the District or caused by public policies. The population loss may be attributable to a child leaving the city to attend college or take a job in another city. When an elderly person's spouse dies, there is no reason to see the loss as attributable to city policies or damaging to the city's social structure.

Conclusions

The District population has decreased in complex ways that are not easy to measure or interpret as to reasons or consequences. We can speculate about how and why decreases occurred, but a lack of data makes it impossible to identify the exact characteristics of the decrease. Nevertheless, it appears that much of the decrease may have been unrelated to the District's policies or services and that in some instances less population may have been beneficial to the city.

From a public policy viewpoint, the first priority should be getting better information about the characteristics of population changes occurring in the city. For example, the District should monitor on an annual basis the net changes in occupied dwelling units by geographical areas. This information should reflect the number of abandoned units and the number of replacement units, as well as changes in the number of units temporarily vacant. Information about changes in family sizes should be determined by comparing data from personal income tax returns, food stamp applications and other government sources.