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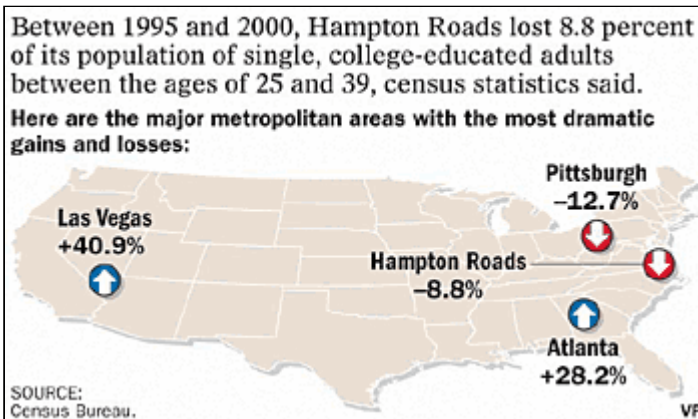


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Hampton Roads among worst metro areas for "brain drain"



By **PHILIP WALZER**, The Virginian-Pilot
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The young and the educated are growing restless in Hampton Roads.

From 1995 to 2000, the region lost a greater proportion of single, college-groomed 25- to 39-year-olds than any other large metropolitan area in the country except for Pittsburgh, the Census Bureau recently reported.

"Most people refer to that as brain drain," said John W. Whaley, deputy executive director of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission. "This is a problem for any community that loses its best and brightest and the people who are going to be its future leaders."

The reasons, analysts such as Whaley say, include a loss of military jobs, a shortage of managerial positions and higher salaries elsewhere.

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The potential dangers: a loss of entrepreneurial activity and civic brainpower and the depression of wages regionwide.

"If you lose these people," Whaley said, "you're losing a lot of seedcorn from which new companies can be born."

Count John W. Graziano among the departed.

Graziano, a Virginia Tech graduate, lived in Norfolk from 1993 to 1996, working in medical equipment sales. He left for Pittsburgh in 1996, at the age of 32, to become a banking consultant.

Opportunities for higher wages and career advancement beckoned.

In Hampton Roads, Graziano said, "there are a lot of jobs where you can make \$100,000 a year, which is a good wage. But in a higher level, where you're looking to make \$150,000 or \$200,000 a year, there are not a lot of jobs."

LaShonda Henderson, a Florida native, left the region to return home in 1999 after she received her bachelor's degree from Old Dominion University in sociology.

A mental health therapist, she figures she made \$5,000 more starting out in Port St. Lucie, Fla., near Palm Beach, than she could have locally. She also thinks social-welfare laws are more family-friendly in Florida.

Between 1990 and 2001, wages rose 41 percent in the region, compared with 48 percent nationwide and 60 percent in major metropolitan areas, said James V. Koch, an economics professor and former president at ODU.

Those higher-paying areas often sport higher costs of living, Koch said in an e-mail, but the refugees often overlook that. "As a consequence, they make locational decisions that may not be based upon good financial evidence."

Also during that decade, Koch said, the military lost about 30 percent of its positions, both uniformed and civilian, in the region.

The local job market is simply not as "broad and deep" as it is in areas such as Northern Virginia or Atlanta, Whaley said.

"Hampton Roads is woefully lacking pretty much across the board in managerial positions," he said. "That's the reason so many MBAs leave the region."

Bruce L. Rubin, the director of Old Dominion's MBA program, concurred.

POLL

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- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Depends on how much more
- ☐ I did leave

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"What are the main businesses here?"

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Rubin said. "Norfolk Southern and Dollar Tree and Smithfield Foods and the shipyards. After you go through the four or five major companies, it falls off to medium-sized companies very quickly."

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Between 1995 and 2000, Hampton Roads lost 8.8 percent of its population of single, college-educated adults between ages 25 and 39, the census statistics said. Among metropolitan areas with 1.5 million residents or more, only Pittsburgh fared worse, losing 12.7 percent.

The overwhelming majority of large metropolitan areas showed significant increases in the number of young college-educated singles, topped by Las Vegas, which gained 40.9 percent, and Atlanta, with a 28.2 percent increase.

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The decision to leave might be reached early: In The Virginian-Pilot's 2002 survey of high-school seniors, only 29 percent of college-bound students said they thought they'd live here after getting their degrees.

Koch, however, said the worst of the local brain drain may be over.

Since 2000, he said, the military has added jobs here and approved raises better than those received by most people not in the service. The region's per-capita income, he said, has risen to slightly eclipse the national average.

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"Public policy changes could make a tremendous difference," Koch said. "As a state, we've invested in reducing the car tax. ... That's short-sighted.

"And, regionally, I still see local officials touting major league sports teams or sports halls of fame — hardly a recipe for lifting the region economically."

But Whaley said local leaders should try to expand attractions from professional sports to art galleries. "We need to find ways to make the region more appealing to them so they make the decision that this is a pretty good place to stay," he said. Not every young single is leaving Hampton Roads.

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Jeff Miller, a 36-year-old from Chicago, has lived in Virginia Beach since 1991 and isn't going anywhere.

He could make more elsewhere. But "I like the area," said Miller, who runs his own advertising agency, RAZZ Dezines. "It's not as hustle-bustle as the big cities, and you're pretty much within hours of every type of activity, from mountains to the rivers to the beach."

Graziano also may yet return.

"For the quality of life, for the school systems, it's awesome," Graziano said. "I would love to come back there someday." But he added: "I feel I have to make my money before I can move back."

Reach Philip Walzer at 222-5105 or at phil.walzer@pilotonline.com.

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