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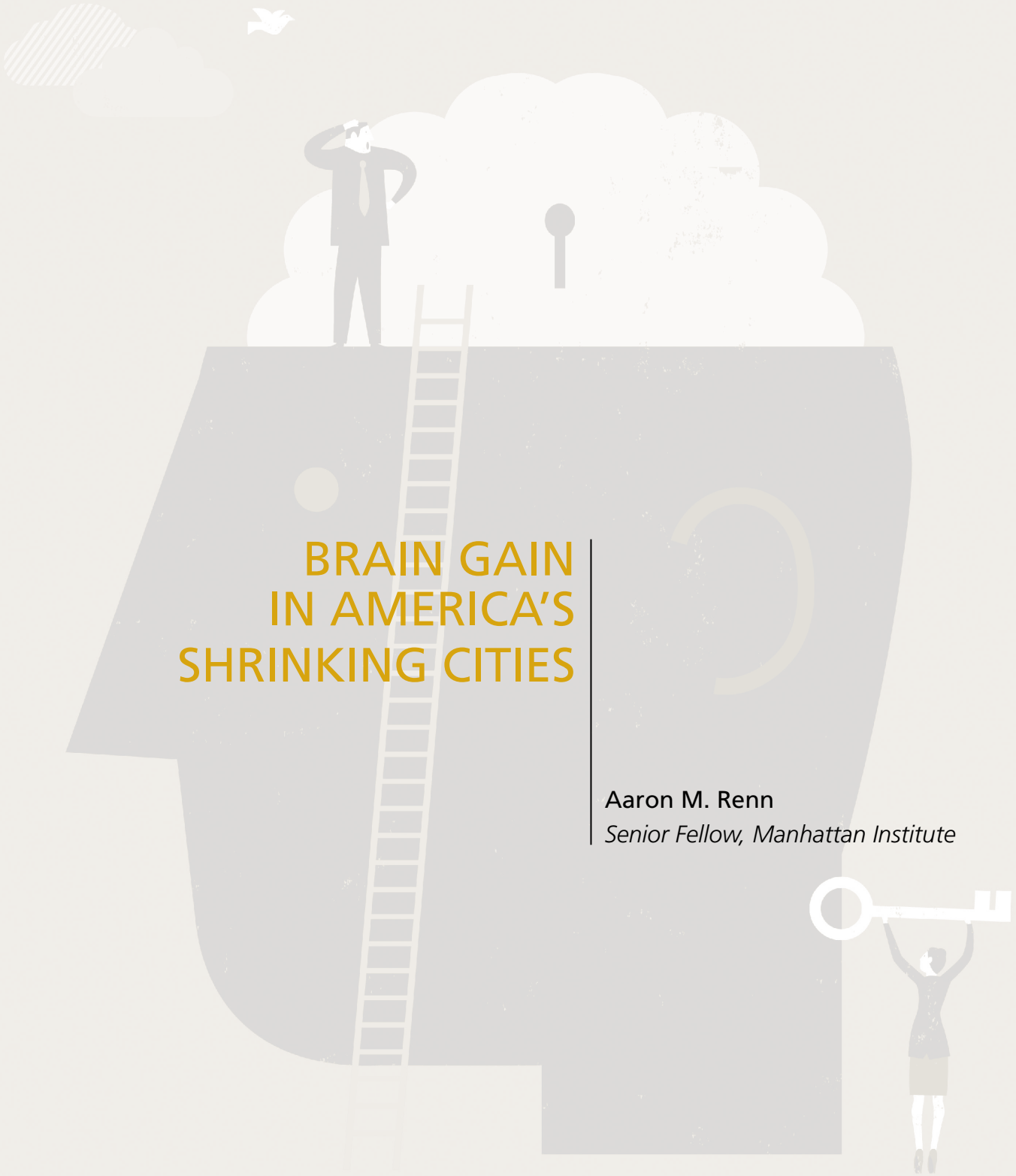

BRAIN GAIN IN AMERICA'S SHRINKING CITIES

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Executive Summary

America's shrinking cities are widely viewed to be suffering from a "brain drain"—the flight of highly educated residents to other, more hospitable locales—that is crippling these cities' economic competitiveness. While such cities have many problems, brain drain as popularly conceived is not one of them. Indeed, the conventional wisdom on brain drain and declining human capital in shrinking U.S. metropolitan areas is largely a myth: brain *gain*, not drain, is the reality.

This paper analyzes 28 such metro areas and finds that only three (Detroit, Bridgeport, and Toledo) have a potential brain-drain concern—and only in the young-adult bracket. Other key findings include:

1. Every major U.S. metro area that is losing population and/or jobs is actually gaining people with college degrees—at double-digit rates.
2. As a group, America's shrinking cities are holding their own with—and, in many cases, outperforming—the rest of the country in overall education-attainment rates.
3. Most shrinking U.S. cities are increasing their educated-population share by adding more young adults with college degrees—and are catching up with the rest of the U.S. in young adult college degree–attainment levels.

Such findings suggest that policies designed to stop or reverse brain drain are attacking the wrong problem. The time and money being spent to fight brain drain in these cities should instead be redirected to more real and pressing problems, such as fiscal distress, infrastructure challenges, public safety, and excessive regulation.

About the Author

AARON M. RENN is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a contributing editor of *City Journal*, and an economic development columnist for *Governing* magazine. He focuses on ways to help America's cities thrive in an ever more complex, competitive, globalized, and diverse twenty-first century. During Renn's 15-year career in management and technology consulting, he was a partner at Accenture and held several technology strategy roles and directed multimillion-dollar global technology implementations. He has contributed to the *Guardian*, Forbes.com, and numerous other publications. His insights on urban issues are regularly cited in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *The Economist*, *Daily Telegraph*, and other international media.

Renn holds a B.S. from Indiana University, where he coauthored an early social-networking platform in 1991. He has created several widely used open-source software packages, including the only program for recovering data from corrupted gzip backups. In 1998, Renn launched one of the nation's first blogs, the Weekly Breakdown, to cover the Chicago Transit Authority.

CONTENTS

Brain Gain in America's Shrinking Cities

Aaron M. Renn

INTRODUCTION

The U.K.'s Royal Society coined the term "brain drain" in the 1960s, referring to that country's loss of talent to the United States.[1] Fear of brain drain—of communities and nations losing their best and brightest to migration—has since become a nearly ubiquitous obsession. When the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation conducted a survey into start-up ecosystems,[2] brain drain was a top concern across the corporate, start-up, academic, and government domains. As Michael Hendrix, the foundation's director for emerging issues and research, observed: "The only exception was New York City. Even San Francisco and Silicon Valley voiced concerns [about brain drain]."

Anxiety over brain drain is particularly acute in postindustrial and shrinking cities and states, places where anti–brain drain policies, often backed by significant spending, have been prominent. In Michigan, former governor Jennifer Granholm created "Cool Cities," a program to retain talent in Michigan's cities, backed by $100 million in state spending.[3] An initial Cool Cities report stated: "At the 'State of the State' address, Governor Granholm made it known to all of Michigan that her administration would pursue an initiative to create 'Cool Cities' throughout the state, in part as an urban strategy to revitalize communities, build community spirit, and most importantly, retain our 'knowledge workers' who were departing Michigan in alarming numbers."[4]

In Ohio, former state university system chancellor Eric Fingerhut promised to make brain-drain reduction one of his key measures: "Fingerhut promises to persuade 70 percent of graduates to stay

in Ohio—roughly the same percentage that now leaves. 'We own this metric now, and that's a radical departure,' [Fingerhut] said. 'Sure, there's a huge risk. The pushback I got on this was, "My gosh, do we really control the economy? Do we control that the hot cities are Chicago or Seattle?" Yes, we can control enough of this to make a difference about it.' "[5]

In Dayton, Ohio, UpDayton, an initiative targeting young, creative types, was created: "We educate a ton of students here at our local universities," explained UpDayton's executive director Laura Estandia, "but when they graduate the majority of them leave and don't engage in the local economy. UpDayton was founded to put a stop to the brain drain for good."[6]

Concern over brain drain is not limited to America's Rust Belt. Ty West, managing editor of Alabama's *Birmingham Business Journal*, writes: "Then, there's the issue of retention. Simply producing more high school and college graduates won't ensure that Birmingham raises its collective brainpower. We have to retain those highly educated young professionals and also recruit them from competing metros."[7]

Even university students sound the alarm. Scott Freitag, in the Providence-based *Brown Daily Herald*, declares that "the state's inability to retain students after graduation, when they often take jobs back home or in cities like New York or Washington, D.C., represents a significant economic cost to the Ocean State. This sizeable departure of skilled individuals, motivated by more promising opportunities elsewhere, has caused an economic brain drain—a significant human capital flight."[8]

Because brain drain is considered to particularly plague shrinking U.S. metropolitan areas, this paper focuses on large metros that are losing population and/or jobs.

Figure I. Shrinking U.S. Metros, 2000–2013

Jobs Decline Only	Population Decline Only	Jobs and Population Decline
• Akron, OH • Birmingham–Hoover, AL • Bridgeport–Stamford–Norwalk, CT • Chattanooga, TN–GA • Chicago–Naperville–Elgin, IL–IN–WI • Grand Rapids–Wyoming, MI • Greensboro–High Point, NC • Hartford–West Hartford–East Hartford, CT • Memphis, TN–MS–AR • Milwaukee–Waukesha–West Allis, WI • New Haven–Milford, CT • Providence–Warwick, RI–MA • Rochester, NY • San Francisco–Oakland–Hayward, CA • San Jose–Sunnyvale–Santa Clara, CA • Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton, PA • St. Louis, MO–IL • Syracuse, NY • Wichita, KS • Winston-Salem, NC	• Pittsburgh, PA	• Buffalo–Cheektowaga–Niagara Falls, NY • Cleveland–Elyria, OH • Dayton, OH • Detroit–Warren–Dearborn, MI • New Orleans–Metairie, LA • Toledo, OH • Youngstown–Warren–Boardman, OH–PA

Source: Author's analysis of Census Bureau Population Estimates Program, Bureau of Labor Statistics State and Metro Employment data

I. SHRINKING CITIES

This paper examines the 28 U.S. metropolitan areas that are both among the country's 100 largest and that experienced measurable population loss[9] and/or job[10] loss during 2000–2013 (**Figure 1**).[11] Why the focus on sizable cities?[12] Because rural areas and smaller cities may experience different dynamics from larger ones.

Figure 1 reveals that seven metro areas experienced declines in population and jobs; that 20 experienced job losses only; and that one (Pittsburgh) saw only population loss. This group mostly consists of cities that one might expect, such as Dayton, Detroit, and New Orleans. But it also includes Chicago—which, as even its mayor has acknowledged, experienced a "lost decade" economically during the 2000s—as well as two affluent cities in the San Francisco Bay Area: San Francisco and San Jose.

The inclusion of the Bay Area cities might seem surprising, given the enormous positive press about the state of America's technology industry and reports of the area's extremely high housing prices. Nevertheless, through 2013, neither San Francisco nor San Jose had recovered from its dotcom-era employment peak. (This also remained true for San Jose through 2014.)

This counterintuitive result for the Bay Area is helpful for two reasons. First, it provides a useful comparison for U.S. metros more conventionally viewed as struggling. Second, and more important, it exposes the disconnect in popular logic between high educational attainment and job growth.

II. EDUCATION LEVELS

This paper next examines education-attainment levels in the aforementioned metros, focusing on the number of residents aged 25 and older holding a bachelor's degree or higher.[13] During 2000–2013, all 28 metro areas gained residents with college degrees by at least a double-digit percentage (**Figure 2**). In other words, they all experienced brain *gain*, not brain drain: more residents with a bachelor's degree or higher and a rising share of residents with a degree.

Figure 2 reveals that brain gain is occurring in all 28 metros—even those that experienced total population loss. **Figure 3** compares the change in total residents with the total change in college-degreed residents for the eight metros that lost population during 2000–2013. Even post–Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, which lost 7.3 percent of its population over the period, gained more than 40,000 net college graduates; Detroit gained more than 150,000, Pittsburgh more than 145,000, and Cleveland more than 80,000.

These trends can partly be explained by generational turnover. Younger cohorts of Americans are far more likely to hold a college degree than their grandparents: college-degree attainment among Americans aged 25–34 is 32.9 percent; but for Americans over 65, 24.1 percent.

Pittsburgh's case is particularly instructive. The city is home to more than 70,000 residents over age 85, or 3 percent of its population—one of the highest shares of the "super-senior" demographic in the United States. Pittsburgh is one of only six of the top 100 U.S. metros to experience a "natural decrease" (i.e., more deaths than births) in population during the 2010s. The city's older cohort, who are dying, are less educated than its youth. This alone raises Pittsburgh's education-attainment rates.

III. MIGRATION

What about the conventional wisdom that the educated are fleeing America's shrinking cities? The Census Bureau's American Community Survey provides a snapshot of migration by education-attainment level (**Figure 4**):[14] most of these shrinking metros did experience a net out-migration of people with college degrees.

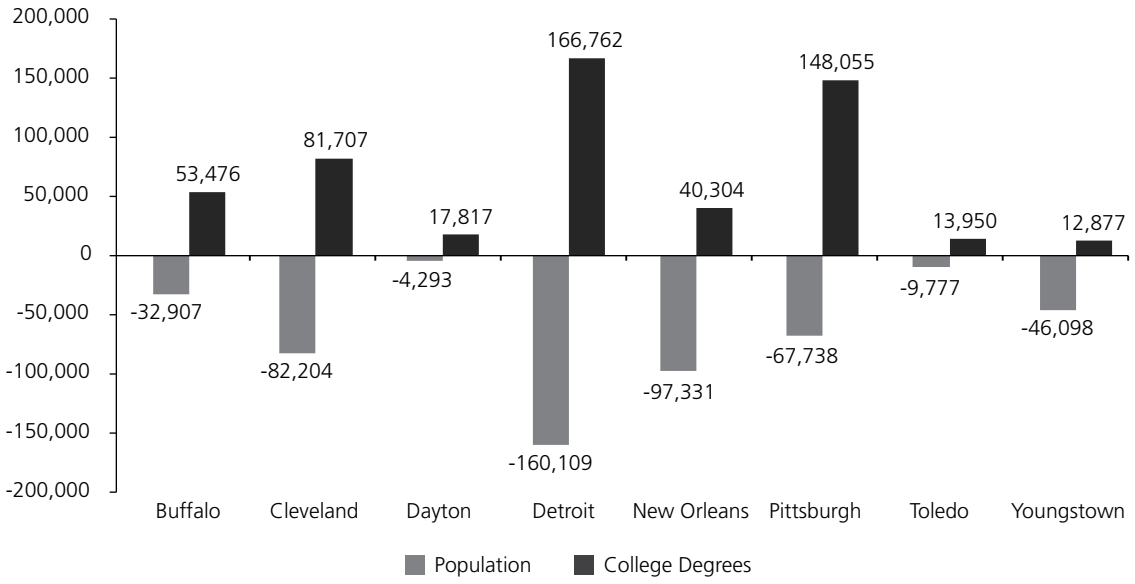
Figure 4's findings should not be surprising—these regions are well known for having large net out-migration. Yet in the popular mind, this reality is distorted into one of brain drain, which (falsely)

Figure 2. People Aged 25+ with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher

Metro Area	2000	2013	Total Brain Gain	Percentage Brain Gain	Percentage-Point Increase in College Degree–Attainment Rate
Akron, OH	110,875	141,553	30,678	27.7%	5.4%
Birmingham-Hoover, AL	157,420	220,197	62,777	39.9%	5.9%
Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, CT	237,674	288,841	51,167	21.5%	5.6%
Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara Falls, NY	182,144	235,620	53,476	29.4%	6.9%
Chattanooga, TN-GA	62,117	88,292	26,175	42.1%	4.2%
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI	1,679,306	2,224,790	45,484	32.5%	6.2%
Cleveland-Elyria, OH	343,103	424,810	81,707	23.8%	5.9%
Dayton, OH	123,270	143,922	20,652	16.8%	3.2%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI	676,906	843,668	166,762	24.6%	5.7%
Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI	137,422	200,089	62,667	45.6%	6.5%
Greensboro-High Point, NC	99,982	136,546	36,564	36.6%	4.1%
Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, CT	236,794	304,292	67,498	28.5%	6.0%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR	165,242	227,642	62,400	37.8%	4.5%
Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	260,981	348,202	87,221	33.4%	6.3%
New Haven-Milford, CT	152,433	198,328	45,895	30.1%	5.9%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA	191,901	232,205	40,304	21.0%	4.9%
Pittsburgh, PA	396,981	545,036	148,055	37.3%	8.8%
Providence-Warwick, RI-MA	248,934	325,807	76,873	30.9%	6.0%
Rochester, NY	190,232	239,111	48,879	25.7%	5.1%
San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA	1,105,519	1,446,263	340,744	30.8%	6.4%
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	455,910	605,781	149,871	32.9%	6.8%
Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton, PA	68,958	93,555	24,597	35.7%	6.1%
St. Louis, MO-IL	434,829	618,650	183,821	42.3%	7.6%
Syracuse, NY	105,039	131,947	26,908	25.6%	4.7%
Toledo, OH	84,144	98,094	13,950	16.6%	3.1%
Wichita, KS	88,015	119,080	31,065	35.3%	4.9%
Winston-Salem, NC	80,903	113,216	32,313	39.9%	4.6%
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA	66,782	79,659	12,877	19.3%	4.0%

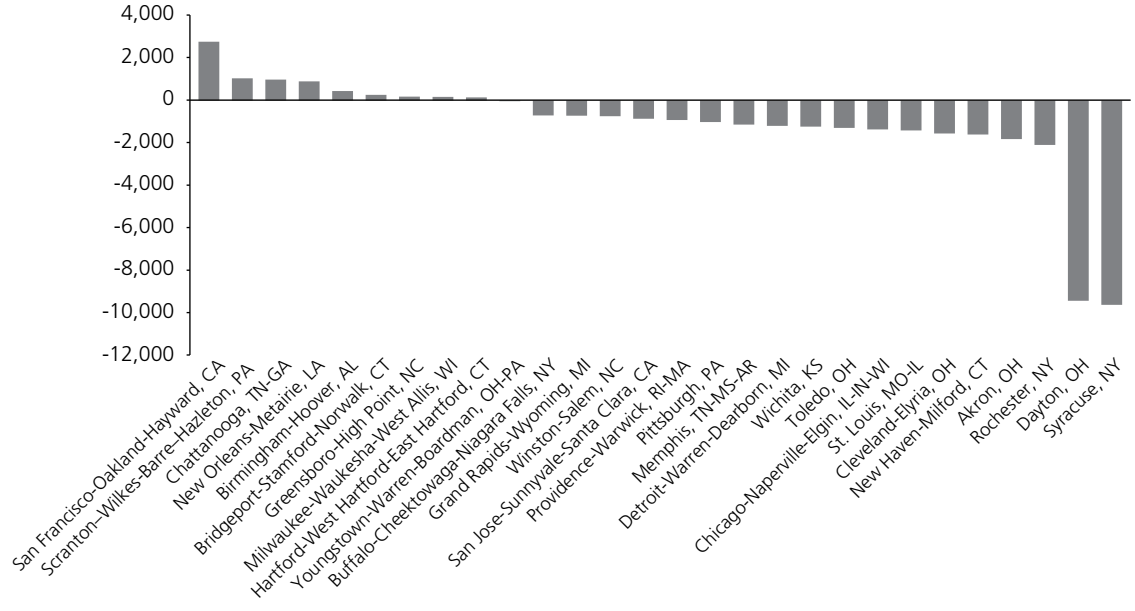
Source: Author's analysis of Census 2000 and 2013 1yr ACS data

Figure 3. Change in Population vs. College Degrees, 2000–2013



Source: Author's analysis of Census Bureau Population Estimates Program, Census 2000 and 2013 1yr ACS data

Figure 4. Net Migration, Bachelor's Degree or Higher, 2007–11 ACS



Source: Author's analysis of 2007–11 ACS county to county migration data

suggests that these regions are seeing a decline in educated residents. It is a misguided mind-set that views a city's talent pool as though it were a bathtub—with a leaky plug in the bottom of the tub allowing brains to escape down the drain, causing a decline in the water level. What this mind-set misses is the running tap at the top of the tub: though there may be some leakage, the water level (the number of residents with college degrees) is rising.

Shrinking, struggling cities are not the only American metros experiencing this form of brain leakage. New York and Boston, conventionally seen as top global talent magnets, experience net out-migration of the educated. In fact, more net residents with college degrees left New York than any other U.S. metro during 2000–2013. But no one frets that New York is hemorrhaging talent.

Migration data can be useful for analyzing certain aspects of a city's talent base, particularly its dynamism or churn. But these data do not offer a complete picture of a city's stock of educated

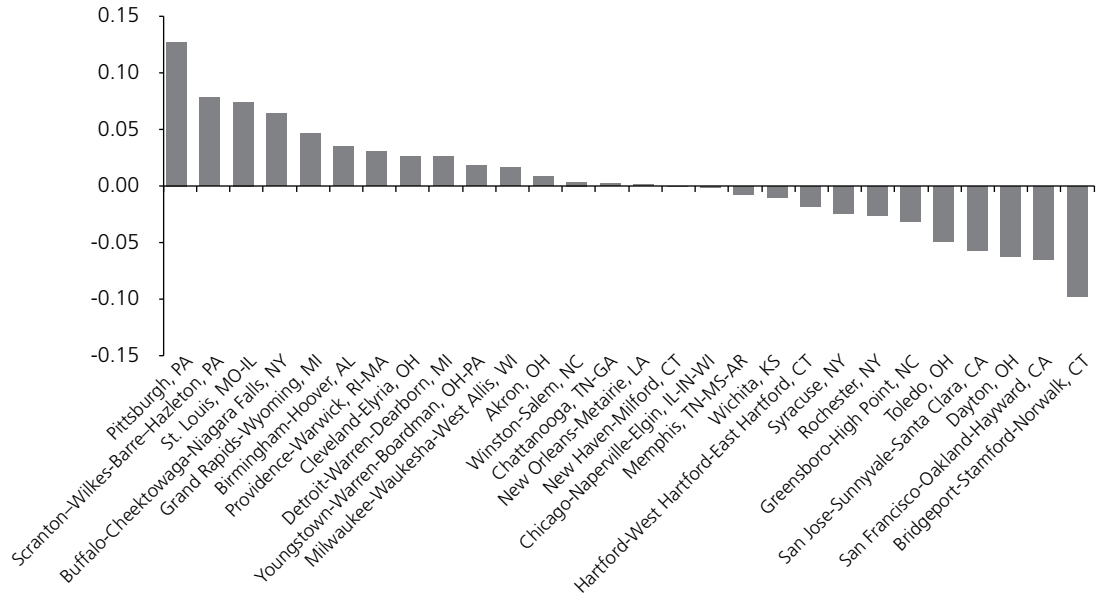
Figure 5. Top Metros by Improvement in College Degree–Attainment Rate

Rank*	Metro Area	Percentage-Point Increase in College Degree–Attainment Rate
1	Pittsburgh, PA	8.8%
5	St. Louis, MO-IL	7.6%
11	Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara Falls, NY	6.9%
13	San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	6.8%
17	Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI	6.5%
24	Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	6.3%
25	Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI	6.2%

*Out of 100 largest metro areas in 2013.

Source: Author's analysis of Census 2000 and 2013 1yr ACS data

Figure 6. LQ Change, 2000–2013



Source: Author's analysis of Census 2000 and 2013 1yr ACS data

residents—such as whether a shrinking city is gaining brains at a slower rate than the average. When college degree–attainment rates of the 28 metros under scrutiny are considered, some rank among America's most improved (**Figure 5**). The top three performers in Figure 5—all in the top ten for the U.S. as a whole—have population and/or job decline and outperform the Silicon Valley / San Jose area's rate of growth.

One metric that allows for direct comparison of a metro's concentration of college-degree holders with the U.S. average is the location quotient (LQ). In 2013, America's college degree–attainment rate was 29.6 percent. A metro with a college degree–attainment rate of exactly 29.6 percent would thus have an LQ of 1.0. If its attainment rate exceeded the U.S. average, its LQ would be greater than 1.0; and if it trailed the U.S. average, less than 1.0. **Figure 6** measures the 28 metros' change in LQ between 2000 and 2013.

Of the 28 metros, roughly half improved their LQ scores—making them more educated, relative to the U.S. average, in 2013 than in 2000—while roughly half lost ground, including San Francisco and San Jose.

While both Bay Area metros rank among America's most educated and have gained people with college degrees, they are relatively less populated by college-degree holders now than in 2000. Because they were already far ahead of the U.S. average in 2000, further gains in college-degree attainment, compared with less educated metros, were more difficult to secure. Other traditional brain-magnet metros (outside the 28 cities analyzed) with declining LQs during 2000–2013 are Austin, Denver, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.

Figure 6 also reveals that some nontraditional brain-magnet cities, including Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Detroit, saw gains in LQ. Such cities actually have a greater concentration of degrees relative to America today than they did in 2000. For example, Buffalo jumped from an LQ of 0.92 (less educated than the U.S. average) to 1.02 (more educated than the U.S. average), while Cleveland rose from 0.98 to 1.01.

Indeed, other than three already highly educated metros—San Francisco, San Jose, and Bridgeport—the only cities with a significantly negative LQ change were Dayton (-0.06) and Toledo (-0.05).

In short, these 28 metros are not falling behind in any significant way; half of them—including cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo that are widely viewed as downtrodden—are actually catching up with or surpassing the rest of the U.S. in education-attainment rates.

IV. YOUNG ADULT EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

If these 28 metros are *not* experiencing meaningful brain drain for their general populations, are they, perhaps, losing young brains? Indeed, much of the discussion of brain drain and education-attainment levels is focused on the millennial generation. (One study, "The Young and Restless in a Knowledge Economy,"[15] focused on millennials' predilection to move.) Are such cities failing to produce and attract the next generation of talent? **Figure 7** reveals education-attainment trends for those aged 25–34 in the 28 metros.

Figure 7 shows that 26 metros gained young adults with college degrees. The two exceptions, Detroit and Bridgeport, still saw their percentage of young adults with college degrees rise. (The main reason that Detroit's and Bridgeport's number of young adults with college degrees declined is that their overall young-adult population also declined—a normal development for a shrinking city.)

As for changes in LQ values, the 28 metros are, as a whole, performing *better* with educated young adults than with adults overall: a clear majority of these cities lifted their LQ, meaning that they outperformed the U.S. average in boosting their share of educated young adults. Cities that underperformed—specifically Detroit, Bridgeport, and Toledo—would do well to investigate the causes of their underperformance; policy adjustments may be necessary to bolster these metros' attractiveness to educated young adults.

Figure 7. Population, Aged 25–34, with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, 2000–2013

Metro Area	2000	2013	Total Change	Percent Change	LQ Change	Percentage-Point Increase in College Degree–Attainment Rate
Akron, OH	27,145	30,690	3,545	13.1%	0.03	6.9%
Birmingham–Hoover, AL	43,304	50,709	7,405	17.1%	-0.04	4.2%
Bridgeport–Stamford–Norwalk, CT	50,437	48,832	-1,605	-3.2%	-0.21	1.3%
Buffalo–Cheektowaga–Niagara Falls, NY	44,119	57,747	13,628	30.9%	0.10	9.2%
Chattanooga, TN–GA	13,341	17,550	4,209	31.5%	0.02	4.7%
Chicago–Naperville–Elgin, IL–IN–WI	484,998	572,103	87,105	18.0%	0.00	6.7%
Cleveland–Elyria, OH	86,316	93,966	7,650	8.9%	0.03	7.0%
Dayton, OH	27,315	29,073	1,758	6.4%	-0.07	2.8%
Detroit–Warren–Dearborn, MI	180,008	170,122	-9,886	-5.5%	-0.01	5.0%
Grand Rapids–Wyoming, MI	37,865	49,195	11,330	29.9%	0.04	6.9%
Greensboro–High Point, NC	25,555	27,207	1,652	6.5%	-0.08	2.4%
Hartford–West Hartford–East Hartford, CT	52,514	64,730	12,216	23.3%	0.05	8.3%
Memphis, TN–MS–AR	43,889	49,334	5,445	12.4%	-0.07	2.4%
Milwaukee–Waukesha–West Allis, WI	68,056	85,841	17,785	26.1%	-0.01	6.3%
New Haven–Milford, CT	37,985	47,302	9,317	24.5%	0.05	8.1%
New Orleans–Metairie, LA	46,595	59,700	13,105	28.1%	0.04	6.4%
Pittsburgh, PA	98,503	131,874	33,371	33.9%	0.12	10.6%
Providence–Warwick, RI–MA	58,869	68,416	9,547	16.2%	0.04	6.6%
Rochester, NY	43,932	52,211	8,279	18.8%	0.00	6.2%
San Francisco–Oakland–Hayward, CA	305,080	350,734	45,654	15.0%	-0.09	5.8%
San Jose–Sunnyvale–Santa Clara, CA	134,357	148,892	14,535	10.8%	-0.01	8.0%
Scranton–Wilkes-Barre–Hazleton, PA	16,036	21,348	5,312	33.1%	0.11	8.3%
St. Louis, MO–IL	108,495	145,804	37,309	34.4%	0.07	8.2%
Syracuse, NY	23,625	29,927	6,302	26.7%	0.06	7.8%
Toledo, OH	20,856	21,060	204	1.0%	-0.09	1.9%
Wichita, KS	20,150	25,108	4,958	24.6%	-0.08	2.5%
Winston–Salem, NC	19,819	21,351	1,532	7.7%	0.01	4.8%
Youngstown–Warren–Boardman, OH–PA	14,249	15,488	1,239	8.7%	0.03	5.1%

Source: Author's analysis of Census 2000 and 2013 1yr ACS data

CONCLUSION

This paper finds that even major U.S. cities that are shrinking in terms of jobs and/or population are adding thousands of new residents with college degrees. While a majority of such metros are experiencing net domestic out-migration of residents with a college degree, this is being more than offset by other factors. As a whole, the shrinking-city group is holding its own with the U.S. average in education-attainment rates—and, in many cases, is outperforming it. With few exceptions, these cities are boosting their population of educated young adults, too.

None of this is to suggest that America's shrinking cities do not face serious problems, but brain drain is not one of them. Indeed, these cities have largely accomplished their objective of boosting brain power and are making positive strides in terms of college-degree attainment. This brain gain is cause for celebration. The vast amount of effort and money currently dedicated to stopping or reversing brain drain should be redirected to worthier pursuits.

Crime must be brought under control in places like Detroit and Buffalo, the core cities of struggling regions, using modern best practices. Shrinking cities have an excess of infrastructure, much of it old and in need of repair, relative to people. Right-sizing, and then upgrading this infrastructure stock will be long, painful, and necessary. America's shrinking cities have legacy zoning and other business regulations that inhibit entrepreneurship and economic growth. Cutting red tape is not glamorous but is vital to their future prosperity. Rebuilding core public services that confer broad benefits to the whole community, not just to the most educated, should be the main policy focus. But the battle against brain drain has largely already been won.

Endnotes

1. See http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/archivestory.php/aid/673/The_brain_drain:_Old_myths,_new_realities.
2. See http://www.1776.vc/reports/innovation-that-matters.
3. See http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/06/where_are_they_now_catch_up_on.html.
4. "Michigan Cool Cities Initial Report," Office of the Governor, State of Michigan, December 23, 2003.
5. See http://highereducation.org/crosstalk/ctbook/pdfbook/OhioBrainDrainBookLayout.pdf.
6. See http://www.daytoncitypaper.com/dayton-the-brain-drain.
7. See http://www.bizjournals.com/birmingham/print-edition/2014/03/07/no-one-solution-to-cure-birmingham.html.
8. See http://www.browndailyherald.com/2013/10/01/freitag-14-brain-drain.
9. Population figures calculated using annual estimates, as of July 1, 2015, from the Census Bureau's Population Estimates program; see http://www.census.gov/popest.
10. Jobs data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics State and Metro Area Employment series in the Current Employment Statistics program; see http://www.bls.gov/sae.
11. Annual data for 2014 are available for both population and jobs. The end year of 2013 was selected to match the most recent data available for education attainment.
12. In this paper, the term "city" refers to a metropolitan area, not a specific municipality. Metropolitan areas are the best standardized way of defining local economies and labor markets.
13. Education-attainment data from Census 2000 SF3 Table P37, recalculated to current metropolitan area definitions, and the Census American Community Survey 2013 one-year report, table B15002.
14. See https://www.census.gov/hhes/migration/data/acs/county_to_county_mig_2007_to_2011.html.
15. See http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/12/AR2006021201210.html.

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