An Exploration of the Sociodemographic and Socioeconomic Dichotomy of Shrinking Cities and Formerly Shrinking Cities in the Context of the Back-to-the-City Movement

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Abstract

In recent decades within the U.S., a renewed interest in downtown and city living has become known as the “back-to- the-city movement” and contributed to revitalization of local downtowns across the nation. Numerous shrinking cities have re-emerged as vibrant communities due to the back-to-the-city movement. This research seeks to understand what sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics are contributing the growth back to the city in formerly shrinking cities and identify if trends are beginning to emerge in shrinking cities. Variables identified through literature review for the analysis included back-to-the-city movement trends and back-to-the-city movement analysis were analyzed through a proportion comparison analysis comparing communities of sociodemographic and socioeconomic changes in growing versus non-growing census tracts in formerly shrinking and shrinking cities at the city-wide and downtown level for 84 cities. The analysis were based on the following period of time for 1970 to 2017. The variables are more characteristics of downtown versus city-wide indicators of the city shrink type or whether the census tract was living or nonliving population, while other variables were more characteristics of census tracts indicating the population movement of city shrink type or geographic area. The results conclude that where were some shrinking cities exhibiting back to the city movement trends based on the identified associated variables.


Methodology

Select City: The selected cities were defined using the following method. 84 census defined places with populations of 50,000 or greater based on the 2002 Census population estimates were selected. This resulted in 75 cities. Then, population change for each place was evaluated for trends in population growth or loss between the years 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2017. Trends in population growth or loss were used to defined a city’s classification as shrinking, formerly shrinking, or flucuating.

Standardized Geographic Areas Over Time: Defining variables for each time period of this study is based on standardized geographic areas to allow variables to be compared over time. This includes defining and specifically, defining the downtown boundaries for each city in the study for which no standardized geographic boundaries exist. Census tracts in 1970 geography for this analysis.

Variable Selection: The variables included within this analysis were identified through literature review by examining the influence of city movement trends in shrinking and formerly shrinking cities.

Data Proporation for Analysis: The flowchart to the right details the process for preparing the data for analysis. At the Census tract level the proportion for 2007 variable data is calculated by the total population of a city is 1,000 and there are 200 to 304, the proportion of 25 to 34 years old is 0.25 (30 percent). The difference between the variables for population trends between 1970 and 1990 is 0.27. Next these groups are subdivided into the growing or non-growing area of the city. These groups are further split by whether the Census tract is a part of downtown or not. These are subdivided into groups by the growing or non-growing area designation. The result are the following four groups by shrink type: growing (“G”) city, for-growing (“NG”) city, downtown, and non-downtown. The median value of the 2007 proportion were calculated for each breakdown and used in the comparative analysis.

Comparative Analysis: The calculated median values are compare through the following four combinations of Census tract groups based on the 1970 to 2000 and 1990 to 2017 time periods. (1) G city to NG city, (2) G downtown to NG downtown, (3) G city to G downtown, and (4) NG city to NG downtown. Median values with a five point difference are considered -stable while median values with a ten point difference represent a greater trend.

Conclusions

The calculated median values are used to compare the degree of change occurring over a shrinking versus a non-growing city, or between growing versus non-growing cities. The results provide a greater understanding of the range of values and what proportion of areas within the city are shrinking or non-growing. Other research suggests that shrinking cities have more characteristics of census tracts losing or gaining population. This study found the same results. The finding is that areas within some shrinking cities are losing population, and the trends are beginning to emerge in shrinking cities. Variables identified through literature review for the analysis included back-to-the-city movement trends and back-to-the-city movement analysis were analyzed through a proportion comparison analysis comparing communities of sociodemographic and socioeconomic changes in growing versus non-growing census tracts in formerly shrinking and shrinking cities at the city-wide and downtown level for 84 cities. The analysis were based on the following period of time for 1970 to 2017. The variables are more characteristics of downtown versus city-wide indicators of the city shrink type or whether the census tract was living or nonliving population, while other variables were more characteristics of census tracts indicating the population movement of city shrink type or geographic area. The results conclude that where were some shrinking cities exhibiting back to the city movement trends based on the identified associated variables.

Objective

Explore trends in sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics in shrinking, formerly shrinking, and fluctuating cities to better understand how these trends in the city movement may be manifesting in these places.

Results

Graphical Trend Summary by Shrinking Type

Overall Variable Trend Summary

Future Questions:

• What is the proportion of the new population groups moving into an area or population groups leaving an area and leaving behind other population groups?
• What is the likelihood that a Census tract gaining population size in one area will still hold the trends reported in the overall variable summary? Can the results inform future metrics that could be applied to understand where back to the city movement is occurring?
• How can we use what we learn through the research of shrinking cities and formerly shrinking cities to find sustainable and equitable ways to support and serve the population that remain within these cities?

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