

Baltimore's population decline a puzzling development

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) April 5, 2017



Some folks are scratching their heads around Baltimore. They – and I include myself among them – were getting used to the notion that the city's decades-long population decline had finally abated. Indeed, we had seen a few glimmers of a slight uptick since the 2010 census.

Then we were jolted by a recent headline in the Baltimore Sun: "Baltimore population falls, nearing a 100-year low, U.S. Census says." According to the latest census estimates, the city had experienced a population loss of 6,700 in the 12-month period ending July 2016.

Hadn't we been hearing, all through the years that Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake was our city's chief executive and cheerleader, that Baltimore would be adding 10,000 new families in the course of a decade? Perhaps that was always intended to be aspirational, but there were signs of renewed growth in many parts of the city. The Census Bureau itself had been reporting growth, showing the city's population of just under 621,000 in 2010 rising to 622,454 in 2015.

There was, of course, the unrest in 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray accompanied by a spike in homicides that jolted the city. Could these developments have caused so many city residents to vote with their feet and seek out greener pastures? It's a possibility, but would represent a dynamic very different from anything that has been observed in recent years.

The reported population loss is puzzling to those who closely local track demographic changes. The news is counterintuitive to those at the Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore. How the city and its neighborhoods have been growing – or declining – will be presented in early April in the latest edition of their Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators.

Those at the Baltimore Metropolitan Council whose responsibility it is to understand how the region is growing and changing face a challenge. BMC, which manages the Cooperative

Forecasting Process used in planning for future regional transportation investments, has the city growing, with an estimated population of 636,000 in 2020. The cooperative process depends on the analysis carried out within each of the council's jurisdictions. Baltimore's planning department finds the census numbers running counter to its monitoring of local development. One bit of evidence: the city has permitted 18,000 new residential units in the last seven years.

We usually defer to the professionalism and the findings of the Census Bureau. But, is it possible that the bureau's methodology did not capture the changes that are occurring in Charm City?

Signs of progress

There are cranes in the skyline to a degree that we have not seen here for years. Entire neighborhoods are being transformed. Take, for example, The Uplands in west Baltimore, where a former public housing project site has undergone a total makeover and now consists of a new community of 763 apartments and single-family homes. Was this appropriately accounted for?

Or, look at North Baltimore, where the new Rotunda, a long-awaited mixed-use development, has finally become a home for the residents of its 379 new units. Remington is also becoming totally transformed under the leadership of Seawall Development. Perhaps those living in Remington Row's 108 apartments did not fully occupy those units by the July 2016 census cut-off.

There are added luxury dwellings, some already occupied and others now in development in Harbor Point. To the south, in Locust Point, new dwellings have come along in the expanding McHenry Row community of high end apartments. Joining it in the neighborhood, across the street along Fort Avenue is Anthem House, with its 275 dwelling units geared to the lifestyle of the millennial generation. Another version of Anthem House is now under construction.

So, it is possible that a number of these developments came along just a little too late to be tallied by the Census Bureau for its 2016 estimate of 614,664 people. It may also be that the bureau's methodology, relying heavily on administrative data, including vital statistics, tax returns and school enrollments, does not fully capture new developments on the ground. Of course, countering those visible signs of growth are the less apparent measures of decline – the loss of household members through death or out-migration or the abandonment of dwellings, maintaining Baltimore's stock of vacant houses.

Many questions remain. Some of them might be answered if Baltimore City were to exercise its right to pose a challenge to the Census Bureau's latest count.

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