

Metropolitan Planning Council
Data Points: Behind the Numbers
The economic threat nobody is talking about: Chicago is losing immigrants
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Liz Granger [00:00:05] At the Metropolitan Planning Council we know that research and data inspire action. We're trying something new here today at MPC. My colleagues Shehara Waas and Margarita Bernal, two researchers, just produced a piece this week explaining something that surprised me. Chicago is losing immigrants. Since we're known as a cosmopolitan city of neighborhoods, we wanted to get a deeper look at the story behind the data. That's why we invited Shehara and Margarita here today to talk about their newest piece, Data Points: The economic threat that nobody is talking about: Chicago is losing immigrants.

Shehara Waas Thanks Margarita for sitting down with me.

Margarita Bernal Thank you.

Shehara Waas [00:00:48] So we just published an analysis that shows that Chicago's immigrant population has been declining for the last 10 years. Can you tell us a little bit more about what you found?

Margarita Bernal [00:00:58] Sure. I didn't expect to find this. I was poking around the numbers and I realized that Chicago has lost nearly 31,000 immigrants over the past decade. It is a huge number. It is like losing the population of the Lower West Side community area which is made up of Pilsen and the Heart of Chicago.

Shehara Waas [00:01:18] 31,000 is a huge number, do we know who these people are?

Margarita Bernal [00:01:22] When I look at the demographic trends, especially race, I saw that Latinos are the ones that are driving these losses. They comprise 52 percent of the Chicago immigrant population and they have declined around 5.6 percent from 2013 to 2017.

Shehara Waas [00:01:40] Margarita, could you tell us how did you decide to explore this topic?

Margarita Bernal [00:01:46] At first it was just curiosity. I came up with the statistics while I was doing research on a different topic, and I found something that surprised me, that Chicago is losing immigrants, even though, Chicago is a sanctuary city and the flow of immigrants keep adding people to the United States population.

Immigration today is a very controversial topic, and given current climate surrounding immigration and Trump's administration efforts to ban immigrants from the country and to impose federal funding penalties to sanctuary cities, I took more interest in this topic. I wanted to understand who these immigrants are. And I wanted also with this blog post I wanted to raise awareness of these trends. The next step would be to understand what are the drivers of these losses, and what is prompting these declines? I think it's very important to keep an eye to this decline, because with fewer immigrants coming into the city it's not surprising why Chicago is now experiencing a slowdown in population growth.

Shehara Waas Thank you for explaining that.

Margarita Bernal You're welcome. Shehara, we work together, and sometimes it is very hard with data to understand the "So what?". So, so what? What would you say this research means for the City of Chicago?

Shehara Waas [00:03:12] Yeah. So people may not know this but we're a city that's built on domestic and international migration so to see this kind of loss and this decline in the immigrant population it's really alarming because I think not only does it threaten our economy and the fact that we have a shrinking tax base, but it also may indicate that we as a city, we're not doing enough in our policy to promote equity for everyone. I think we just have to ask ourselves you know are we really doing all we can to value the cultural vibrancy that immigrant communities bring to our region and the answer may be no we're not doing all that we can.

Margarita Bernal [00:03:50] Why do you think demographic shifts matter, especially population loss?

Shehara Waas [00:03:55] Well I think demographic shifts really matter just in the sense that all of our residents matter, right? We have to look at demographic shifts when we're considering things like how do we adequately fund our services? Are services spread in a way that is equitable geographically distributed across our region? I think that we can't ignore the fact that it's been heavily reported in the media that Cook County itself is

experiencing major population loss. So earlier in the month we saw a study that came out that showed the alarming population lost just between 2016 and 2017. So, again, it kind of begs the question you know why do people not feel that the Chicago region is a place that they can thrive and call their home.

I think it it points to the fact that policymakers need to really be looking at the numbers and you know 31,000 that may not seem like a huge number, but it says a lot about what we're doing as a region to think about equity for everyone and that's something that we think a lot about here at Metropolitan Planning Council. So, for those that are familiar with our work on The Cost of Segregation and Our Equitable Future, they know that this is something that we think about every day and through Our Equitable Future. We worked with a number of stakeholders across the region to put together a roadmap to outline what some policies are that can bring us closer to equity. And so folks can definitely check out our website and look at some of those strategies that we've been working on for the past several years, that kind of get at this very question. So everyone, that's all the time that we have for today. Margarita, thank you so much for sitting down with me and explaining your research.

Margarita Bernal Shehara, thank you for working with me.

Shehara Waas Of course. Everyone, we'll see you next time on Data Points: Behind the Numbers.