

SNG-Illinos population-4-17-17

Illinois population—So long, it's been good to know ya'

By Jim Nowlan

The modern American is restless. He moves around, toward good things like jobs, opportunity, warmth, family members, safety. It has been thus since our founding.

What, if anything, can or should be done about the movement of people out of Illinois?

Illinois has been losing white people on a net basis since the 1970s, maybe earlier, since the home air conditioner made the South livable.

This loss has been papered over by the “natural increase” (births over deaths) within our state.

This gave us small population increases, until recently.

According to recent Census Bureau estimates, Illinois (12.8 million residents) has lost population annually for the past three years, 38,000 in 2016, more than any state in the nation. Even the metropolitan Chicago area, with its supposedly ever burgeoning suburbs, lost population this past year.

What's going on?

In the mid to late 19th Century, Illinois was the fastest growing state in the nation. Immigrants and Easterners filled up our farmland and took manufacturing jobs in Chicago and across the state.

But more recently, those two job sectors have probably been the most important elements in our slower growth, now decline, in population.

My tiny county of Stark, all farmland, has lost population every decade since the 1880s.

Until the 1980s, farm boys without ground to plow could take jobs in nearby cities like Peoria and the Quad Cities on the line at CAT and Deere. No longer.

In just the 2000-2010 decade, rural and small-town Illinois lost a staggering 12.6 percent of all its people under age 45. Enrollment in my county's schools has plummeted 15 percent in the past eight years alone.

Since Illinois had more manufacturing jobs in the past than neighboring states, we have thus seen more population flight than neighboring states, as technology shrinks plant floor jobs.

And as senior citizens have become more comfortably fixed than this sector was in the 1960s, more have had the means to become snowbirds, migrating South and Southwest in the winter, often permanently relocating.

A month ago, Connie, at her namesake Country Kitchen café next door to my office, wiping her apron, looked out over an almost empty big back table where the farmers sit.

“They’ve all gone South,” she mused, “some for good.”

The biggest permanent losses are to Florida and Texas, which not coincidentally have no income taxes.

Chicago is experiencing a fascinating mix of changes. Blacks are moving out, away from the violence, mostly to the South where they probably have roots, now to a better life than when the region was viciously segregated.

On the other hand, central city Chicago is booming, with highly educated, mostly white young millennials flocking to good jobs and lively social life. Chicago is developing a reputation as a really hot place for techies, notwithstanding the violence in poor neighborhoods not far away.

I think, but cannot document, that Illinois population flight is also encouraged by the terrible state of affairs in our public life.

Piled onto a reputation as a corrupt state—four of our past seven governors have been measured for striped suits—Illinois now has a dysfunctional government.

The instability and unpredictability of not having a state budget for going on three years sends a “Don’t go there” message to business. This adds to the sourness and despair many of us feel about our state: “Let’s get out of here.”

Some places in the Midwest are proving that they can grow, cold weather notwithstanding.

Minneapolis-St. Paul is robust. And Sioux City, South Dakota has grown 63 percent, to 150,000 or so, since 1990. The city has become a hub for back-room bank processing and health care, as I understand it.

So, the trends can be bucked. What to do?

We simply have to get the state back on a good fiscal footing. That will, unfortunately, require increased taxes, which will contribute to some more flight, in the short term.

And we have to work together.

But with our strengths in interstate, rail, and airport infrastructure—all unrivaled in the nation—plus location at the heart of the Heartland, a highly-educated workforce and copious amounts of water, Illinois can become attractive once again.