

No, Chicagoland isn't the only metro area losing residents

 [politifact.com/illinois/statements/2018/jun/01/lori-lightfoot/no-chicagoland-isnt-only-metro-area-losing-residen](https://www.politifact.com/illinois/statements/2018/jun/01/lori-lightfoot/no-chicagoland-isnt-only-metro-area-losing-residen)

"We are the only metropolitan area in the country that's losing population."

— [Lori Lightfoot](#) on Sunday, May 20th, 2018 in a radio interview

By [Kiannah Sepeda-Miller](#) on Friday, June 1st, 2018 at 7:00 a.m.



Lori Lightfoot appears on WTTW on May 14, 2018 soon after announcing her campaign. It was one of at least three separate media appearances during which she made her claim about population drain. (WTTW)



A Chicago mayoral hopeful vying to represent the city's progressive wing recently leapt into the race with a talking point about population drain.

Lori Lightfoot, an attorney who previously headed Mayor Rahm Emanuel's police board, joined the growing crowd of potential candidates seeking to unseat him in May. In [multiple media appearances](#) following the announcement of her candidacy, Lightfoot argued high tax burdens under Emanuel are driving families of modest means out of the city.

"The fact that we are the only metropolitan area in the country that's losing population ought to be a sense of urgency," Lightfoot said during a WGN radio interview. "To me, it's the proverbial canary in the mine shaft."

The city of Chicago's population drain is well-documented. Chicago lost residents in 2017 for the third year in a row, the latest Census data show, and its population has been on a mostly uninterrupted decline since peaking at 3.6 million in 1950. Even so, at 2.7 million residents today, Chicago remains the nation's third largest city.

But the "metropolitan area" extends far beyond the city of Chicago, not just in colloquial terms but in those clearly recognized by the nation's official head-counters at the U.S. Census Bureau. So the claim that the Chicago metropolitan area was the only one out of hundreds in the U.S. to lose population struck us as a demographic head-scratcher worth checking out.

The meaning of 'metropolitan area'

The Census assesses population change in metropolitan areas along officially designated lines that include counties with close ties to a core urban area. Almost a quarter of those 391 defined metropolitan areas experienced population loss between 2016 and 2017, [according to Census data](#).

The Census defines the Chicago metropolitan area quite expansively, taking in not just Chicago and Cook County but eight other counties in Illinois as well as four in Indiana and one in Wisconsin.

The Chicago metro area is among the nation's 10 largest, and Census estimates found that none of the other nine lost population in 2017. That said, some other still sizable metropolitan areas, including those surrounding Pittsburgh, Pa., and Rochester, N.Y., did shrink.

"Chicago technically is a place," explained Chicago demographer Rob Paral. "It is different than a metro area."

That distinction might be chalked up to a slip of the tongue by Lightfoot had she not repeated the phrase "metropolitan area" in campaign talking points on at least three occasions.

A Lightfoot spokeswoman said in an email that while the candidate is saying "metropolitan area," she is only referring to the city of Chicago itself. In comparison to the nation's other largest cities, the spokeswoman said, Chicago was the only one to experience a decline in 2016, the latest year for which city-specific data was available at the time Lightfoot made her claim.

"Lori is running to become the next mayor of Chicago and when she addresses population loss, she's referring to the fact that we are on a radically different trajectory than other major metropolitan cities like Los Angeles, New York, Boston or Philadelphia," the spokeswoman said.

While the Lightfoot campaign is correct that Chicago was the only one of the nation's biggest cities to see losses, it was far from the only city to slip. And the candidate's original comments did not reference cities at all, let alone distinguish between major cities or otherwise.

Paral, the independent demographics researcher, also took issue with the Lightfoot campaign's characterization of Chicago's population trajectory as "radically" different from other large cities.

None of the major cities her spokeswoman cited, for instance, gained population by even a full percentage point last year, while Chicago fell by just 0.14 percent, and the gap between them the year prior was not much greater. That makes the difference in their rate of change relatively nominal.

Making it in Chicago

We also asked Paral about Lightfoot's broader argument that taxes were responsible for driving low- and middle-income residents away.

"I think the jury is out on that," he said, adding that the correlation between tax rates and population change "isn't that strong."

Lightfoot does seem to find more solid ground in highlighting how an income gap may be playing a role in which Chicago-area residents decide to stay or go.

A recent analysis by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning found the number of people living in the Chicago region making less than \$25,000 shrank between 2006 and 2016, while the number of residents making \$75,000 or more grew.

"The loss of low-income residents in the region suggests that we're not being so inclusive," said Aseal Tineh, the policy analyst who wrote the report.

But the planning agency says it has not conducted research into links between population loss and taxes, which is the connection Lightfoot is trying to make.

Our ruling

While arguing that high taxes are pushing lower-income earners out of Chicago, Lightfoot said: "We are the only metropolitan area in the country that's losing population."

Lightfoot has used the "metropolitan area" phrase repeatedly in the opening days of her campaign for mayor, though a spokeswoman now says when she uses the word "metropolitan" we should really insert the words "major city."

It could be tempting to cut Lightfoot some rhetorical slack in her quest for the mayoralty. After all, the original Mayor Richard Daley got so routinely tongue-tied that his exasperated press secretary famously admonished reporters: "Don't write what he says, write what he means."

In Lightfoot's case, however, it's not clear exactly what she means. She keeps repeating an incorrect statement that is wrong whether taken literally or figuratively. The Chicago metropolitan area is far from the only one in the country to lose population last year, according to the Census. And the city of Chicago by itself is far from the only city to lose population--though as the spokeswoman later pointed out, it is the only one among the nation's very biggest cities.

Experts also cast doubt on the existence of any evidence to back up the other beat of her claim, that lower-income Chicago residents were leaving because of high taxes.

Lightfoot's comments use a precise term imprecisely to make an unproven argument about population loss. We rate her claim Mostly False.