

Young People Not Fleeing, Census Shows

by Andrew Brod

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In the last couple of years, it has become an article of faith in Greensboro that the city is losing young people and that its economy is not a good place for young professionals to live and work.

Of course it was more than faith. There were statistics to back it up. In early 2000, the North Carolina Office of State Planning projected that there would be fewer young people living in Guilford County in 2000 than in 1990. OSP projected that the 2000 Census would reveal a 6.2 percent decrease in the number of 20-to-24-year-olds and an 8.4 percent decrease in the number of 25-to-34-year-olds.

I expect few of us saw the OSP projections. But many of us saw the study now known as the McKinsey Report, which was released in November 2000 and included among its statistical findings that “Greensboro has seen a decline in absolute and relative numbers of 18-to-34-year-olds over the past decade.” An accompanying graph showed Guilford County’s population of 25-to-34-year-olds falling by about 8.5 percent between 1990 and 1999.

That got a lot of folks worried because this age group will produce our next generation of civic and business leaders. Not only was it apparently accounting for a smaller share of the overall population (the relative decline), but its actual population numbers were falling as well (the absolute decline).

The concern was so great that Action Greensboro, the group that evolved from the funding partners of the McKinsey Report, established Attracting and Retaining Young Professionals as one of its six task forces. On November 5, this task force will be among those releasing action plans for the future. I participated in some of that task force’s meetings and I liked what I saw in an early draft of its action plan. But recent figures from the 2000 Census indicate that the situation is not as critical as we thought.

In what follows, I’ll focus on 25-to-34-year-olds to try to get a statistical handle on those young professionals. The data available so far from the 2000 Census don’t allow us to break down the age-group data by type of job, so we can’t know for sure who’s a professional and who isn’t. But leaving out 18-to-24-year-olds helps by excluding most college students, most of whom have yet to join the professional ranks.

So what did the Census say? In Guilford County the 25-to-34-year-old age group *grew* 7.3 percent between 1990 and 2000, which is striking given the decrease predicted by the McKinsey Report and the state of North Carolina. Looking specifically at Greensboro, the Census reveals that the city’s 25-to-34-year-old age group grew 11.5 percent. So much for losing young professionals.

Greensboro's overall population grew 22 percent between 1990 and 2000, which means that 25-to-34-year-olds' share of the city population fell. Put differently, the population of these young adults grew in absolute terms, but it did indeed decline in relative terms. However, such relative declines have been seen nearly everywhere in the country as the American population ages.

Next door in Winston-Salem, the 25-to-34-year-old age group grew 10.8 percent, which isn't bad either. But the population share of that group is now smaller than in Greensboro, after being about the same in 1990. For Forsyth County as a whole the picture is bleaker, with a 5 percent decline in 25-to-34-year-olds during the 1990s.

Let's put these figures in context. During the 1990s the population of North Carolina increased 21 percent, which is about the same as Greensboro's growth rate. But the state population of 25-to-34-year-olds grew only 6.1 percent, which is about half of Greensboro's growth rate in that category. The national comparison is even starker. The United States population grew 13 percent, but the 25-to-34-year-old population *fell* 7.6 percent.

Clearly, Greensboro and Guilford County are faring well when compared to national and state population trends for young adults. But part of our civic culture is masochistic in nature. We insist on comparing ourselves with Charlotte and Raleigh, two astounding growth engines that just happen to flank us to the southwest and east.

But this time the comparison isn't so discouraging. To be sure, the 25-to-34-year-old age group grew much faster in both cities than in Greensboro. The growth rate was nearly 25 percent in Charlotte and just under 22 percent in Raleigh. However, their overall populations grew even faster, which means that in both cities the 25-to-34-year-old age group shrank in relative terms, just as it did in Greensboro. In Charlotte and Raleigh these young adults accounted for a larger share of the 1990 population than in Greensboro, but all three cities saw that age group's share decline by 2000.

So the McKinsey Report was correct in noting that during the 1990s, "Raleigh and Charlotte have been able to attract young people. . . , increasing their absolute number of young residents and bucking the national trend toward an aging population." It appears we can say the same thing about Greensboro.

Therefore, the new Census data show that Greensboro is not actually in bad shape when it comes to the demographics of young adults. It's only natural to desire improvement, but we're not in crisis. We look good when compared to many cities nationwide, including those to which we have looked for lessons about our own economic development.

Take Chattanooga, Tennessee, where a group of civic leaders visited in March to learn about that city's program of economic development. In Chattanooga, the number of 25-to-44-year-olds fell about 3.7 percent during the 1990s. In most American cities, the older end of that wide age group has grown while the younger end has shrunk, so it's a

good bet that the drop-off in Chattanooga would have been even greater if I'd been able to isolate the figures for 25-to-34-year-olds.

Chattanooga's experience suggests that attracting and retaining young adults is a complicated endeavor. Some people (including me) have said that encouraging a vibrant downtown district is an important piece of the puzzle, but it's clearly not the only piece. After all, Chattanooga has a nice downtown. Others argue that it's all about having the kind of businesses that draw young people, and once those businesses are in place the vibrant downtown will just naturally follow.

Whatever the precise formula, the new Census data show that it's not quite accurate to frame the challenge facing Greensboro as one of attracting young adults to a land where few dwell. Instead we want to retain those already here and try to ensure that there is no reversal of our recent good fortune. More to the point, we want to develop the kind of local economy that young adults will continue to value, and value even more than they did during the 1990s. The McKinsey Report may have gotten a few numbers wrong, but the basic challenge remains.

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