

LOSING POPULATION AND LOVING IT

Don't let the perpetual growth addicts fool you, population decline is hardly synonymous with societal decay and can actually be symptomatic of an improving quality of life.

**An NPG Forum Paper
by Mark Cromer**

ABSTRACT

Human population statistics have long been portrayed in devoutly binary terms, through a black and white lens that holds population growth is fundamentally good and population decline is indisputably bad. Simplistic to the point of being dangerously delusional, platitudes praising population growth have helped propel the world past the planet's carrying capacity through environmental catastrophe and toward the cusp of civilizational collapse. In the United States, however, there are locales that offer snap shots of the promise that depopulating communities hold and demonstrate in real world terms that decreases in population actually augur improved quality of life and hope for the future.

This past April, discerning television viewers across the United States were treated to an eight-episode interpretation of Patricia Highsmith's classic 1955 novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, a reboot that was offered up by Netflix as a noirish departure from previous cinematic adaptations of the work.

The starkness of the black and white cinematography and the slow-brewing pace of the plot development throughout the story arc of *Ripley*, as this rendition was titled, was wrapped around another understated but ever-present feature of the landscape that con man-turned-killer Tom Ripley finds himself navigating: depopulated cities, towns and villages that speak of a glorious past amid a present pleasantly sparse of humans.

The series opens in New York City at the dawn of the 1960s, where Ripley finds himself hunkered down in the gritty room of a tenement building and surrounded by the ever-present symptoms of densely populated environs; from the grime of the big city to constant noise pollution and privacy intrusion. But when fate steers his path into a golden opportunity

that puts him on a steamship crossing the Atlantic and then on a train to the southern Italian coast, Ripley arrives in a land of gorgeous architecture and glorious landmarks. A land that's uniquely populated by a leisurely yet seemingly precious few people.

From the stinking sardine can of NYC to the breezy balconies, empty courtyards and deserted beach fronts of Atrani, San Remo and Palermo in the Mediterranean and Venice on the Adriatic, it's a jarring juxtaposition for Ripley, a sparseness that seems both mildly ominous at times and yet seductively refreshing in its *space*.

As they watched American expats Ripley, Dickie Greenleaf and Marge Sherwood drift in and out of hauntingly beautiful locations large and small and in places where a minimalist population keeps things running just fine and at a comfortable pace, many of them certainly pondered at least for a moment how lovely it would be to have such landscapes easily accessible here in which to live, not just visit occasionally to 'get away from it all.'

For the millions of American viewers who watched the critically acclaimed *Ripley*, the baseline level of relative societal tranquility the series captured – presented primarily as a semi-surreal backdrop to mimicry, manipulation and murder – undoubtedly caught their eye as well and perhaps raised the question in their minds: Why can't it be like that here today?

With America's Great Cities now in states ranging from chronic crisis to civic rigor mortis and as many mid-sized cities and towns also find themselves reeling from crime, poverty, addiction and other social ills such as affordable housing shortages often exacerbated by grim economic conditions and diminishing resources, the axiom that population decline is a surefire symptom of decay is once again being bandied about as evidence of societal failures.

Southern California, a region that as of December 2023 was home to more than 23 million people, experienced a net loss of population among nine of its 10 counties between 2022 and 2023, marking the third consecutive year of population loss among the three coastal contiguous counties of Orange, Los Angeles and Ventura that are home to more than 13 million people.¹

Among the punditry class across the ideological spectrum, Southern California's now consistent population shed (like the state at large, which has seen net outbound migration hit nearly 1 million residents since 2021²) has been interpreted in stark political terms. The Right sees it as Exhibit A on the roster of evidence that the deep blue state's progressive politics have finally led to a nuclear-grade societal meltdown, fatally polluting the quality of life for famously laidback Californians as crime explodes on its streets even as a vast tide of homelessness surges in spite of the tens of billions of dollars Sacramento has thrown at the problem.³

For the Left, the exodus out of California as well as other high population blue states such as Illinois and New York, which have also charted successive net losses in population since 2020⁴, is the result of pandemic-related issues that have been amplified by a shortage of affordable housing and a spiking cost of living driven by corporate greed.

Perhaps it is a confluence of all of the above.

But what of places where population decline represents not just a domestic migration to safer, cleaner and more affordable climates, but harkens a trajectory toward a more sustainable human footprint and the emergence of a quality of life where residents can enjoy some proverbial *breathing room* and all of the benefits that come with it?

What about those places that are losing population and loving it? University of Hawaii at Manoa professor Dr. Nathaniel Gronewold's recent Forum paper for Negative Population Growth, Inc., establishes that countries such as Japan have adapted well over time to population loss and are now seeing the benefits a declining human footprint brings, from stabilizing housing costs to rising wages.

Americans may not be walking out their front door to find themselves able to freely stroll nearly empty streets framed with classic architecture or wander along stretches of seawalls encountering little more than hovering gulls and dancing whitecaps, but in a variety of places across the country people are waking up to the fact that shedding population is hardly a zero-sum game in which their communities are always on the losing side and that striving for population reduction is in fact a plan for the future that's worth pursuing.

THRIVING THROUGH POPULATION LOSS

The small town of Galena knows a thing or two about navigating sustained population loss while continuing to not only enjoy a quality of life with relative tranquility as a key feature but also thrive in spite of the historic outbound flow of people. Nestled into Northwestern Illinois on a lush bend of the Mississippi River just below Wisconsin and right across the mighty waterway from Iowa, Galena's 3,224 residents⁵ in the summer of 2024 are looking at another year of sustaining a mild population loss by year's end.

Whether it is a handful of residents, several dozen or perhaps even more people than that, it's more likely than not that 2025 will begin the same way that at least

the 65 previous years began: losing population. Galena has lost population in every decennial census since 1960, shedding some of the largest numbers of people living there since the Great Depression.

Or put another way: there were more people living in Galena in 1850 – by nearly twice as much – than there are in 2024.

But make no mistake, Galena is not in a death spiral with its old downtown sporting a ‘doom loop’ that has been witnessed before in such places as Aberdeen in Washington state to the national tragedy that Detroit’s staggering population bleed-out represented. In fact, Galena is far from it.

Galena lost nearly 11-percent of its population during the 1960s and continued to lose population over the next decades, ultimately recording an additional 6-percent loss between 1980 and 1990. This former mining town that President Ulysses S. Grant once called home has evolved with the outbound traffic and, in many respects, capitalized on it.

The historic economic anchors of the town have varied across eras. At its heyday, Galena experienced the bustle of steamships feeding the mercantile machine along the banks of the Mississippi and its tributary, the Galena River. As in many other industrial cities, Galena’s namesake river was vital to its daily function, helping to power its mining interests and manufacturing plants. All too common in the old rust belt, the great hollowing out of the American industrial base impacted Galena as well. Fortunately, left in its wake exists an inventory of historic buildings and districts that were more asset than casket.

“In the 1970s to the 1990s, Galena faced a challenging transition as manufacturing jobs moved away. Initially, the city experienced some economic hardship, marked by empty storefronts and an increase in vacant homes and businesses,” said Tom Rynott, the Communications Director for Galena Country Tourism. “However, the community quickly pivoted to capitalize on its rich historical assets and natural beauty. Efforts were made to promote tourism, leveraging Galena’s well-preserved 19th-century architecture and scenic landscapes. Local government and community leaders spearheaded initiatives to

restore historic buildings and develop tourism infrastructure.”⁶

The initial shockwaves of job losses that inevitably led some residents to pull-up stakes and either ‘follow the jobs’ or find new employment altogether, was ultimately produced by necessity a more economically nimble Galena, according to Rynott, who described the small town as working deftly with what it had on hand to plot a long-term course into the future.

“This strategic shift helped Galena attract visitors and new businesses, gradually transforming the local economy from manufacturing to tourism and services. Community resilience and a forward-thinking approach enabled Galena to adapt effectively to these economic changes,” Rynott said, adding that the Mississippi River once again played its historic role in providing opportunity to the town.

“Galena’s proximity to the Mississippi River has been a significant geographic and commercial advantage throughout its history. In the early days, the river facilitated trade and transportation, making Galena a hub for steamboats and lead mining. As transportation evolved, the river remained a crucial element of the town’s identity and appeal,” he said. “Today, the river enhances Galena’s charm, drawing tourists for river cruises, recreational activities, and scenic beauty. The river’s influence can be seen in the town’s cultural and economic evolution, from a 19th-century industrial center to a modern-day tourist destination that celebrates its natural and historical heritage.”

The evolution of Galena through decades of sustained population loss that has crested into its rebirth as a destination for day-trippers has been three decades in the making, according to Rynott, who added that the town’s commitment to not demolishing much of its stock of standing buildings proved to be a boon that has paid significant dividends for the small community.

“Galena’s transformation into a popular day-trip and tourist destination began in earnest in the 1990s. The town’s awakening was driven by a growing recognition of its unique historical assets and picturesque setting. Efforts by local historians, preservationists, and business owners played a crucial

role. They highlighted Galena's well-preserved historic district, which includes over 85% of the town listed on the National Register of Historic Places," Rynott said. "Investments in tourism infrastructure, marketing campaigns, and events showcasing Galena's history, arts, and culture attracted visitors. This period saw a surge in boutique shops, bed-and-breakfasts, and restaurants, revitalizing the local economy and boosting Galena's profile as a premier tourist destination."

The civic vision and municipal dexterity that's required to harness the energy generated by the outbound flow of people over time in places like Galena may still seem in short supply across America in 2024, but public administration expert Dr. Suzanne Beaumaster said that governing bodies both small and large can absolutely benefit from population declines, particularly when it comes to aligning delivery of public services with constituent interfaces. Beaumaster, who is the Associate Dean of the College of Law and Public Service at the University of La Verne (ULV), where she also teaches public administration courses, points out that communities that scale down and retract population in a manageable fashion can reap rewards that are both immediate and on layaway.

In very real terms, fewer people can lead to better 'bedside manners' from politicians and public administrators as the intimacy of civic governance becomes more pronounced.

"A declining population can enable more efficient governance. With fewer residents, local governments can focus on more personalized and effective service delivery. This streamlining can reduce bureaucratic red tape, allowing for quicker response times to citizen needs and more tailored public services," Beaumaster said. "This also impacts the better use of government fiscal resources. For example, an agency could afford higher quality or more expansive technological resources. More bang for the buck as it were."⁷

What Galena has managed to pull off, so far at any rate, could well serve as a template for many other communities across the country, especially those locales where historic infrastructure can provide pre-existing opportunities to retrench and reimagine

a more prosperous but less crowded landscape.

"Communities facing population decline can shift towards sustainable development practices. This can include the repurposing of abandoned buildings and areas, fostering urban agriculture, and investing in renewable energy sources. Such initiatives can create jobs, attract new residents, and promote long-term economic stability," Beaumaster said. "A declining population can encourage a focus on improving the quality of life for existing residents rather than continuous growth. This shift can lead to more inclusive and equitable community development, where the needs and well-being of current residents are prioritized. Communities experiencing population decline often become centers of innovation out of necessity. By rethinking traditional approaches to urban planning, economic development, and service delivery, these areas can become models of resilience and adaptability for other regions facing similar challenges."

According to Rynott, the inflow is comprised primarily of two demographics: retirees looking for a place that offers a slower pace of life that's still a nice place to put their feet up and take the air in and young professionals whose career path has afforded them the opportunity to work remotely.

As divergent as both of those demographic subsets may be, neither one of them is interested in moving into a stale, stagnant or lifeless locale. The challenge, of course, is to balance the inflow of arriving residents and the pressures to expand the housing stock to accommodate them without sacrificing the improvements that were developed as the population declined.

In towns like Galena, where the net population continues to decline at least marginally, the arrival of new residents is more likely to act as an important stabilizing ballast that keeps the town in something of a sweet spot. A review of public message boards and local organizations focused on life in Galena reflect both the allure the town has developed as well as some of the elements that have likely helped keep hordes of new residents away.

"My parents retired there. My dad likes it, my mom not so much," wrote one contributor on a Reddit

thread about Galena. “They live in a neighborhood and there’s really only one house with people who live there full-time. Lots of houses are rented out and while fine most of the time, can result in having some rowdy weekend parties on occasion. There are no street lights so it gets crazy dark and can be a little scary navigating there, especially in the winter.”⁸

Darkened streets aren’t the only potential obstacle facing retirees or really any new arrival or visiting prospective transplant. Other impediments of the small town variety, including road maintenance and the proximity of comprehensive healthcare facilities, also present challenges.

“They don’t salt the roads, they use sand, which seems effective enough but gets messy,” the writer continued. “My Mom needed surgery and had to go to DuBuque for that – the hospital in Galena isn’t equipped for everything.” DuBuque, Iowa, with a population of nearly 60,000 people is approximately 16 miles and 25 minutes away from Galena, which is served by the 25-bed Midwest Medical Center that was built in 2006 and features an emergency room and trauma care, acute and subacute care across a range of medical disciplines including internal medicine and cardiac rehab, surgery services and radiology.

For a small town of just more than 3,000 residents, the hospital in Galena is certainly boxing above its weight, and that has to be in part because of the more than 1 million tourists that stroll through the town annually.

Those waves of people enjoying the charms of Galena and opening their wallets to do so are the ultimate metric of a town successfully managing population loss and economic rebound simultaneously.

Not surprisingly, preservation played its critical role early and decisively in providing the town with enough historic assets to monetize. Galena’s historic downtown district, which listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969, is comprised of more than 800 properties that constitute about 85% of the city,⁹ an outsized historic profile that runs the spectrum of commercial buildings, government offices (including purportedly the oldest still operating Post Office in the country) and private

residences that are terraced across the hilly town.

“Preservation has been a guiding principle in Galena’s development strategy. The town’s historic architecture has been leveraged as a key asset, with a vision from the Jo Daviess Historical Society and the Galena Historic Preservation Commission to maintain and repurpose buildings from previous eras,” Rynott said, describing the town’s long-game approach to blending population loss with economic gain in a manner that’s supported by residents.

“Local ordinances and community initiatives have ensured that preservation is prioritized in development plans. Restoration projects and adaptive reuse of historic structures have kept the downtown vibrant and historically authentic,” he said. “Preservation efforts are supported by both public and private sectors, ensuring that while the town evolves, its historical charm remains intact. This balance between preservation and development continues to shape Galena’s identity and future plans.”

But the pressures to build toward population growth are certainly on the horizon.

Even small towns like Galena that have successfully managed their way through resilient population declines will be faced with the prospect of developers pitching plans for dramatic expansion that will provide more revenue. Whether those siren calls are seductive enough for the alderpersons on the town council of Galena to dramatically reverse course remains to be seen, but ULV’s Beaumaster said that towns, cities and regions that stay focused amidst population declines can see benefits accrue.

“While population decline might initially strain fiscal budgets due to a reduced tax base, it can also lead to a re-evaluation and re-prioritization of spending. Governments can shift resources from overextended infrastructure projects to maintaining and enhancing essential services, leading to a more balanced and sustainable fiscal policy,” she said. “With fewer people to serve, the quality of public services such as healthcare, education, and social services can improve. Healthcare facilities and schools can offer more personalized attention, potentially leading to better health outcomes and

educational achievements. Reduced wear and tear on infrastructure like roads, bridges, and public transportation systems can allow for better maintenance and longer lifespans of these assets. This can also result in cost savings and reduced need for expensive expansions.”

For much larger locales that have more recently experienced population loss, the immediacy of positive impacts may be impossible to discern, particularly in areas where population declines can be directly attributed to social conditions (i.e. crime, collapsing infrastructure, homelessness and other societal ills) that often obscure the potential for ‘glass half-full assessments.’

In the Pacific Northwest, Portland, Oregon’s largest city and its most eclectic gemstone, has been rocked by years of civic dysfunction that resulted in a net loss of more than 22,000 people between 2020 and the summer of 2023.¹⁰ While a 3.4% reduction in population may seem like small potatoes in a city that still has more than 630,000 residents, the five-figure turnaround in Portland’s residential population followed more than four decades of sustained double-digit population growth in the Beaver State, including a spike that hit 21% in the 2000 census.

That aggressive population growth trend suddenly stopped and reversed itself in Portland over the last three years.

Nicholas Kristof, an Opinion Columnist for *The New York Times* who was raised in Yamhill, Oregon, just outside of Portland, and who ran for governor there in 2022, recently sounded the alarm of what has happened in Portland and what it portends for other crowded West Coast cities in particular. In a column that highlighted a pervasive civic dysfunction that seems utterly intractable in places like Portland, the self-declared progressive writer offered a heartbreaking account of a high school friend of his who became homeless in his old hometown and was found frozen to death in the tent that she had pitched in a public park.¹¹

But Kristof’s account of the nightmarish developments occurring in Portlandia and his call for less ideological peacocking at City Hall and more pragmatic approaches to the panoply of social ills that

have fueled an exodus of tens of thousands of people from the city was notable for a glaring omission and shortsighted in its suggested solutions.

While accurately describing the demand for affordable housing – which is hardly synonymous with the term ‘low-income housing’ – and the stock of available housing that working (and even middle) class residents can actually afford as a chasm that is “vast,” Kristof declines to acknowledge the ever-escalating pressure that rising population growth adds to that disparity nor does he consider the opportunities that declining population presents in places as large as Portland or as small as Galena.

California alone faces a shortage of 3 million homes necessary to meet the current affordable housing needs of its population, according to Kristof, and he notes that publicly-funded housing development projects are typically built with outrageous costs of up to \$1 million-per-unit.¹² But while Kristof accordingly calls for greater leeway for private developers to launch a building blitz across the West Coast of the United States, unencumbered by restrictions on population density, he declines to address the relentless inflow of population that has saturated so much of the West Coast and with many of those new arrivals dependent on affordable housing and public assistance.

Kristof’s column demonstrates the one-dimensional perspective on population decline that continues to inform and define so much of the national discussion surrounding population issues. He fails to see – or chooses not to – the opportunities that are presented by significant population declines and consider ways they might be harnessed for the benefit of all, how more than 20,000 people leaving Portland over the past few years offers a little more breathing room and what the possibilities might be for the beleaguered city if another 60,000 people left the city over the course of the next six years.

The easing burden on affordable housing and associated social services would be the first metric to apply and the notable improvements along a spectrum of quality-of-life issues would not be far behind.

“One of the immediate benefits of a declining population is less traffic congestion. This can lead to

shorter commute times, lower stress levels for residents, and reduced pollution from vehicular emissions, contributing to a cleaner and healthier environment,” ULV’s Beaumaster said, adding that as the human footprint recedes in any given area the potential benefits are not restricted to the remaining humans but offer direct plus-sides to virtually every other species.

“Population decline often results in more available open space. These areas can be transformed into parks, nature reserves, and recreational facilities, enhancing the community’s quality of life. Less urban sprawl can lead to better environmental conservation, less habitat destruction, and improved air and water quality,” she said. “With fewer residents, law enforcement can become more effective in maintaining public order and safety. Smaller populations often allow for stronger community-police relationships, more effective crime prevention, and quicker emergency response times.”

In places like Portland, such potential benefits of shedding population should absolutely be seen as a win-win-win-win-win.

Whether Portland regains consciousness, comes to its senses and pulls out of its death spiral remains to be seen, but even in success stories like Galena, holding firmly to the belief that ‘small is beautiful,’ preventing a tidal surge of new residents will likely prove daunting in the years ahead.

“While Galena’s appeal as a great place to visit and live is a source of pride, there are concerns about maintaining its unique quality of life amid growth. The community is mindful of the potential for overdevelopment, which could undermine its small-town charm. Efforts are being made to manage growth sustainably, ensuring that new developments align with the town’s historic character and natural beauty,” Rynott said. “Balancing tourism with the needs of local residents is a priority. By fostering community engagement and thoughtful planning, Galena aims to preserve its allure while accommodating growth, ensuring that it remains a cherished destination for future generations.”

POPULATION LOSS CAN PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES

There are small towns, mid-sized cities, large regional jurisdictions and even metropolitan areas all over the United States that are experiencing some level of population loss; from Jackson, Mississippi, which has posted net population losses over the past four consecutive decennial census counts that reached a double-digit population shed in 2020, to San Francisco, with the city by the bay losing nearly 70,000 residents over the past several years for a net loss of 7.4% – the first population loss the city has witnessed since 1980 and one that eliminated virtually all the population growth San Francisco had posted since 2010.¹³

In the cases of both a mid-sized city like Jackson, which has a population of nearly 146,000 (and a larger metro area) and San Francisco, which is home to more than 800,000 people within the city’s limits, it is unclear whether the civic leadership in either of the cities will seize or even see the potential opportunities presented by the outbound flow.

And not every town or city is going to have the substantial stock of historic buildings on hand that Galena was able to harness, but certainly very many do, particularly small towns and mid-sized cities that didn’t see their early and mid-20th Century cores bulldozed and demolished in the name of ‘urban renewal’ and especially when including classic architecture spanning the first half of the 1900s.

There are also other factors in play in places like Jackson and San Francisco as well, including a cost-of-living altitude in San Francisco that designates individuals making less than \$105,000 annually as ‘low income,’¹⁴ and debilitating waves of street crime in both cities that can complicate and cloud the immediate upsides to population losses.

But if those trends continue, it would be tantamount to municipal malfeasance if the governing entities and the associated civic power centers such as the Chamber of Commerce, tourism boards and other such outfits did not stop trying to staunch and then reverse the population loss and instead focus on how to take maximum advantage of it.

Losing population and loving it is a state of being whose time has come.

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