

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

## Urban exodus is expanding to outer reaches

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**ST. LOUIS** • For half a century, it has been the same story. Families by the thousands moved out of the city. Almost by the same equation, the city's loss was St. Louis County's gain.

Better schools. Newer homes. Safer streets. Former city dwellers headed to the suburbs.

Now, 2010 census figures released Thursday confirm profound changes that began taking shape in the past few decades.

No longer is St. Louis County the primary beneficiary of the city's continued decline. For the first time since at least 1900, the county's population actually dropped over a 10-year span.

Now, St. Louis County and the city find themselves in the same boat: wondering how to regain the swagger that the doughnut hole of the region once held.

Experts say it's a trend going on in major cities across the country. What was originally a migration from cities to near suburbs has shifted to the outer reaches.

"It's happening all over," said John R. Logan, a demographer at Brown University.

The 2010 census figures confirm that once-distant bedroom communities have become major population centers.

Even as St. Louis County lost nearly 2 percent of its residents over the last decade, counties to its west swelled: St. Charles County by 27 percent; Lincoln County by 35 percent; Warren County by 33 percent.

The region as a whole, meanwhile, added about 4.2 percent population to 2.8 million residents, up from about 2.7 million a decade prior. That rate of growth, however, was less than half the national rate.

When digging deeper into the numbers, looking at factors such as age and race, the picture gets more interesting.

For example, St. Charles County's growth - which now makes the county larger than St. Louis city - has been fueled largely by an exodus of whites from St. Louis County. That's the same migration pattern that a half-century ago left the city reeling and St. Louis County flourishing.

And just as whites once left the city for St. Louis County, blacks are now making that same move.

In St. Louis County, the white population declined by 10 percent, even as the black population spiked by 21 percent. And the county's gains in blacks appear to come at the expense of a 12 percent decline of blacks in the city.

Age factors into the equation as well, with both St. Louis and St. Louis County losing children under the age of 18 at rates faster than their total population loss. The figures reinforce a pattern of families of school-age children moving to farther-reaching suburbs.

William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, said cities no longer served as the sole identity of a region. Especially in second-tier cities.

"They are not the huge, dominant place that they once were," Frey said. "The suburbs are associated with the American Dream. I think that's why a lot of immigrants go straight to the suburbs. They feel, rightly or wrongly, that it's a step up."

The tides have been turning for decades, with the images of the ideal life marked by large yards, cul-de-sacs and houses with great rooms.

Census figures show how dramatically those shifts to the suburbs have been over the last 50 years.

As the city began its population slide, losing nearly 100,000 people in the 1950s alone, St. Louis County saw huge gains, with almost 300,000 people moving in between 1950 and 1960. An additional 250,000 people would move in by 1970.

Then the county's situation began to change, in a trend that has carried through to today.

No longer was St. Louis County booming, adding just over 22,000 in the 1970s, less than a tenth of the growth of the prior decade. Meanwhile, residents continued to pour out of the city, which lost nearly 170,000 people in the same decade.

But this time, it was counties such as St. Charles that opened themselves to growth.

In the '70s, St. Charles County added 51,153 residents, twice as many as in St. Louis County. In the decades that followed, St. Charles County would pull even further ahead in terms of growth.

Thursday's figures now show that St. Louis County is in negative territory, as St. Charles County roared on, growing by 27 percent.

Warren and Lincoln counties posted even larger percentage gains, growing by more than a third in a single decade.

Those gains were most evident in towns such as O'Fallon, which saw population swell by 72 percent between 2000 and 2010. And now the baton of monumental growth has been passed to more distant cities such as Wentzville, which more than quadrupled in size during the same 10 years.

The suburban migration is a pattern shared to a lesser degree in the Metro East, where whites moved from places such as East St. Louis into Belleville, and are now moving farther east.

An increase in population is news that communities tout. A growing city is one that families find attractive, based on good schools, jobs, parks and a healthy housing stock.

For government leaders across the country who are slashing their budgets as revenue streams dry up, accurate population counts are crucial.

Population determines how much federal money makes its way back to the local level. In the case of St. Louis, that can mean as much as \$3,400 per person, although, on average, the Census Bureau uses \$1,200 per person when talking about federal dollars coming back to communities.

The results of the 2010 Census will be used to determine how \$400 billion in federal funds are divvied up from among 140 programs. The funding covers everything from building hospitals, highways and bridges, to school lunch programs and senior citizens services.

The idea is that a growing city will need to expand its number of classrooms, widen its roads and provide more services to the residents who move in. An undercount means fewer federal dollars.

St. Louis city, with a drop in 29,000 people, sees its already sagging budget taking more hits. And that is leaving city leaders going over the latest census numbers looking for mistakes in their favor.

The latest census figure has already led Mayor Francis Slay to escalate his calls for the city and St. Louis County to merge in some fashion. Doing so, he argues, would help consolidate resources, reduce costs and attract businesses.

In the meantime, others are calling for immediate changes to stem the loss of residents from city neighborhoods.

"The question facing the city, especially in its northern wards, is where did all the black people go?" said St. Louis Alderman Antonio French. His 21st Ward lost 17 percent of its population. "Black families don't want to live in high-crime areas. They don't want to live where they don't feel safe. They don't want to live where there aren't educational opportunities, economic opportunities.

"A lot of black families went to St. Louis County looking for a better life."

And now some appear to be moving to St. Charles County, although the numbers remain small.

While the white population increased by 22 percent in St. Charles County, the black population jumped by 96 percent. But to put that in context, blacks make up just 4 percent of St. Charles County's population.

Certainly, leaders of the high-growth areas such as St. Charles County rejoice with each new census bringing good news.

But the growth introduces its own challenges. As traffic increases, roads must be built and maintained. Police and fire services face strains.

As families move in, schools must be constructed and supported. And in the current economy, no one is immune to the kinds of government shortfalls that have forced the Francis Howell school district in St. Charles County to lay off 95 employees to trim \$10.3 million from the district's budget.

Meanwhile, with the growth come questions, such as how long the gains can last. Already, the economic crisis has led to a decline in building permits and an increase in foreclosures even in counties such as St. Charles.

And there's the question of whether new growth will shift elsewhere. And of how far away can it go from the urban center. That's a tough question to answer, said Todd Swanstrom, a professor with the Public Policy Research Center at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Unlike many other major metropolitan areas, St. Louis does not have an ocean, mountain range or desert to stop its growth to the west, he noted.

But Garry Earls, St. Louis County's chief operating officer, said there would be an eventual end to the westward migration, as commuting becomes a longer and longer affair.

"It will stop when the income level of the family can't afford the transportation," Earls said.

*Stephen Deere and Tim Logan of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.*