

Chicago's population down third year in a row — but we're still ahead of Houston: census

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It's no secret that there's been a friendly competition brewing between Chicago and Houston in recent years, and just-released census figures may keep that going: As Chicago's population declined for a third straight year, the Texas city's head count has continued to climb.

This week, the U.S. Census Bureau announced a new round of population estimates for cities across the country showing Chicago had lost 3,825 residents in 2017, while Houston grew by 8,235.

Population trends for the past couple of years prompted some experts to question whether Houston could unseat Chicago as the third-largest U.S. city. And it's even sparked a little ribbing. This spring, journalists in both cities got into a spirited back-and-forth over which one reigned supreme — including mention of the census count — when Houston announced it was getting its own version of the Bean. Called Cloud Column, Houston's stainless steel sculpture was created by Anish Kapoor, the same artist who designed Millennium Park's Cloud Gate, which went up in 2004.

For now Chicago keeps its rank as the third-most-populous city with 2.7 million residents, compared with No. 4 Houston with 2.3 million, census figures show.

It's unlikely Houston's population will surpass Chicago's anytime soon unless our neighbors to the south see exponential growth in the next couple of years, according to at least one expert. Houston's population didn't grow as much in 2017 as in previous years. And the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey could affect its population in coming years, said William Frey, a senior fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#).

What's certain is that Chicago and the state have seen its population fall in recent years, and though it's been a trickle, experts are trying to figure out why.

"Chicago and Illinois is a special case," Frey said. "We knew that the state continued to lose population, as did Cook County and now we see the city. I think there is a bigger economic issue. I don't think you can pinpoint it as something specific. It's certainly a piece of it. It's broader than just a city problem."

Of the five largest cities — which in order are New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Phoenix — only Chicago saw a population drop, according to census figures. In fact, Chicago lags behind Los Angeles, the second-most-populous city, by more than a million residents.

Aseal Tineh, an associate policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, said the economy has played a role in the declining population. While jobs have been added in the area, the economy is not growing as quickly, she said. And the economy plays a role in the growth of the immigration population. Tineh said the area is not seeing the kind of growth from foreign-born people that it did from 1990 to 2000.

“Chicago hasn’t been able to recover as quickly as our peer regions,” she said. “That is a pretty big role in the population change.”

An analysis of the latest figures done by Frey at the Brookings Institution found that Chicago was one of 16 larger cities across the country that lost population, and it had the third-largest drop.

The census figures are based on estimates that are later adjusted as more data are analyzed. For instance, the Census Bureau reported last year that Chicago’s population had fallen by 8,638 residents in 2016. But this year, the 2016 number was updated to reflect a loss of 4,879 residents.

While Chicago lost nearly 4,000 residents in 2017, that’s less than the estimated loss of 4,879 residents the year before that, according to census figures. But experts warn that doesn’t necessarily mean the exodus from the city and state is about to end.

“I think it’s too soon to tell if the trend will change,” Frey said. “It’s still a trend that’s different than a lot of metro areas.”

And it’s not just Chicago that’s shedding population. The Chicago metropolitan area, which extends from the city to its suburbs and into parts of Indiana and Wisconsin, also has lost residents for three consecutive years. And Illinois dropped from fifth-largest to sixth-largest state in 2017.

Tineh, with the local planning council, said people often have moved from the city to the suburbs in the Chicago area, but that doesn’t appear to be the case now. With other parts of Cook County also losing population, she said she thinks people might be moving out of state, possibly to the Sun Belt. Phoenix, for instance, saw a population increase of 1 percent, or 24,036.

Indeed, cities across Illinois saw their populations drop, according to the census figures released this week. That includes Aurora and Carbondale, which each saw a population drop of fewer than 300 people, while Rockford’s and Springfield’s head counts fell by fewer than 1,000. Peoria lost about 1,500 residents, according to census figures.

One Illinois city that saw population bump was Naperville, which gained an estimated 488 residents from 2016 to 2017, according to the Census Bureau.

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