Small Can Be Beautiful

By Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper

Coming to terms with decline.

Americans tend to think that places, our history and our planning have given us a sense that the U.S. population is on a permanent roll, that it will inevitably continue to increase nearly everywhere. This belief has in it a strong element of myth. In fact, the U.S. has experienced population spurts at various times and in various places, but that increase is by no means universal. It has occurred in some parts of the country but not others. Thus, the American infatuation with growth has always meant overlooking an important chunk of reality.

Colonial and post-revolutionary land promotions for settlers portrayed America as a land of abundance where one could reasonably expect to make a fortune—or at least a new life—in the company of an increasing number of equally lucky people. Yet even the 1800 census found some counties that had lost population since the first count in 1790.

Throughout the 19th century, the census charted the Western settlement boom, which was fueled, of course, by migration from the Eastern states. Between the Civil War and the turn of the 20th century, the census recorded steady decreases in the population of rural northern New England. The region was simultaneously feeling the loss of the Civil War dead (and their unborn descendants) and of outmigration to the then-expanding agricultural Midwest and the new factory cities and towns of the Northeast, the late 19th century equivalents of today’s fast-growing Sun Belt.

Desertedness is as characteristically American as settlement, especially in rural areas. Censuses since 1860 reveal frequent and sometimes generations-long population losses in northern New England, Appalachia, the Corn Belt, the Great Plains, the intermountain

Percent change in total population from 1990 to 2000 by county

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>50.0 to 191.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>25.0 to 49.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>13.2 to 24.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>0.0 to 13.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>-10.0 to -1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>-42.3 to -10.1</td>
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Parts of the Great Plains are losing population at a rapid rate, although the 2000 census shows somewhat less decline than in 1990.
West, the Pacific Northwest, the Lower Mississippi Delta, and the coastal-plain South Atlantic. Such losses have occurred—and in some cases continue to occur—in every major American region except southern New England, the Midatlantic, and the Southwest.

Most recent censuses—particularly those of 1950, 1960, 1970, and 1990—show widespread rural and urban decline across much of the country. Suburban growth means that metropolitan areas grow overall, but particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, the now-older industrial central cities have acquired rural America’s familiarity with population loss.

**The latest numbers**

The 2000 census, like earlier censuses, shows many rural and urban places losing population, although there are fewer declines than in 1990.

Losses concentrate in a few regions. The Great Plains, the 10-state shortgrass, semiarid midsection of the country east of the Rockies and west of the 98th meridian (or just west of Oklahoma City or San Antonio), showed the greatest proportional losses, with the most visible declines occurring in the northern half of the region. But the Lower Mississippi Delta, the western parts of the Corn Belt, central Appalachia, western New York, and northern Maine also had large patches of decline.

Cities are losing people, too, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest. Although New York and Chicago grew for the first time in several decades, other cities—Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, St. Louis—continued their long-term declines, but at a slower rate. Older Southern cities like Birmingham and New Orleans also shrank.

Some smaller metro areas outside the West showed population losses of three percent or more—for instance, Alexandria, Louisiana; Binghamton, New York; Pittsfield, Massachusetts; and Steubenville, Ohio.

In all these cases, rural and urban, the cause is the same: the pressures on longstanding industries, in part because of production efficiencies and import competition. In rural areas, there are fewer jobs in natural resource extracting activities like farming, ranching, logging, mining, and oil drilling. In the cities, manufacturing opportunities have decreased drastically.

Nor have the shrinking places attracted information- and service-based jobs, the country’s main source of employment growth, in the same numbers as growing areas. In declining areas, land often opens for potential new uses on, for example, abandoned or underused farm and factory sites, but such uses may not appear expeditiously. Or if they do, they, like the old ones, require fewer people for their development. Thus the population continues to fall.

In both the rural and urban cases, a regional perspective is usually weak, more often absent. Individual communities try to find their own competitive advantages, but without a substantive rethinking, their new plans amount to little more than tinkering with the old ones.

**Smart decline**

Planning has always had a bias toward growth. In fact, the new field of city planning emerged in the 20th century specifically as a means of controlling growth and its impacts. City and regional plans, local zoning ordinances, state land-use regulations, and environmental impact reviews all aim at managing rising population, new construction, and traffic growth.

But what can planners do when communities are shrinking rather than growing? We suggest the answer is “smart decline.” Smart decline means leaving behind assumptions of growth and finding alternatives to it.

In particular, smart decline requires thinking about who and what remains. It may entail reorganizing or eliminating some
services and providing different ones. It may involve promoting certain land uses and landmarks more as historical remnants than as sources of growth.

Clearly, these activities represent a departure from the traditional role of planners. And that could be politically and psychologically uncomfortable, especially because decline is so rarely acknowledged publicly or professionally.

The Great Plains offers an excellent laboratory for creative adjustments to long-term population loss. The region has a long boom-and-bust history, starting with the decline of the Native American populations after contact first with European explorers and then with settlers. Following the Civil War, heavy promotions by government (through the Homestead Act, for example) and private interests like the railroads drew homesteaders.

At first, the region’s deep soils and open range promised an eternal garden that would feed the country (and eventually much of the world). Only gradually did the sparseness and unpredictability of Plains rainfall became clear, leading to an exodus of settlers in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Immigration picked up in the 1900s as the government allowed the settlers more acreage.

Then came the ’20s, with all its woes: excessive sodbusting, a plague of locusts, and a major depression, which hit the Plains eight years before the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. The Dust Bowl of the ’30s literally put people on the road out of the region, mainly to California.

Successive censuses registered ever fewer people, particularly in the rural counties far from interstates, rivers, large government facilities, and colleges. The 2000 census showed that North Dakota had the lowest population gain of any state, and nearly all its recent growth has been urban rather than rural.

Overall, the Plains economy has remained heavily agricultural, but agriculture has over time required more capital, not more people.

Government subsidies have kept some Plains residents in place but have done little to sustain community. Technology has enabled farmers to overlook the region’s semiaridity by drawing down the Ogallala Aquifer, which lies beneath the southern two-thirds of the region. As agricultural production and subsidies have risen, soils have deteriorated and water tables have dropped and become polluted.

A recent North Dakota State University study found that only 1.4 percent of rural Plains counties grew continuously between 1950 and 2000, while 39.9 persistently declined. People under 30 are the most likely to leave, so the region has aged, too. Few new families form.

Countries with hospitals are better able to stem population decline, but several Plains hospitals have stopped providing obstetrical services while retaining geriatric ones. School consolidations continue. North Dakota’s state legislature last year considered requiring consolidation of any school districts without a high school. The combination of outmigration with little immigration makes the region’s population increasingly less racially and ethnically diverse.

**Solutions**

Specific examples of smart decline are still hard to come by, but some proposals are beginning to emerge. For instance, James Satterlee, a rural sociologist and retired director of the census data center at South Dakota State University, laid out a scheme for consolidating six counties in the northern Great Plains, where many counties have fewer than 3,000 residents.

Under Satterlee’s proposal, each of the jurisdictions would retain at least one major county function and continue to provide some services. Government costs would drop without disrupting services.

Alternative use is another idea. In 1987, we presented such a proposal for parts of the Great Plains. If the ongoing population losses persisted, we suggested that it would make sense to tear down the fences, replant native grasses, and restore native species such as the buffalo. We suggested a name for this reborn place: the Buffalo Commons.

As first we expected that the federal government would be the Buffalo Commons’ prime creator, acquiring the land people left behind. But as the rural Plains continued to shrink through the 1990 and 2000 censuses, population loss attracted more attention. Now the Buffalo Commons seems likely to come into being through local, state, tribal, and private-sector activities rather than federal ones.

Many individuals, organizations, and governments have already initiated Buffalo Commons-type practices. Buffalo populations have increased on both private and public land. Land-preservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy have bought land in part for raising buffalo. Banks now lend for buffalo herds, and some state agricultural extension services offer ranchers advice on how to raise them.

The InterTribal Bison Cooperative, a consortium of 51 tribes headquartered in Rapid City, South Dakota, is bringing back Indian
buffalo herds and buffalo culture. Last August, South Dakota’s Rosebud tribal government became the first public body formally to endorse the Buffalo Commons.

Our projections and those of the Great Plains Restoration Council suggest that about a quarter of the region’s land is potential Buffalo Commons. These are places, found in all 10 Plains states, where population loss and economic stress are strongest, and where the rise of the Buffalo Commons would add the most market and non-market value. The Plains and its buffalo past are central in the development of America’s self-image. The Buffalo Commons vision for the region allows plan-

class population and later many of its industrial facilities. The 1967 riots further eroded the urban core.

Between 1950 and 1990, the city lost nearly half its population and jobs. As in the Great Plains, Detroit’s population has become less diverse over time. The city lost 53 percent of its remaining white residents in the last census and now has the highest level of segregation of any large city in the country. Photog- nant to make the most of an idea and symbol-driven economy that need not depend on continual population growth.

Big city scenario
Population loss in the Northeast, Midwest, and South has meant more open space within cities, often disconcertingly so. Long-term decline has often led to neighborhoods filled with abandoned buildings and overgrown, litter-filled empty lots, where public health hazards and crime flourish.

These neighborhoods, whose conditions place enormous stress on the mostly poor and minority residents that remain in them, present a key challenge to contemporary city planning.

Detroit provides the most striking example, both because of the magnitude of its decline and its central role in one of 20th century America’s signature industries, the automobile. The city reached its peak population in 1950, having attracted waves of population to build cars, trucks, buses, and World War II tanks and other weaponry. But postwar suburbanization drew off its white, middle-

class population and later many of its industrial facilities. The 1967 riots further eroded the urban core.

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Many downtown skyscrapers stand mostly empty, too, indicators of and contributors to population decline. Vergara has proposed memorializing the ruins by setting aside a 12-block area as a museum, an American Acropolis that would illustrate the fallibility of the myth of endless growth.

University of Pennsylvania urbanist Witold Rybczynski has argued that we should seek to concentrate the population of seriously declining cities in the most salvageable neighborhoods. Such an approach, he says, would allow better municipal service provision and create a more urban fabric.

The vacated land could become open space, providing recreation and allowing air and water quality to improve. Some land could be deannexed or sold off to private developers. Over time, demand might increase in the city because of these improvements, he suggests, and new housing might eventually be built in these neighborhoods.

Many planners working on urban agriculture, urban forestry, and community garden programs are already using smart decline tac-

tics. In cities like Detroit, St. Louis, and Philadelphia, there are active programs to involve civilians in planting, maintaining, and harvesting crops in vacant lots.

Facing facts
Decline planning strategies are often controversial and difficult. But they have the virtue of acknowledging the reality, persistence, and effects of population decline. Such recognition is a necessary first step that allows planners to think creatively and practically about smart decline, just as they do about smart growth.

Some smart growth policies do address decline indirectly, for example by channeling development to brownfields. But such policies are still growth-driven; they assume the inevitability of growth. Explicitly, purposefully, planning for less—fewer people, fewer buildings, fewer land uses—demands its own distinct approach.

A first requirement is to assess who and what remains and is likely to remain—in essence, to provide a good inventory. It may also be necessary to revive the existing, growth-oriented land-use regulations that no longer apply and may interfere with smart decline.

Above all, planners must consider the people who are still there. Those who remain in an area that is losing population often feel left behind, unconnected from the growing parts of the economy. Planners can use stories, regional narratives, to point out the strengths of the region or neighborhoods. In the end, smart decline may be able to turn a difficult situation into something more positive.

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Resources

On the web. The website “Fabulous Ruins of Detroit” provides a virtual tour of major 20th century factories now destroyed or barely occupied, as well as the 1984 razing of Hudson’s, downtown Detroit’s last department store: http://detroityanes.com/home.htm.