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**Ohio's 'Shifting' Population Presenting Regional Challenges**

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COLUMBUS, Ohio -- A recent Brookings Institution report offers some basic policy recommendations that could help revitalize Ohio's cities and help rebalance the state's significant shifts in population, says an Ohio State University rural/urban policy specialist.

Mark Partridge commented on the Brookings findings in light of a new Ohio State report, "*Growth and Change: Population Change in Ohio and its Rural-Urban Interface*," which he co-authored.

"The Brookings report (*Restoring Prosperity: The State's Role in Revitalizing America's Older Industrial Cities*) got a lot of play across Ohio and the country last week," said Partridge, the Swank Professor of Rural-Urban Policy in the Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Developmental Economics. "But its national focus can be viewed as a one-size-fits-all approach to the problems of industrial cities. What's most important for Ohio to consider is its recommendation that we need to work across regions to solve problems. Cities, suburbs and townships, particularly in Ohio, need to work together as an integrated unit rather than compete with each other."

Partridge co-wrote the "Growth and Change" report with Jill Clark, program manager with Ohio State University Extension, and Jeff Sharp, rural sociologist with Department of Human and Community Resource Development. Sharp and Partridge also have appointments with OSU Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center.

**Shifting Population**

Ohio has experienced weak population growth for decades, but the state has not addressed a key underlying issue -- substantial population redistribution within the state, Partridge said. The Growth and Change report illustrates that shift, which has hollowed out Ohio's urban cores and over-burdened outlying townships.

"The pulls and tugs that our townships are experiencing are the mirror image of the decline of our cities' central core," Partridge said. "These two trends have the same underlying cause, and it will take regional cooperation to address it. Too often, outlying areas and central cities treat each other as if they're from different planets, but the problems they're experiencing are very interconnected."

According to the Growth and Change report, nearly 4 million residents, or 35 percent of Ohioans, now live in townships, which encompass the state's unincorporated areas. That's an increase of

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nearly 3 percent just between 2000 and 2005. At the same time, Ohio's largest cities have lost 2.3 percent of their population.

Growth in township population has been building since at least 1960, despite the frequent annexations of township lands into nearby cities and villages. The report shows that township population increases have largely occurred in suburban and exurban areas between five and 15 miles from urban centers, while both rural-area townships and central cities have been losing residents.

"This increase in township populations has strong implications for the way population is managed," Clark said. "But, currently in Ohio, townships are restricted in their authority over land use."

### **'Leftover Spaces'**

In Ohio, municipalities (cities and villages) have "home-rule" powers, giving them more authority to make decisions regarding population and land-use change, while townships and counties are much more limited in their powers and ability to make decisions regarding land-use. Yet Ohio's 1,300 townships vary widely in their makeup, the report reveals. At the extremes, 70 townships have a population of less than 500 people, while 55 are home to more than 10,000. More than 30 of Ohio's townships have population densities of over 1,000 people per square mile.

"The dynamics of Ohio's townships are so vastly different, but they're all looked upon politically as sort of 'leftover spaces' between cities and villages," Clark said. "Back in the 1920s, Ohio was looked upon as a leader in planning and zoning law, but we haven't made many changes in the rules of the game since then. We live in a different reality today."

Communities typically think a higher population is always positive, Clark said, "but not all population growth is a good thing. The cost of providing community infrastructure and services typically outpaces income that results from a higher population in previously undeveloped areas."

Ironically, Ohio's urban cores that are losing population already have schools, roads, electricity, and water and sewage systems in place. That means the upkeep of these aging systems must be maintained by fewer and fewer people -- typically those with less income, Clark said. At the same time, new infrastructure in outlying areas must be built to meet the demands of incoming residents, who are often spread out over large geographic areas.

"Maintaining and building all that infrastructure is potentially very expensive," Partridge said. "We may not want this kind of arrangement in a state that's struggling financially."

If today's high gas prices continue to rise, the trend toward moving to outlying areas may significantly diminish, Partridge said. That would reduce the pressure on townships to continue to offer more services for more residents, and it may increase the support for leaders to revitalize "brown fields" (abandoned areas in urban settings that often need environmental clean-up) in central-city areas, he said. Doing so would be in the best interests of not only the cities' residents, but of the entire area's region. Policymakers need to start conversations to make hard decisions, Partridge said, "not as townships, villages or cities, but as regions that are very interconnected."

For example, policymakers may want to consider regulations that would limit new infrastructure to be built only in areas more suitable for development, while providing incentives to encourage growth near towns and villages and to revitalize urban cores, Partridge said. It's this kind of conversation that needs to take place regionally and statewide.

"The state needs to be thinking about the hard choices of targeting development -- where can we

get the most bang for our buck? Would it be better to focus funds to revitalize Cleveland's central city or should we focus more on smaller cities, which serve as regional hubs? If we want to 'Turnaround Ohio,' we need to be thinking strategically."

To do so, attitudes throughout Ohio have to change, Partridge said. "People have to realize the importance of regional collaboration, and then they can put pressure to change how much power townships and regional authorities have," he said. "Ohio already has regional groups like MORPC (the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission), but they don't have many carrots or sticks to use to promote real change."

### **Finding a Niche**

Ohio is certainly not the first state to face these kinds of challenges.

"Many regions have faced the ebbs and flows of changing economic conditions -- look at New England and North Carolina. When they lost their industrial base, they had to reinvent themselves. Ohio needs to find its niche for the future."

For example, rural areas that offer environmental and scenic amenities are experiencing lots of growth nationally, Partridge said. Southeastern Ohio's Appalachian areas could capitalize on that appeal and, in two or three decades, could look very different than they do today. An example in the Growth and Change report is Nelsonville in Hocking County, which is attracting a growing artistic community. But it takes planning and sound decision-making to ensure growth occurs in a way that makes economic sense, he said.

"You can't sit around and try to guess what the next trend will be," Partridge said. "But a community can lay the groundwork by concentrating on offering good services at relatively low cost; making sure they have good schools; and having good governance that's transparent and involves people throughout the community. A good foundation is the key to putting a community in the best position to do well."

Among other findings in the report:

- Ohio's population growth ranked 49th in the 2000-2005 period, lagging behind even other Great Lakes states with similar climates and which face similar economic challenges.
- Except for Columbus, the state's metropolitan areas -- large, medium and small -- all are experiencing either slow growth or declines in population. Among Ohio's three large metro areas, population growth in Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor ranks 47th of 49 among similarly sized areas across the nation. The medium-sized metro areas of Akron, Canton-Massillon, Toledo, Dayton and Youngtown-Warren-Boardman rank (respectively) 57th, 58th, 61st, 62nd and 63rd nationally among 64 similarly sized areas. And the state's small metro areas, including Lima, Weirton-Steubenville, Lima, Springfield and Marietta, have fared even worse.
- On the other hand, population within the city limits of Ohio's small cities (with populations between 5,000 and 50,000 and villages (populations less than 5,000) has actually grown by about 1 percent and 3 percent, respectively, since 2000. These cities appear to be drawing population from nearby townships, which are losing population.
- Most population growth has occurred along the I-71 corridor, stretching from the outskirts of Cincinnati north through Columbus and up to the outskirts of Cleveland.
- Ohio's townships with the largest populations may have reached their physical capacity and may not experience much more growth in the future. Townships with populations between 1,000 and 2,500 are expected to experience the most growth.

"Growth and Change" is a joint project of the rural-urban policy program and the Exurban Change Project, both of which are housed in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences. The complete report is online at <http://exurban.osu.edu>.