

Detroit Census Confirms a Desertion Like No Other



Abandoned homes on the northeast side of Detroit tell the story of a city whose residents have fled in record numbers.

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Laying bare the country's most startling example of modern urban collapse, census data on Tuesday showed that Detroit's population had plunged by 25 percent over the last decade. It was dramatic testimony to the crumbling industrial base of the Midwest, black flight to the suburbs and the tenuous future of what was once a thriving metropolis.

It was the largest percentage drop in history for any American city with more than 100,000 residents, apart from the unique situation of New Orleans, where the [population dropped](#) by 29 percent after [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005, said Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociologist at [Queens College](#).

The number of people who vanished from Detroit — 237,500 — was bigger than the 140,000 who left New Orleans.

The loss in Detroit seemed to further demoralize some residents who said they already had little hope for the city's future.

“Even if we had depressing issues before, the decline makes it so much harder to deal with,” said Samantha Howell, 32, who was getting gas on Tuesday on the city’s blighted East Side. “Yes, the city feels empty physically, empty of people, empty of ambition, drive. It feels empty.”

Detroit’s population fell to 713,777 in 2010, the lowest since 1910, when it was 466,000. In a shift that was unthinkable 20 years ago, Detroit is now smaller than Austin, Tex., Charlotte, N.C., and Jacksonville, Fla.

“It’s a major city in free-fall,” said L. Brooks Patterson, the county executive of neighboring Oakland County, which was also hit by the implosion of the automobile industry but whose population rose by almost 1 percent, thanks to an influx of black residents. “Detroit’s tax base is eroding, its citizens are fleeing and its school system is in the hands of a financial manager.”

Nearly a century ago, the expansion of the auto industry fueled a growth spurt that made Detroit the fourth-largest city in the country by 1920, a place it held until 1950, when the population peaked at almost two million. By 2000, Detroit had fallen to 10th place.

Depending on final numbers from all cities, Detroit now may have dropped to 18th place, said William Frey, a demographer at the [Brookings Institution](#).

City officials, cognizant of the negative political and financial consequences of such a decline in population, said they intended to challenge the census. It probably missed tens of thousands of residents, they said.

“While we expected a decline in population, we are confident these figures will be revised,” Mayor [David Bing](#) said in a statement. He told reporters that if the city could account for a total of 750,000 people, it would meet a threshold for receiving more federal and state money.

Detroit is the only city in the United States where the population has climbed above one million but also fallen below one million, Mr. Beveridge said. And because of the magnitude of Detroit’s population drain, Michigan is the only state to register a net population loss since 2000. Michigan’s population fell by 0.6 percent while the nation’s as a whole grew by 9.7 percent.

The reasons for Detroit’s losses over the last decade include the travails of the auto industry and the collapse of the industrial-based economy.

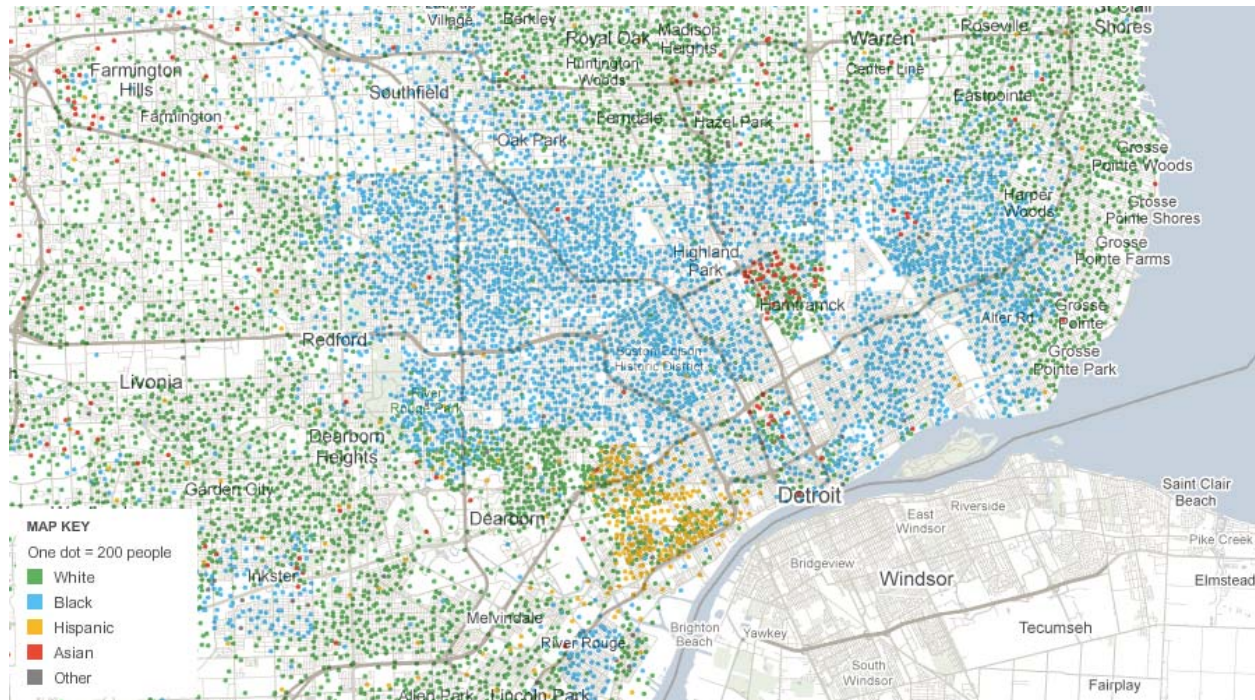
“There’s been an erosion of the nation’s industrial base, and this is the most dramatic evidence of it,” Mr. Beveridge said.

But a major factor, too, has been the exodus of black residents to the suburbs, which followed the white flight that started in the 1960s. Detroit lost 185,393 black residents in the last decade.

“This is the biggest loss of blacks the city has shown, and that’s tied to the foreclosures in the city’s housing,” Mr. Frey said. Because of the Great Migration — when blacks flowed from the South to the North — and the loss of whites, he said, “Detroit has been the most segregated city

in the country and it is still pretty segregated, but not as much.” At one point, the city was 83 percent black.

Many blacks moved to nearby suburbs, but census data shows that even those suburbs have barely held their own against population loss.



Here is a map of racial composition of communities in Detroit and area. Note the high concentration of African-American residents in Detroit, versus the White population in many of the surrounding suburbs.

The staggering loss over the past decade surprised even demographers who track Detroit’s out-migration patterns.

“I never thought it would go this low,” said Kurt Metzger, an urban affairs expert and demographer who analyzes data about the city.

“This is the biggest percentage loss that Detroit has ever seen,” he said, noting that the city suffered a higher numerical loss, 300,000, from 1970 to 1980. Still, that accounted for only 20 percent of the population, which had been 1.5 million in 1970.

The question now is the degree to which the most recent census figures will discourage those who have invested in Detroit and continue to try to make a go of it.

“Obviously it’s going to be a blow,” Mr. Metzger said. “All of us are kind of shocked, but it means we have to work that much harder.”

With more than 20 percent of the lots in the 139-square-mile city vacant, the mayor is in the midst of [a program to demolish](#) 10,000 empty residential buildings. But for many, the city already seems hollowed out.

“You can just see the emptiness driving in,” said Joel Dellario, a student at the [College for Creative Studies](#). “I’ve been in and out of this city my whole life, and it’s just really apparent.”

Jacob Smilovitz contributed reporting.

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