

Millennials are leading a ‘brain gain’ in one of the most overlooked Midwestern cities

ERIC JAFFE, CITYLAB JUN. 27, 2015



In reporting an [Atlantic piece](#) on James Corner’s fantastic redesign of Cleveland’s Public Square, I was surprised by the strength of the city’s downtown revival.

After a tailspin in the 1980s, Cleveland’s downtown population soared 32 percent from 1990 to 2000—the biggest rise of any Midwest city (including Chicago) and far above the regional average (7.7 percent), [according to Brookings](#). The climb has continued at pace; last summer downtown reportedly reached an “[all-time high](#)” of 12,500, with an astonishing residential occupancy rate of 98 percent.

Call the oversight a bad case of East Coast bias. Though I don’t think I’m alone in missing downtown Cleveland’s rise. David Fields of transportation planning consultancy Nelson\Nygaard, who led the traffic

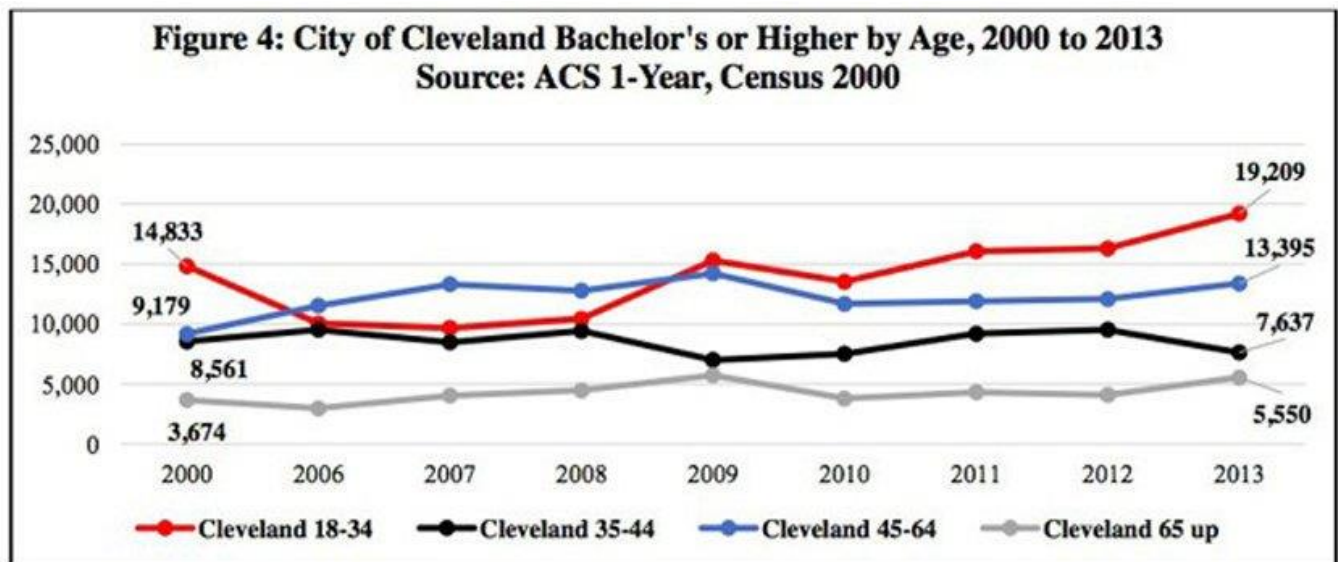
analysis for Public Square, describes the area's growth as "totally underestimated" from a national perspective.

"Downtown Cleveland is an amazing turnaround success story," he says. "The next generation is moving back in and really activating the place in a way that, if you haven't seen it in a long time, it makes it really exciting to go downtown. It's not what you think of when you think of Cleveland from a few decades ago."

That Millennials are flocking to an American city is no revelation. But a [new demographic study](#) from the Center for Population Dynamics at Cleveland State University, led by researcher Richey Piiparinen, lends some powerful numbers to the discussion where Cleveland is concerned. The report shows all the ways Cleveland's young people—those age 18 to 34 with college degrees, to be precise—are leading the charge back downtown.

Let's take a closer look at some of the key metrics.

4 charts and maps showing Cleveland's growth



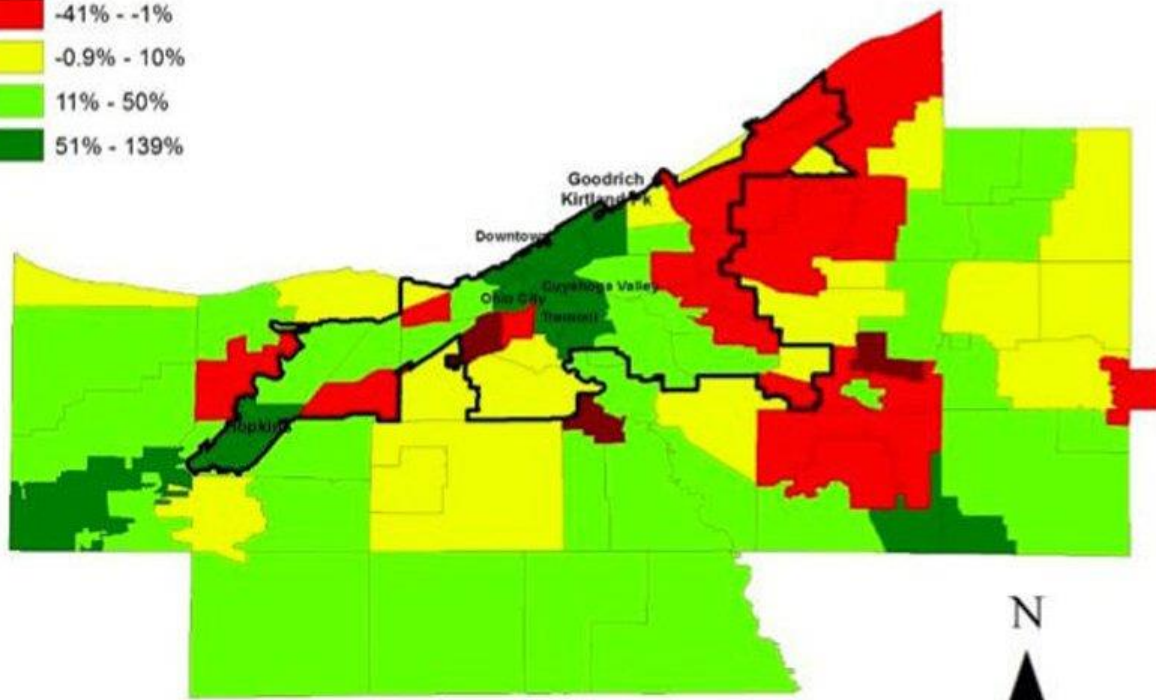
Cleveland State University

First let's take the city as a whole. Following a lull in 2006, there's been a 91 percent rise in the number of young residents with bachelor's degrees—a "brain gain," as Piiparinen and collaborators call it. Population has remained more or less stable for other age groups over the same period. While promising, the trends also lead to questions about how to make Cleveland more appealing for families, which in turn leads to projects like the new Public Square.

**Map 1: Percent Change in Adults with Bachelor's or Higher
for Cleveland, Ohio (2000 to 2013)**

 Cleveland City Limits

**Percent Change in College-Educated Adults
From 2000 to 2013**



**Cleveland State
University**
 The Center for Population Dynamics

Source: 2000 Census, 2013 5-Year ACS
Created by The Center for Population Dynamics

And when we focus on 25- to 34-year-olds at the neighborhood level, downtown Cleveland again leads the way. The area added some 1,628 residents from this age group from 2000 to 2013. Several other districts within a couple miles of the core also ranked high on this list: Tremont, Ohio City, Goodrich-Kirtland Park, and Cuyahoga Valley among them.

Table 3: Fifth Migration Geographies¹ for the City of Cleveland. Source: 2000 Census, 2013 ACS 5-Year

Community	25 to 34 Total	25 to 34 White	25 to 34 Hispanic	25 to 34 Black	25 to 34 Asian	Total Change in College Graduates, 2000 to 2013
Downtown	1,628	1,376	23	-186	415	3,357
Kamm's	1,604	1,314	93	123	74	1,214
Old Brooklyn	1,337	320	478	495	44	139
Edgewater	1,076	893	5	178	0	85
Tremont	718	731	-69	40	16	565
Cuyahoga Valley	519	401	9	72	37	718
Bellaire-Puritas	401	106	245	-3	53	-87
Ohio City	396	363	-78	91	21	509
Jefferson	340	47	23	244	26	301
Goodrich-Kirtland Pk	292	268	48	-20	-4	366
North Shore Collinwood	246	-140	45	316	24	-297
Hopkins	156	104	-6	42	16	128
Brooklyn Centre	100	86	27	-18	5	12
West Boulevard	74	-491	-44	590	19	218
Detroit Shoreway	17	345	-180	-167	19	377

Cleveland State University

Not every race is benefiting from the downtown renaissance alike. Young whites make up the overwhelming majority of the population shift from 2000 to 2013, followed by young Asians. Hispanics age 25 to 34 more or less stayed put. The black population dropped in downtown during this period—raising concerns that some young African Americans are being priced out of the area.

And 4 possible reasons for the shift

The authors of the new report focus on two main reasons for Cleveland's rebound among young workers. First is its lengthening list of residential amenities: "walkability, social connectivity, proximity to retail and nightlife, or more generally a preferred lifestyle." By next summer locals can add Public Square to the pile.

There's also the city's emergence as an economic hub for professionals with advanced degrees—especially healthcare and education. In 1994, the city was home to roughly the same number of both high- and low-skilled jobs (64,875 and 62,084, respectively); by 2013 the gap had widened considerably, with nearly 150,000 jobs in Cleveland now requiring advanced degrees, to some 41,500 requiring a high

school education. And no neighborhood has added more residents with advanced degrees than downtown: 828 since 2000, up 169 percent.

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In writing about [the “passion” of young Clevelanders](#) for CityLab in 2013, Nona Willis Aronowitz added two more reasons to the trends. One is the relatively low cost of starting a business; the other is the relatively high influence you can have in national political campaigns.



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Not every neighborhood in Cleveland is getting the same attention, and income inequality is still a problem. Cleveland hasn't escaped the problems of other growing metros—namely, income inequality. The urban scholar Alan Mallach, for one, [has found](#) that while some home values are rising in some central neighborhoods, they've fallen in the city as a whole. The authors of the Center for Population Dynamics report acknowledge these trends in their call for more affordable housing, especially in the areas attracting residents with advanced degrees. But overall they see these challenges as “the shadows of evolving opportunities” created by the city's much-needed growth.

“Cleveland is on this track right now,” says Nelson\Nygaard's David Fields. “It reminds us that we've got great cities of all scale. You don't necessarily have to be New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or San Francisco to be a great city.”

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