

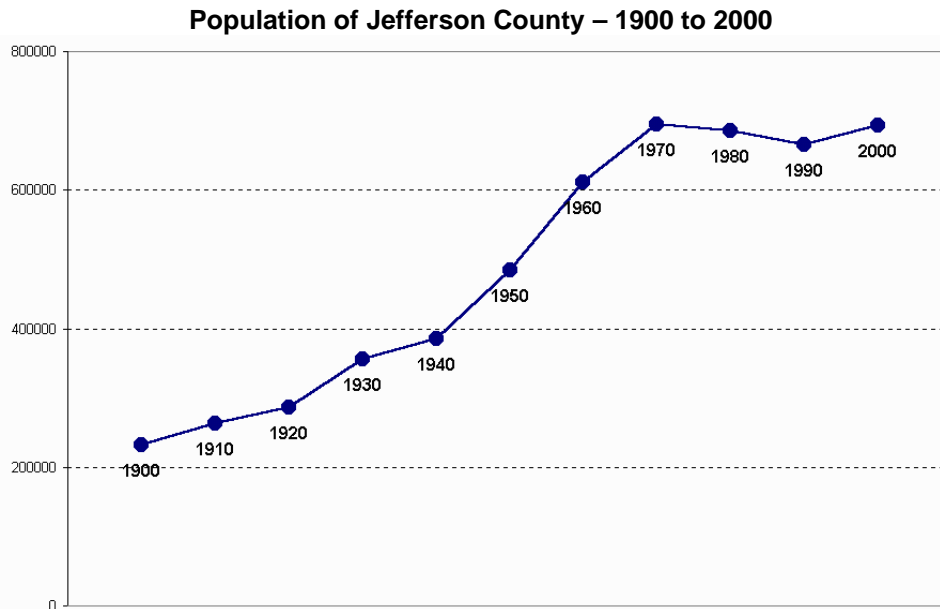
Greater Louisville's Zero-Growth Problem (v. 3)

Chris Graney, Jefferson Community College 2002

The *Courier-Journal* has run many stories on the 2000 Census results, the changes that have occurred in Jefferson County since 1990, and what those changes mean for the county. It has also had significant coverage of growth and development issues. However, a major issue being overlooked is the growth and changes that have occurred in Jefferson County since the 1970 census, and what those changes mean for the county. The 1970 census recorded a peak in Jefferson County's population at 695,000 people – and there has been no significant population change since then. However, there has been progress and significant development of rural areas in Jefferson County since 1970. The lack of population growth over the past thirty years, coupled with the continuing development of large areas of the county, raises interesting questions. What has been happening to the population in the last thirty years? What pays for all the expansion of infrastructure and public services when there is no population growth, and what does that mean for my taxes and the attractiveness of my community?

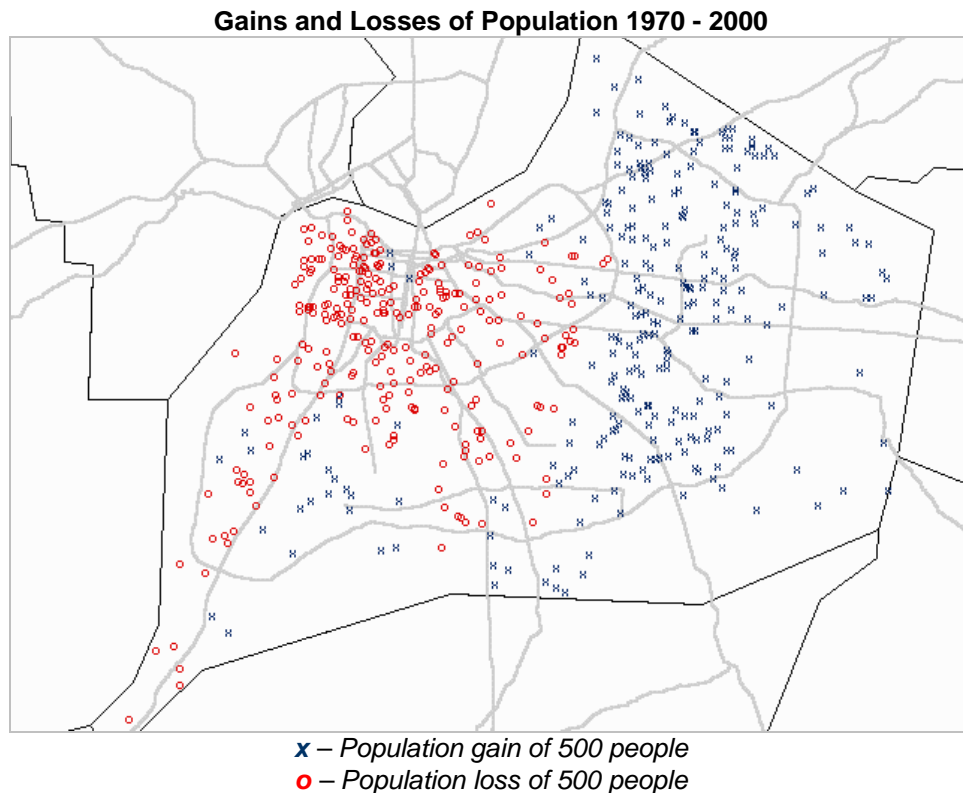
Jefferson County's Shifting Population

Jefferson County did not reach 695,000 people by being a no-growth area. From the beginning of the 20th century through 1970 Jefferson County grew dramatically – nearly tripling in population. This growth did not continue after 1970.



If the county has not grown in population since 1970, yet has continued to develop, then population must be getting less dense – the same number of people are simply spreading out over a larger area. That is something that is happening in most American metropolitan areas as densely populated central cities lose population and less densely populated suburbs gain population.

However, in Jefferson County the central city is not the only area losing population. I produced the map below using mapping software and census figures from 1970 and 2000.



Some of the results didn't surprise me and probably won't surprise any Jefferson County resident. The eastern portions of the county have seen enormous growth. Many areas in the eastern county have more than tripled in population over the last 30 years. The rest of the county has seen either modest growth or has lost people. What is surprising is the extent of area that has seen population loss, and how much loss those areas have seen. The loss has not been confined to the central city – many suburban areas in southern and southwestern county, as well as some of the older eastern suburbs, have lost people over the past thirty years.

For some areas it is easy to understand what is going on. For instance, it is easy to explain the population loss in the region surrounding the airport. As the airport has expanded people have had to move out of the area. The area's population has declined as the airport and related facilities took over land once occupied by homes. It is also easy to explain population loss in mature neighborhoods that are stable and fully developed such as the Bardstown Road, Taylor-Berry, or Lexington Road areas. Households in Jefferson County got smaller in the 30 years between 1970 and 2000. That follows a national trend. Census figures show the average Jefferson County household size was 3.2 persons in 1970, 2.4 persons in 2000 – a drop of about 25%. Thus a typical mature neighborhood is going to have seen a 25% drop in its population between 1970 and 2000. That loss probably reflects the fact that in 1970 the households in that neighborhood had more kids in them than they did in 2000 (according to the census, the number of people aged 0-19 in Jefferson County dropped 31% between 1970 and 2000).

So the airport region lost people due to loss of homes. Economically stable, mature neighborhoods lost people due to demographic changes. More puzzling are the mature neighborhoods that lost huge numbers of people – some areas near downtown lost well over half of their population. One thing I thought might factor into understanding population losses, especially these large population losses in older, more densely populated areas, was home

ownership. If many people moved from renting to owning their own home between 1970 and 2000, that could cause the population to spread out. However, roughly a third of Jefferson County housing units were renter-occupied in both 1970 and 2000, so that didn't explain big losses of people. Another big puzzle are all those population-losing suburban areas that have room for further development – areas that have space for new neighborhoods yet lost population like a mature neighborhood. The big puzzle overall is that it isn't just that the eastern county is growing, but that the county is moving people from west to east.

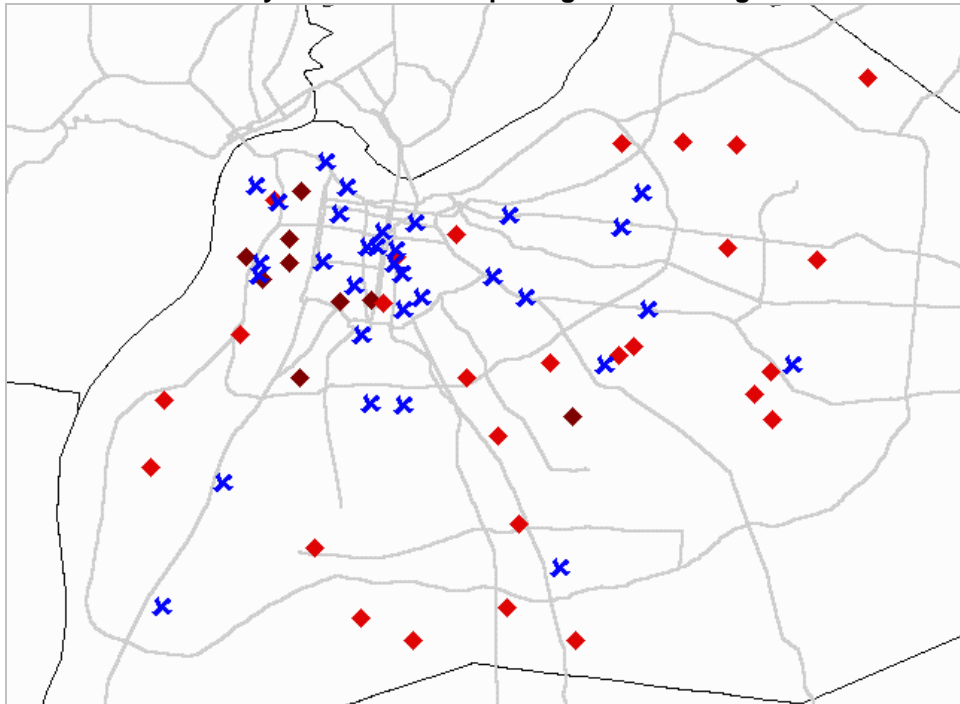
The Costs of Moving People

It costs money to move people, so what of the costs of a zero-growth shifting of population from Shively and Portland to Jeffersontown and Middletown? Between 1900 and 1970 Jefferson County gained over 60,000 people per decade (on average). Roads, sewers, schools, and other infrastructure had to grow rapidly. People paid taxes to build the county.

What were taxes paid for between 1970 and 2000 when the county was growing by 0 people per decade (on average)? To serve a population that is more dispersed than it was 30 years ago, new roads into formerly rural areas have been constructed and old roads have been improved. Utility services have been laid into new developments. New schools have been constructed in outlying areas. School buses have transported children who are, on average, more widely separated. Police and firefighters have been required to protect a more widely separated population.

Let's look more closely at schools as an example. As mentioned earlier, there were 31% fewer young people in Jefferson County in 2000 than in 1970. That doesn't mean fewer teachers or classrooms were needed, because the student-teacher ratio dropped from roughly 25:1 to 17:1 during that time, a drop that matches the decrease in numbers of young people. Plenty of new schools have been built since then; many old schools have been closed. In looking at a map showing where schools have opened and closed, it's clear that the majority of the schools that have been closed were located in population-losing areas. Some new schools have been built to replace closed buildings that were presumably no longer usable, but many new schools have been built in those areas where population has increased.

Jefferson County Public School Openings and Closings 1970 - 2000



X – School closed since 1975

◆ – School opened since 1970 or currently under construction.

Schools have followed the population as it moves out, even though the population is not growing. What if the money spent on this chase was instead available for other purposes? How much of a raise could teachers get with the money spent on a new school? How much lower would our taxes be without the money needed for a new school? Either better-paid teachers or lower taxes might make Jefferson County a more attractive place to live (and thus more likely to actually attract people). So it is with other infrastructure – rather than spreading infrastructure over a large area to support a moving but non-growing population, we could have better infrastructure, or we could have lower taxes, either of which might make the county more likely to attract people and generate real growth.

Paying the Cost—Current Losers and Eventual Losers

For the past 30 years the cost of dispersing the county's population has been paid for by all Jefferson Countians to some extent via taxes. As things stand, a large portion of the county – those areas with declining populations – are paying taxes essentially to help shift the focus of services away from their areas. They are the losers.

People who live in areas of population growth are the winners – they get a discount on the cost of moving into formerly rural areas. However, even the winners will be losers soon enough. All new areas become older areas and, if the trends of the past 30 years continue, their populations will shrink and the outflow of money to still newer areas will commence. An area can be new for only so long – it can be mature indefinitely.

This has to be really inefficient. The flow of resources from one area to another is not market-driven; taxes, zoning, and other government policies are at least partly responsible for the flow. Many believe that this is all for the best – that jobs are created, the tax base is built, the local

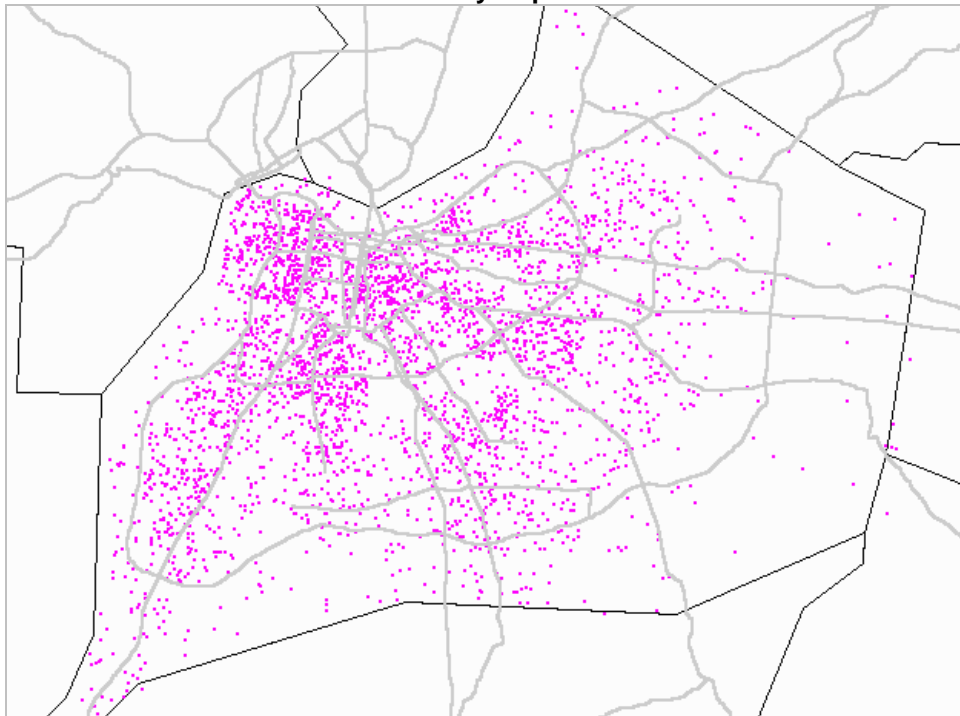
economy grows, standards of living rise, and everyone benefits, even without population growth. But certainly we could have had more jobs created, more of a tax base built, more economic growth, and greater improvement in quality of life since 1970 than we have had.

I encourage my elected officials to think about the “Population of Jefferson County – 1900 to 2000” graph and take a hard look at the past 30 years. We’ve had over a quarter of a century of zero population growth in Jefferson County. I believe solutions to our growth problems lie in lower taxes and improved services, and in making our community more attractive. I believe these can be accomplished by concentrating resources on improving existing infrastructure and by taking a conservative approach to building new infrastructure when population growth does not demand it, so that new development of rural areas pays for itself and the growth potential of areas that already have infrastructure is highlighted. Some of the latter is happening in Downtown and Russell, but we still focus on building roads and interchanges for new business in the “growing” eastern county while space stands empty in Shively, a region with plenty of roads and interchanges already built. We need to stop moving people around Jefferson County and calling it “growth”. We need to start making Greater Louisville a place people move to that actually does grow.

Notes – Population data came from the census. Some Jefferson County census tracts changed between 1970 and 2000. Therefore changes in population for those areas had to be estimated. The “Gains and Losses of Population 1970 – 2000” map and the “Jefferson County Population” maps may contain minor errors due to this. Data on Jefferson County Public Schools came from various JCPS sources, which were not 100% consistent with each other. The Jefferson County Public School Openings and Closings 1970 – 2000 map may contain minor errors due to this.

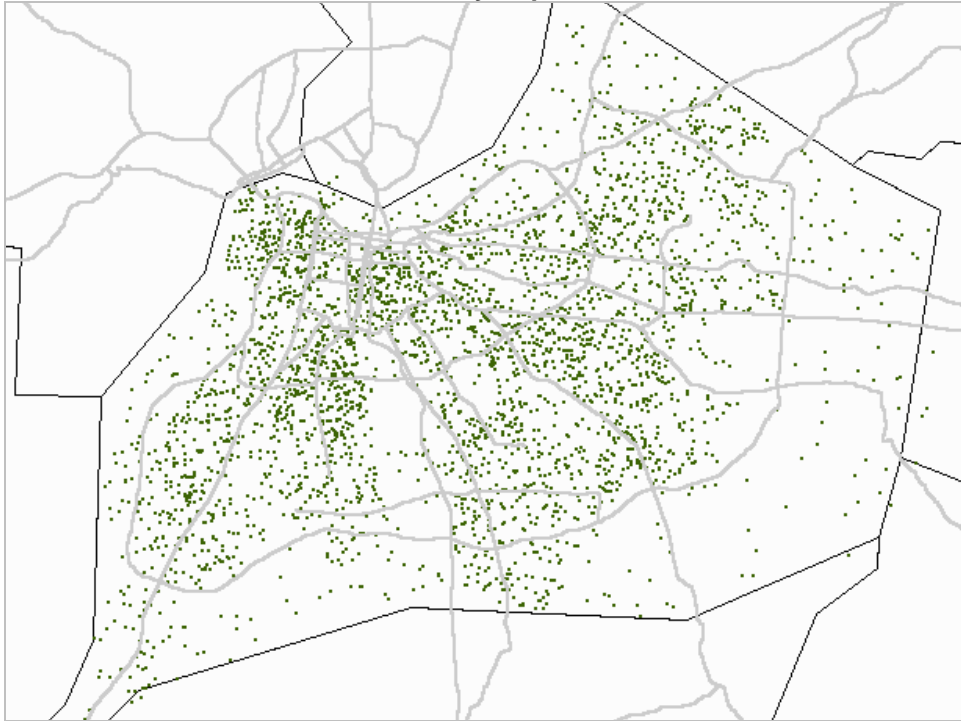
Two other maps which may be included for general reference:

Jefferson County Population 1970



Each dot represents 200 people.

Jefferson County Population 2000



Each dot represents 200 people.