

Chicago slips in population but is still third-largest city in U.S. — for now

By Cecilia Reyes and Patrick M. O'Connell
May 23, 2019 | 5:50 AM



A pedestrian walks near the Illinois Medical District Blue Line stop as the sun sets in Chicago on May 19, 2019. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

The majority of municipalities in the Chicago region, including the city itself, lost population last year, according to newly released estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, part of a familiar trend of overall stagnation and decline among Midwestern cities.

Though Chicago remains the third-largest city in the United States, behind New York and Los Angeles, fourth-place Houston continued to close the gap, moving to within 380,492 residents of Chicago. After losing an estimated 7,073 people from 2017 to 2018, Chicago stands at just over 2.7 million residents, according to the new census data. Houston, the biggest city in Texas, gained 8,057 last year and now has more than 2.3 million.

The growth in Houston reflects national trends, as cities in the South and West — including Phoenix, San Antonio, Fort Worth, Texas, Seattle and Charlotte, N.C. — continue to gain population at a rapid clip. Chicago will be overtaken by Houston eventually, demographers say, given the rates of change for both cities — but not in the next couple of years.

Christine Percheski, an associate professor of sociology at Northwestern University, cautioned that while it is significant to note that Chicago is losing people, “this does not necessarily reflect the health or the functioning of the city.”

An array of complicated factors are at play in population numbers, including changes to mortality, fertility and immigration rates, she noted.

The new estimates, released in Chicago late Wednesday, show that most municipalities in northeastern Illinois are not adding residents. Of the 279 incorporated towns and cities in Cook County, the collar counties and Kendall County, more than three-fourths lost population in the last year, the Tribune found. The average municipality in the area shrank by 0.6%.

Though few, pockets of growth in the Chicago region do exist. Far northwest suburban municipalities such as Huntley and the village of Pingree Grove, about halfway between the Loop and Rockford along Interstate 90, are not just growing but booming, the Tribune found in analyzing two decades’ worth of census figures. The southwest suburbs near Joliet and Aurora are also among the fastest-growing places in terms of total residents and rates of population increase.

Huntley, Yorkville and Oswego have more than doubled in size since 2000, the Tribune found. All grew between 1% and 3% from 2017 to 2018, the latest census release shows; that growth outpaced the 0.7 percent average increase for all cities nationwide with more than 10,000 but fewer than 50,000 residents.

Although not all of far-flung suburbia is gaining population, officials in high-growth areas say new housing, quality schools, lush parks and less congestion play a big part in drawing families into these expanding communities.

Chicago and places nearby, meanwhile, which tend to be older, often showed stagnating or decreasing population sizes since 2010.

David Wilson, a geography professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who has studied the growth of cities in the region, said he didn’t find Chicago’s stalling population surprising, saying pointedly that if a city focuses its efforts on polishing a few neighborhoods and creating selling points for more upwardly mobile residents, there won’t be a lot of gain over time.

“It comes down to an ethical question, a city for whom?” Wilson said.

The trend of inner-ring suburbs losing population while areas farther away from the city gain is not particular to Chicago, said Ken Johnson, a University of New Hampshire sociology professor and senior demographer at the university’s Carsey School of Public Policy.

“What is happening in Chicago’s inner-ring suburbs, the Cook County suburbs, is not dissimilar to what’s happening in other North and Midwest urban areas,” Johnson said. Cities like Boston and New York also are experiencing population declines in closer-in suburbs.

In areas like Huntley that are growing, Johnson said, people are drawn by the ability to buy more house for less, even if moving farther away from the city core may mean a longer commute.

A construction crew works on townhomes along Disbrow Street in the Talamore
A construction crew works on townhomes along Disbrow Street in the
Talamore development on May 20, 2019, in Huntley. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago
Tribune)

Room to grow

Beyond the reach of Chicago’s public transit network, amid still-operating farms and abandoned barns, some places in the region are attracting new residents.

Huntley, once a hub of more than 2,000 dairy farms, is now a community of retirement village developments, new subdivisions, strip malls and a revitalized downtown. Huntley’s population, which was less than 6,300 in 2000, has ballooned to more than 27,000. The village is in the top 10 Chicago-area communities for total population added and rate of population growth in the last two decades.

Huntley’s downtown, near the intersection of Illinois Route 47 and the Union Pacific railroad tracks, now features a chocolate shop, a barbecue restaurant, several bars and an assortment of other stores, some in repurposed former milk plants and turn-of-the-last-century farmhouses.

“For Sale” and “Property Available” signs now pop up every few minutes along four-lane Illinois 47 and the two-lane roads bisecting the north-south artery. Along those roads,

complete with new stop lights, is a mosaic of subdivisions that have sprouted up alongside silos and open fields.

The village annexed thousands of acres of land in 1992, opening the way for retirement village developments such as Del Webb's Sun City as well as traditional houses targeting young families. Today, clusters of construction crews continue to dot the open fields to the north, west and south of downtown, across the street from meticulously manicured baseball fields, new playgrounds, a recreation center and a pool complex, complete with waterslides.

The influx of people has created new opportunities. One section of a former Borden dairy plant is now the newly opened Sew Hop'd microbrewery, owned by some of the same guys who operate the Union Special sewing machine company, which continues its operations within the same complex.

Terry Hitpas, one of the owners of Sew Hop'd and Union Special, said adding the brewery was a natural way to bridge Huntley's past with its future. The brewery allows the sewing machine factory to stay afloat, while catering to the village's burgeoning population.

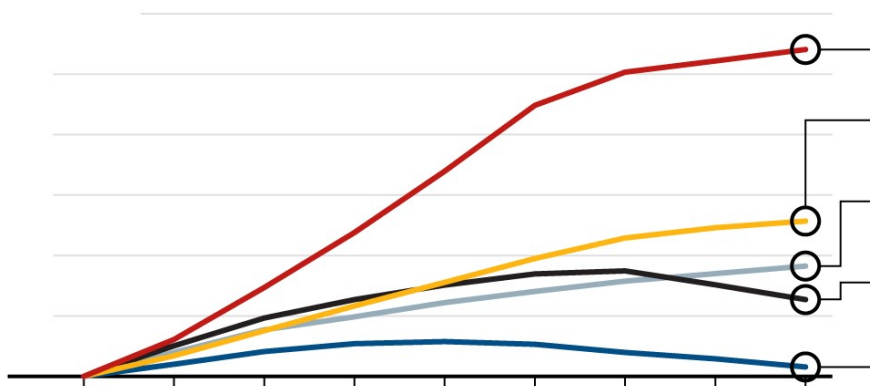
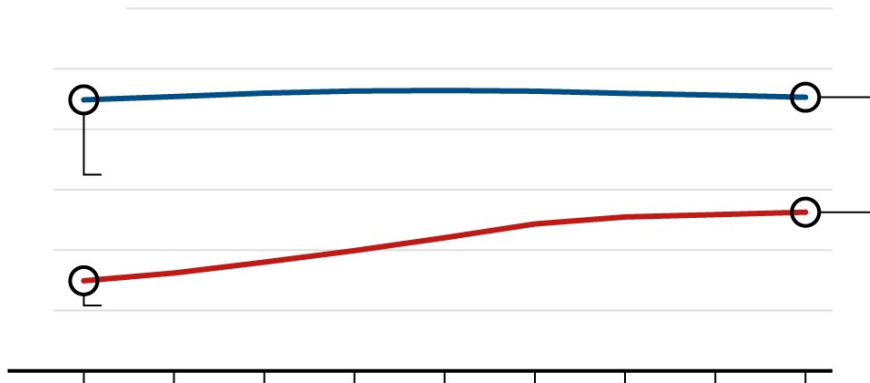
A few miles south of downtown on Illinois 47, Sunny Patel has a similar plan. Patel and the other owners of the Villa Park-based More Brewing Company are rehabbing a former Chevrolet dealership near the bustling interchange with Interstate 90 into their second location. A late summer opening is planned.

Patel said Huntley appealed to him because it has a growing population and offers a potential customer mix of families, beer lovers and retirees.

"We want to get more people into Huntley and show them what it's all about," Patel said. Patel is also betting on continued renewal and expansion. With plenty of nearby land up for sale, Patel expects more businesses and residents to flood into the area.

A little north of Patel's construction project is the emerging Huntley Springs, a new luxury housing for residents 55 and older. The soon-to-open building, still under construction, will feature month-to-month leasing that includes dining, entertainment and lodgings for two weeks at any of the other 34 housing complexes in the U.S. owned by Resort Lifestyle Communities. All 130 units in the development are reserved.

“It’s not cheap, and it’s not for your average person,” said Bill Conder, the project manager and site superintendent with Cameron General Contractors. “It’s like a cruise on land for people at a later stage in life.”



Changing communities

Some small towns in the Chicago area have grown significantly, census data shows. Among those that had fewer than 10,000 residents in 2000, half grew their population size by at least 8% by 2018.

By contrast, among the 20 cities with at least 50,000 residents two decades ago, half either lost population or grew by less than 1 percent.

And despite the encouraging growth on the outskirts of some suburban counties, these changes won’t have much impact on the larger region’s economy because the population

numbers there remain small, cautioned Aseal Tineh, an associate policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning who analyzed population trends at the township level.

Still, when visiting Pingree Grove, it's hard not to notice the change in the community.

A short drive south from Huntley across Interstate 90 in northern Kane County, Pingree Grove has grown from a total population of 271 in 2000 to 8,976 in 2018, accelerating in year-to-year growth in the last few years. Incoming Village Manager Dean Frieders attributes a large part of that increase to Cambridge Lakes, a large residential development started in the early 2000s that spurred construction of a well and wastewater facility.

The boost in population also means that Pingree Grove is building its first Village Hall, set to open within the next two weeks. Right now, the village operates out of trailer parks. With new development and a bigger name on the map, Frieders says he hopes people will see the role of local government firsthand.

“One of the things we lose sight of is that the vast majority of services that come up in our daily lives are local — turning on the tap water, calling 911, going to the park. All of those are local government.”

New homes go up northwest of Reinking Road and Higgins Road on May 20,
New homes go up northwest of Reinking Road and Higgins Road on May 20,
2019, in Pingree Grove. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

By contrast, the village of Ford Heights in southern Cook County has lost 22% percent of its population since 2000, or 754 people, leaving an estimated 2,705 residents living there last year. Nearby Harvey shrank by 18% during the same time span, losing 5,279 people.

On Wednesday afternoon, the senior center in Ford Heights was empty except for one staff member. A few blocks away, cracked side streets led off into vacant, grassy lots, areas clearly designed for houses.

Not far away on Ellis Avenue, Jerry Mannery was helping a friend remove tree stumps from the side of a driveway. Mannery has lived in Ford Heights for decades and said it's

unfortunately not a secret why the village continues to lose residents: a lack of housing and local job opportunities.

“The resources are not there,” said Mannery, 65, a retired welder. “If you have to travel to Chicago or north of Chicago for a job, I might as well move there.”

Back in the 1970s, he said, the village at least had a few black-owned businesses, night-life for adults and activities or clubs for children.

“We need to have a better environment for the youth,” Mannery said. “All of that stuff was better then.”

Some larger regional cities — Aurora, Joliet, Bolingbrook — saw big boosts in population in the early 2000s but are now mired in stagnation, with yearly population changes of less than 1 percent. Demographers say those areas are now having to deal with the problems common to older cities in the nation’s Rust Belt.

Midsize suburban cities in the region are dealing with the vestiges of being industrial cities to varying degrees, the U. of I.’s Wilson said, noting they used to do a better job of attracting workers and now have to compete with other cities at a larger scale.

“The global economy is ruthless,” Wilson said. “It has really asked these places to create downtown jewels and intoxicating cultural bases as a way of attracting new people there. Reinvention has to be ongoing, and it’s very difficult to do.”

Johnson said domestic migration patterns — people moving from one part of the U.S. to another — appear to be returning to pre-recession trends. The Great Recession froze many people in place, and did so longer than the “official” end of the recession around 2009-10.

But another factor at play in the Chicago area, Johnson said, is that fertility rates have not recovered to their pre-recession levels. Fewer women in their teens and 20s are having children, which means fewer babies are being born in the area to counter the loss of people moving elsewhere.

In Ford Heights, where the population has been falling for years, officials are trying to look to the future, launching a communitywide planning effort aimed at revitalizing the village. Dubbed “Envision Ford Heights,” the plan calls for investment in the village’s crumbling water system, a logistics center at the interchange between Illinois Highway

394 and Lincoln Highway and various neighborhood improvements. Village officials did not respond to requests for comment on Wednesday.

Mannery, meanwhile, said he isn't necessarily frustrated or hopeful, just realistic. He said the continued loss of people turns into a vicious cycle.

"If you do do something for the youth, you have to have the youth. If you do something for the geriatric, or older people, you have to have older people," Mannery said. "It's almost like a stigma. Boom: We're iced."

creyes@chicagotribune.com

poconnell@chicagotribune.com