



Who's Moving to the Cities, Who Isn't: Comparing American Cities

A Center for Community Progress Research Brief

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Introduction

Recent years have been heralded as a transformative era in the trajectory of American cities by everyone from urban pundits to the editors of *Time* magazine.¹ Topping them, a writer for Atlantic Cities has called it the “Golden Age” of American cities.² As the headline of the *Time* article, “The New American Dream Is Living in a City, Not Owning a House in the Suburbs,” suggests, this age is seen as not just a temporary shift, but a fundamental transformation taking place in where and how Americans choose to live.

The issue here is not so much overall migration, as it is the movement of people in the middle and upper income ranges of the American demographic profile who have been severely under-represented in most central cities since the middle-class flight that followed the end of the Second World War. The ability of the cities to draw and hold an economically diverse population is an important element in whether they can retain, or regain, economic vitality.

In this narrative, the aging of the baby boomers and the arrival of the new generation born since around 1983 and known as the millennial generation, are seen as heralding a significant shift in demand. As baby boomers age, the argument goes, they may wish to downsize from the large suburban houses on individual lots they sought in earlier decades and return to the cities, while the millennial generation, in Arthur Nelson’s words, do “not necessarily want to live in the kinds of homes, neighborhoods or communities where their parents raised them.”³

While the proposition that these population shifts, if indeed true, are enough to create a ‘golden age’ is questionable, the fact that *something* is happening in American cities is beyond dispute. The question is, what is it, and where is it taking place? Is it just about the march of the millennials to the cities, or, as many writers claim, is it about a shift in preferences cutting across generations; and is it affecting all American cities to roughly the same extent, or are certain cities benefiting, while others are falling behind? More specifically, if – as common sense would suggest – some cities are benefiting more than others, what are the key differences between cities, and in particular, how are these trends affecting the nation’s distressed older industrial cities, the legacy cities?

By looking at one highly important indicator – where college-educated adults at different age levels are living and where they are moving – this research brief attempts to offer some initial thoughts on those questions. At the same time, it is important to stress that this is only one indicator of change. Real and sustainable urban transformation will require change in many other aspects of the urban scene, and a readiness to confront the issues of poverty, lack of opportunity and inequality that continue to plague our cities.

Analysis

To look at this question, we looked at the distribution in different cities of adults with a bachelor’s or higher degree by age group in 2000 and 2012, and how that distribution shifted between 2000 and 2012. We treated college degrees as a stand-in for middle and

upper income status. This is borne out by the fact that in 2012, median earnings nationally for individuals with a bachelor’s or higher degree were roughly \$55,200, or nearly 60% higher than the national median for all individuals.⁴ Notwithstanding anecdotal reports of the difficulties young college graduates are experiencing in the workforce, the wage disparity between college graduates aged 25 to 32 and high school graduates of the same age is even greater, 63%.⁵

We looked separately at four different age groups, as classified by the US Bureau of the Census: 25-34, 35-44, 45-64 and 65 or over. We used data from the American Community Survey for 2012 and from the decennial census long form for 2000. We then looked at a total of 24 large cities with populations over 250,000: nine cities that are widely heralded as strong, successful, cities we call ‘magnet cities,’ five sunbelt cities, and ten legacy cities, historically industrial cities that have lost at least 25% of their peak population, shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: CITIES ANALYZED IN THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

MAGNET CITIES	SUNBELT CITIES	LEGACY CITIES
Austin	Atlanta	Baltimore
Boston	Dallas	Buffalo
Brooklyn (see note)	Las Vegas	Cincinnati
Chicago	Miami	Cleveland
Denver	Phoenix	Detroit
Portland		Milwaukee
San Francisco		Newark
Seattle		Philadelphia
Washington, DC		Pittsburgh
		St. Louis

NOTE: Brooklyn is, of course, part of New York City (although it was a separate city until 1898). Since it is widely seen as the locus of demographic transformation in New York City, we chose to look at it separately, since what may be taking place in that borough is likely to be obscured if citywide data is used.

We asked three questions of this data:

- Is each age group of college-educated adults over- or under-represented in each city today?
- Was each age group over- or under-represented in each city in 2000, and how has it changed?
- Are cities capturing more or less than their proportionate share of *the growth* in each age group between 2000 and 2012?

To answer these questions, we compared the city’s distribution and trends to the statewide distribution and trends for each age group.⁶ For example, 11.6% of Denver’s total population is made up of college-educated adults between 25 and 34, compared to 5.5% of Colorado’s population (or just over 4% of the nation’s population). This group is clearly over-represented in Denver’s population. Looking at trends, we see that between 2000 and

2012, the total number of college-educated adults aged 25 to 34 grew by a little over 52,000 statewide, but by over 27,000 in Denver, which means that Denver captured nearly 53% of total statewide growth. Since its total share of Colorado’s population is roughly 12%, we can say that Denver captured substantially more than its proportionate share of the growth in that demographic.

Simply knowing that a city’s distribution of a particular group is either more or less than proportional to its total population is only part of the picture; another part is understand *how much* it is either over- or under-represented. To answer that question, we calculated the ratios between the city’s share of each demographic, and its share of the *growth* in each demographic, and the statewide level. To illustrate this, Table 2 shows the ratios for Boston.

TABLE 2: CITY/STATE RATIOS FOR BOSTON

	25-34	35-44	45-64	65+
Population share 2012	2.13	0.89	0.64	0.63
Population share 2000	1.81	0.81	0.68	0.68
Share of growth 2000-2012	5.15	GAIN ⁷	0.58	0.60

A ratio of 1.0 means the city’s share is the same as the statewide level. For example, if 5% of the state’s 2012 population are adults 25 to 34 with college degrees, and the same group makes up 5% of the city’s population, the ratio between city and state for 2012 would be 1.0. Since Boston’s ratio for 2012 is 2.13, that means that the share of that demographic in its population is more than double the statewide level. The same approach is used to look at the city’s share of growth. If a city has 10% of the state’s population, and it captured 10% of the state’s growth in a particular demographic, its ratio would be 1.0. *Boston, however, with less than 10% of Massachusetts’ population, captured nearly 50% of the growth in 25-34 year old college-educated adults between 2000 and 2012, thus showing a ratio of greater than 5.*

While Boston is becoming a popular millennial destination, capturing a disproportionate share of the statewide growth in that group, it is not doing well either holding or drawing older people with college degrees, as ratios well below 1.0 for other age groups indicate. While it showed a small gain in college-educated adults 35 to 44 over the past decade, its share of that demographic is still below the state average. Meanwhile, its population share of adults 45 and older are well below statewide levels, while its 2000-2012 share of growth actually shows a decline in Boston’s share of older college-educated adults over this period.

Appendix 1 presents tables with the ratios for magnet cities, Sunbelt cities, and legacy cities respectively. The data has been color-coded to highlight the key differences between age groups and between cities. Green cells show age groups that are over-represented in that city, while red cells show age groups that are under-represented; the darker the color, the greater the over- or under-representation.

Findings

This research suggests that the change in cities' trajectories is real, but uneven. While there is no question that significant changes are taking place, we would suggest that much of the talk of 'historic urban reordering' or of 'golden ages' is still premature. Many – but far from all – cities are seeing a dramatic rise in their millennial population, 25 to 34 year old college-educated adults. Some cities, principally a cluster of the magnet cities, are also seeing a significant increase in their share of college-educated adults in the 35 to 44 year old range, suggesting that those cities are increasingly seen by families who have the means to choose their environment as suitable places to raise children. Far fewer cities are drawing adults 45 and older, suggesting that the proposition that a significant shift in the residential preferences of empty nesters and retirees is also taking place, while widely asserted, is much less well-founded. Table 3 shows the average population share by age group for the three categories of city.

TABLE 3: COMPOSITE POPULATION SHARES BY CATEGORY OF CITY FOR 2012

	MAGNET CITIES	SUNBELT CITIES	LEGACY CITIES
25-34	2.53	1.61	1.30
35-44	1.61	1.22	0.72
45-64	1.10	0.96	0.63
65+	1.15	0.92	0.69

NOTE: ratios shown are average of individual city ratios in each category, not weighted by city population size.

1. *Most cities, but not all, are drawing significant numbers of highly-educated millennials*

The 'magnet cities' are truly millennial magnets – nearly 16% of San Francisco's population, and nearly 14% of that of Seattle and Boston, are college-educated adults between 25 and 34 compared to slightly more than 4% in the United States population. All of these cities are also drawing a larger share of the growth in millennials than their already disproportionate population share. At present, 15% of Washington DC's population is made up of millennials; at the city's current trend the number of 25- to 34-year-olds will increase to over 20% by 2025. Notably, however, with the exception of Brooklyn,⁸ *all of these cities already had disproportionately high 25- to 34-year old population shares in 2000*, although not to the extent they had reached by 2012.

Other cities are drawing millennials, but the picture elsewhere is much more uneven. Among the Sunbelt cities, Atlanta is drawing millennials at a rate more typical of the magnet cities than of other cities in the Sunbelt. Miami, although historically not a major millennial destination, is clearly catching up. Dallas, Phoenix and Las Vegas – particularly the last – are actually losing ground, and are drawing less than their proportionate share of growth in this demographic.

The picture among legacy cities is equally mixed. Four of the 10 cities – Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and St. Louis – have become significant millennial destinations,

while Buffalo and Milwaukee are showing some promise. Other cities, Detroit and Newark in particular, however, are still lagging well behind this powerful urban trend.

2. *Movement of college-educated adults 35 to 44 to cities is less pronounced than that of the millennial generation, but still significant for some cities.*

Most magnet cities are magnets not only for the millennial generation, but for the next group of college-educated adults as well, those in the 35 to 44 age bracket. San Francisco and Seattle, but also Austin, Portland and Washington DC, have significantly more than their proportionate share of this demographic, while in all of the magnet cities the rate of growth significantly exceeds their current population share. While it is impossible to tell from this data what percentage of the 35 to 44 year olds moving into Washington, Seattle or Denver are in child-rearing families, it appears that these cities are broadening their demographic appeal beyond the millennial generation. Boston stands out, however, for the opposite trend; although that city is one of the nation's most pronounced millennial magnets, it is under-represented in all older college-educated age groups.

Again with the exception of Atlanta, the picture in the Sunbelt is very different. Although college-educated 35 to 44 year olds are represented in Dallas, Las Vegas and Phoenix at roughly the same rate as in their states' populations, they are not a growing demographic in these cities, particularly in Dallas and Phoenix. They are growing rapidly in Miami, where they have historically been under-represented.

Legacy cities, however, are for the most part failing to capture their share of this demographic. Only St. Louis has *both* a higher population share and a higher rate of growth among college-educated adults 35 to 44 than its state, although a few cities with low population shares are showing growth in this group, which is significantly under-represented in most legacy cities.

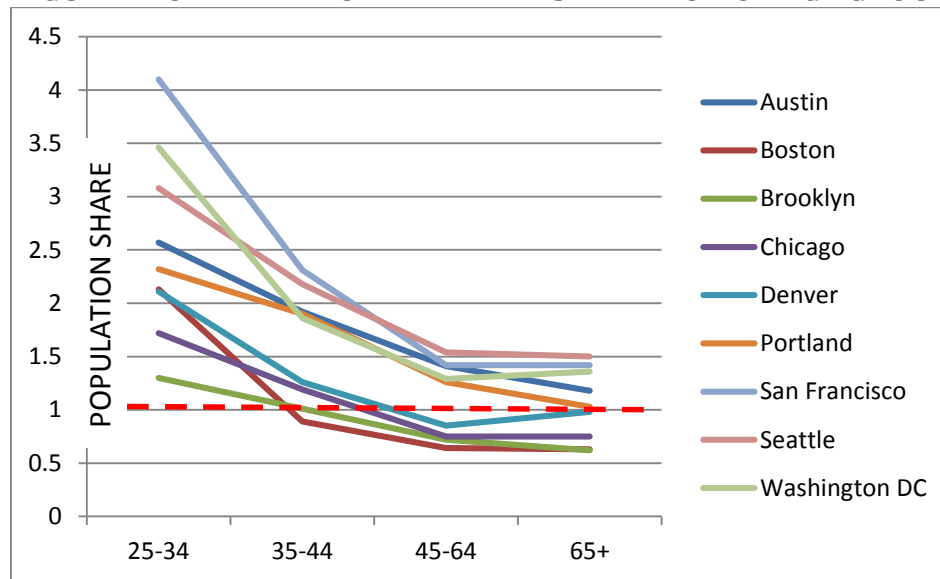
Cincinnati is an outlier. Over the decades preceding 2000, Cincinnati retained a significantly higher share of college-educated adults at all age levels than its peer cities, and in 2000, it had the highest shares of college-educated adults *for all age groups* among the 10 legacy cities. Over the past decade, however, in contrast to many of the other cities which saw at least relative gains, Cincinnati has lost ground across the board. This raises significant questions about the city's trajectory and future prospects.

3. *While a few cities are attracting college-educated adults over 45, most are not, particularly legacy cities*

The attractiveness of American cities continues to be directly proportional to the age of the individual. *None* of the cities studied shows trends toward urban living among college-educated adults 45 or older that are comparable to the trends driving millennials, or even the 35 to 44 age group (there is relatively little difference between the trends for those 45

to 64 and those over 65). While a few cities have more than proportionate shares of college-educated adults 45 and over, Seattle, San Francisco and Austin being the most notable, there is no evidence of a significant upward trend. *Even more than in the case of millennials, cities like Seattle and San Francisco were over-represented in this group in 2000, and the trend since then has basically been one of maintaining the status quo rather than increasing their population share.* Portland is the only city that went from being under-represented to overrepresented in the college-educated 45 to 64 year old group between 2000 and 2012. Other cities, including Boston, Chicago and Denver, are attracting few college-educated older adults. Relative over- or under-representation of different age groups in the cluster of magnet cities is shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: OVER- AND UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF AGE GROUPS IN MAGNET CITIES



Age groups above the dotted red line are over-represented and below the dotted red line are under-represented in the city's population

College-educated adults over 45 are under-represented in most Sunbelt cities. While they have historically been slightly over-represented in Atlanta and Dallas, their share has dropped, rather than grown, in both cities since 2000. The picture for legacy cities is bleaker. No legacy city either has a proportionate population share of older college-educated adults or is drawing even close to their proportionate share of the growth in this demographic. Only Pittsburgh and Cincinnati are even close, and both are drawing far fewer than their current share. This is particularly significant, because, reflecting the expansion in higher education that took place between the 1950s and the 1980s, *older adults are – by far – the fastest growing group of college-educated adults by age bracket in the United States, as shown in Table 4.*

TABLE 4: INCREASE IN COLLEGE-EDUCATED ADULTS BY AGE GROUP FOR UNITED STATES 2000 TO 2012

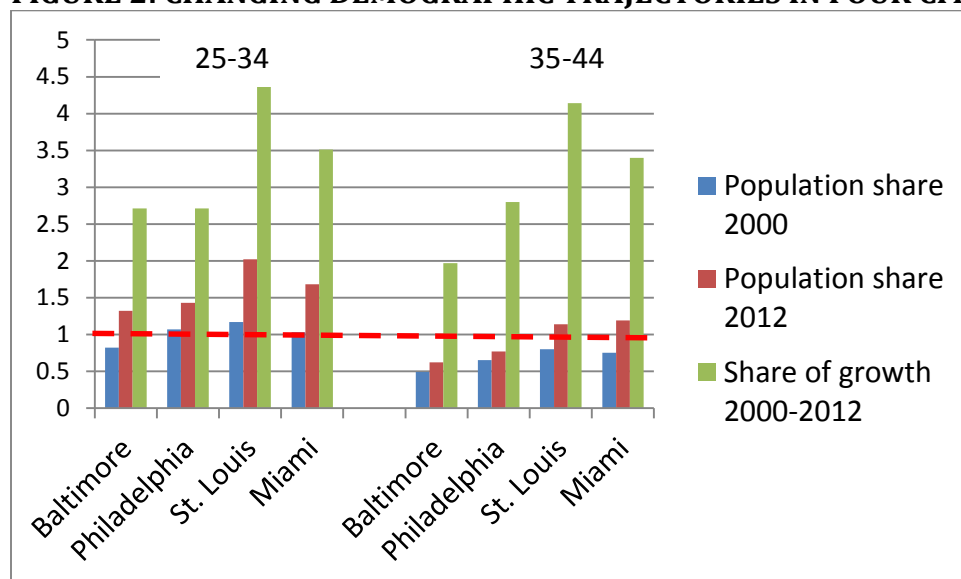
	NUMBER 2000	NUMBER 2012	INCREASE	% INCREASE
25-34	10,899,873	13,567,437	+ 2,667,564	24.5%

35-44	11,882,123	13,250,617	+ 1,368,494	11.5%
45-64	16,296,602	23,907,407	+ 7,610,805	46.7%
65+	5,384,007	10,017,061	+ 4,633,054	86.1%

4. History is usually destiny, but not always

We have stressed the point that, for the most part, the cities that are strongly over-represented in various college-educated demographics today – like Seattle or San Francisco – were already over-represented in 2000 in those same demographics. This is generally true, but *there are enough exceptions to suggest that it is possible for a city to break out of the pack and change its demographic trajectory*. Four of the cities – three legacy cities and one Sunbelt city – exemplify this process of transformation, with respect to both the 25 to 34 year old and 35 to 44 year old demographics, as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC TRAJECTORIES IN FOUR CITIES



Age groups above the dotted red line are over-represented and below the dotted red line are under-represented in the city's population

While Baltimore and Philadelphia are still under-represented among college-educated 35 to 44 year olds (below the red line), the trends reflected in their share of growth suggests that that could change significantly over the course of the next decade, particularly as the number of millennials moving into this age group will be substantially larger than the pool making up this demographic for the past decade, and – one can hypothesize – may be more strongly predisposed to continue to live in the cities that they have made their home than their predecessors. It is worth noting that there is a very strong correlation⁹ between magnet cities' share of growth for the 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 age groups, but no correlation in legacy cities; this may reflect a spillover in growth in the next older age group in the magnet cities, which may, in turn, be attributable to the fact that many of those cities have been attracting young, well-educated, people for much longer than have even the more successful legacy cities. No legacy or Sunbelt city, and only Portland among magnet cities,

however, shows a positive trend line in terms of its ability to attract college-educated adults over 45.

Closing Note

As we stated at the beginning of this brief, the economic vitality of America's cities is closely tied to their ability to draw and hold an economically diverse population. In that respect, the extent to which many cities are clearly becoming significant destinations for the millennial generation – and in many cases attracting large numbers of college-educated 35 to 44 year olds – is a sign of significant progress in rebuilding urban America. At the same time, it is clearly premature to declare victory, and herald the present as an urban golden age. The urban revival reflected in the numbers presented above is manifestly uneven, in two important respects:

- While some cities have been highly successful in drawing and holding college-educated adults, many others are not, and continue to lose ground; and
- The movement to the cities is predominately a movement of the young, with older college-educated adults under-represented or declining even in some cities that are powerful magnets for younger people.

At the same time, the evidence of a few legacy cities shows that cities *can* change their demographic trajectory. The data here suggests that it may be well worth while to take a closer look at the trends – and the forces driving those trends – in Baltimore, Philadelphia and St. Louis, and see if there are lessons that can be learned and applied in other legacy cities.

The second point is more complicated. Is a city in which young people, predominately single individuals and couples, are vastly over-represented, and middle-aged people and child-rearing families – particularly but not exclusively among middle and upper-income households – significantly under-represented, likely to be a healthy, vital city? There is no simple yes or no answer to such a question, yet there are compelling arguments that a city needs the diversity of age groups, household types, and stages in the life cycle – as much as economic or ethnic diversity – to truly thrive.¹⁰

Finally, a third question must also be raised. No city's adult population is entirely, or largely – with few exceptions – either affluent or college graduates. The litmus test of a successful city is not only in its ability to draw an economically diverse population, but in how that translates into greater opportunity and an improved quality of life for all of the city's residents. In that respect, we still have a long way to go, both in understanding the extent to which urban revival is indeed creating benefits for the city's present residents, particularly its lower-income residents, and – to the extent that it is not – in changing policies and strategies to create greater opportunities for all in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Mallach is a senior fellow at the Center for Community Progress in Washington DC. A city planner, advocate and writer, he is nationally known for his work on housing, economic development, and urban revitalization, and has worked with local governments and community organizations across the country to develop creative policies and strategies to rebuild their cities and neighborhoods. A former director of housing & economic development in Trenton, New Jersey, he currently teaches in the graduate city planning program at Pratt Institute in New York City. He has spoken on housing and urban issues in the United States, Europe, Israel and Japan, and was a visiting scholar at the University of Nevada Las Vegas for the 2010-2011 academic year. His recent books include *A Decent Home: Planning, Building and Preserving Affordable Housing* and *Bringing Buildings Back: From Vacant Properties to Community Assets*, which has become a resource for thousands of planners, lawyers, public officials and community leaders dealing with problem property and revitalization issues. He is a member of the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Certified Planners, and holds a B.A. degree from Yale University.

APPENDIX TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC RATIOS FOR MAGNET CITIES

		Austin	Boston	Brooklyn	Chicago	Denver	Portland	San Francisco	Seattle	Washington DC
25-34	Share 2012	2.57	2.13	1.30	1.72	2.11	2.32	4.10	3.08	3.46
	Share 2000	2.53	1.81	0.94	1.33	1.54	1.95	3.53	2.91	2.31
	Growth share	2.83	5.15	2.64	2.65	4.31	3.48	9.27	3.29	8.09
35-44	Share 2012	1.92	0.89	1.01	1.19	1.26	1.90	2.31	2.18	1.86
	Share 2000	1.65	0.81	0.75	0.84	0.91	1.41	1.85	1.84	1.39
	Growth share (see note)	3.31	GAIN	GAIN	3.58	3.34	3.44	5.41	4.34	5.68
45-64	Share 2012	1.41	0.64	0.72	0.75	0.85	1.26	1.42	1.54	1.29
	Share 2000	1.4	0.68	0.69	0.73	0.91	0.86	1.46	1.50	1.46
	Growth share	1.49	0.58	0.81	0.61	0.64	1.13	1.13	1.52	0.88
65+	Share 2012	1.18	0.63	0.62	0.75	0.98	1.03	1.42	1.50	1.36
	Share 2000	1.18	0.68	0.62	0.79	1.25	1.01	1.48	1.45	1.56
	Growth share	1.21	0.60	0.63	0.60	0.71	1.01	1.24	1.49	1.09

KEY TO COLORS

	Absolute Loss
	<0.75
	0.75-1.24
	1.25-1.99
	2+

NOTE: both Massachusetts and New York State lost college-educated 35-44 year olds between 2000 and 2012, while Boston gained slightly and Brooklyn gained substantially in this demographic. For this reason, it is impossible to calculate a ratio, and the growth share is simply shown as 'gain'

APPENDIX TABLE 2: DEMOGRAPHIC RATIOS FOR SUNBELT CITIES

		Atlanta	Dallas	Las Vegas	Miami	Phoenix
25-34	Share 2012	2.91	1.57	0.76	1.68	1.13
	Share 2000	2.00	1.52	1.13	1.03	1.06
	Growth share	11.31	0.85	0.14	3.51	0.85
35-44	Share 2012	1.77	1.00	1.11	1.19	1.05
	Share 2000	1.22	1.09	0.99	0.75	1.06
	Growth share	3.37	LOSS	1.14	3.40	0.59
45-64	Share 2012	1.21	0.96	0.97	0.71	0.95
	Share 2000	1.71	1.04	0.95	0.61	0.88
	Growth share	1.02	0.47	0.83	0.82	0.87
65+	Share 2012	1.37	1.10	1.06	0.44	0.61
	Share 2000	1.48	1.23	1.07	0.65	0.57
	Growth share	1.11	0.75	0.97	0.10	0.57

APPENDIX TABLE 3: DEMOGRAPHIC RATIOS FOR LEGACY CITIES

		Baltimore	Buffalo	Cincinnati	Cleveland	Detroit	Milwaukee	Newark	Philadelphia	Pittsburgh	St. Louis
25-34	Share 2012	1.32	0.95	1.82	0.85	0.43	1.15	0.48	1.43	2.50	2.02
	Share 2000	0.82	0.73	1.78	0.76	0.47	1.04	0.36	1.07	1.66	1.17
	Share of growth	2.71	2.23	0.12	0.07	LOSS	1.38	1.15	2.71	4.88	4.42
35-44	Share 2012	0.62	0.64	0.96	0.67	0.39	0.71	0.29	0.77	0.99	1.14
	share 2000	0.49	0.58	1.03	0.49	0.43	0.66	0.24	0.65	0.94	0.80
	Share of growth	1.97	LOSS	LOSS	3.45	LOSS	0.77	1.77	2.80	LOSS	4.14
45-64	Share 2012	0.51	0.68	0.93	0.44	0.49	0.57	0.26	0.59	0.96	0.83
	Share 2000	0.52	0.6	0.95	0.38	0.47	0.61	0.24	0.65	0.95	0.72
	Share of growth	0.27	0.45	0.54	0.38	0.08	0.43	0.32	0.40	0.63	0.78
65+	share 2012	0.57	0.57	0.92	0.38	0.54	0.54	0.19	0.64	1.00	0.74
	Share 2000	0.62	0.61	1.22	0.46	0.46	0.74	0.26	0.7	1.11	0.82
	Share of growth	0.40	0.36	0.15	0.11	0.38	0.21	0.09	0.53	0.61	0.74

ENDNOTES

¹ *Time* recently published an article by Sam Frizell headlined “The New American Dream Is Living in a City, Not Owning a House in the Suburbs,” (April 25, 2013) borrowing the term from Christopher Leinberger, who used the phrase in the title of his 2008 book, *The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream*. Among other pundits, Vishaan Chakrabarti has called our times a “historic urban reordering” in a 2014 op-ed in *The New York Times*, while Alan Ehrenhalt’s book *The Great Inversion*, defined that term as “the rearrangement of living patterns across an entire metropolitan area, all taking place at roughly the same time”.

² Zachary Karabell (2013. “The Golden Age of American Cities—and What’s Really Behind It” *Atlantic Cities*, October 25.

³ Arthur C. Nelson (2013) *Reshaping Metropolitan America: Development Trends and Opportunities to 2013* Washington DC: Island Press, p33.

⁴ The economic benefit from college education only really works for those who get a four-year degree; median earnings for individuals with some college or with a two-year associate’s degree were 8% *below* the national median for all individuals.

⁵ Pew Research Center, *The Rising Cost of Not Going to College* (2014)
<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/02/SDT-higher-ed-FINAL-02-11-2014.pdf>

⁶ For Washington DC, we compared the city’s distribution and trends with national data. While we feel that using statewide percentages as the frame of reference provides a more meaningful picture, it can be argued that it tends to understate the share of cities in states with a higher share of college graduates, such as Massachusetts or New York, and overstate the share of cities in states with lower shares, such as Florida or Michigan. In most cases, however, the difference would be minimal.

⁷ Since Massachusetts as a whole saw a net loss in the number of college graduates in the 35 to 44 year old bracket, while Boston saw a small gain, it is impossible to calculate a ratio. Hence, the word ‘gain’ appears in lieu of the ratio in that cell.

⁸ The population share numbers for Brooklyn at all age levels are less impressive than a follower of urban trends might expect from the vast amount of publicity about the transformation of that borough. The fact is, however, that Brooklyn is a very big place, with a population of nearly 2.6 million. The media tend to focus on the dramatic transformation of areas like Williamsburg, Fort Greene and others relatively close to Manhattan, while showing less interest in the vast expanses of lower-income and working-class Brooklyn to the south and the east.

⁹ Significant at the .001 level.

¹⁰ For a cogent article on this theme, see “The Childless City” by Joel Kotkin and Ali Modarres, *City Journal*, Summer 2013, available at http://www.city-journal.org/2013/23_3_childless-cities.html