What happens when small towns keep getting smaller?

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2025-02-16

Declining populations, geographic barriers, and limited resources have left Western Massachusetts struggling to sustain essential services like roadways, municipal buildings, and broadband access. U.S. Census numbers released in 2024 show clear shifts in population across the state, with **almost 60%** of the 351 municipalities losing population.

These Census figures highlight Western Massachusetts counties ranked at the bottom for state population growth over the past decade. Hampshire County grew only 2.7%, Hampden County grew 0.5%, while Franklin and Berkshire counties lost residents compared to the top population gainers at 8% growth. Among cities, Holyoke experienced the largest population decline, followed by Pittsfield and North Adams. Officials are ringing alarm bells about the financial implications of this trend as federal funding is often distributed on a per capita basis, potentially reducing resources for these municipalities.

A new report from the Office of State Auditor Suzanne M. Bump highlights the challenges Western Massachusetts communities face in maintaining public infrastructure. The study calls for a rural rescue plan, urging increased Chapter 90 funding to $300 million annually, the creation of a public infrastructure agency, and continued broadband investment. With federal relief funds available, the report emphasizes the urgency of addressing these issues now to prevent further decline.

Administrators stress the need to make their communities more attractive to new residents by ensuring adequate facilities for existing populations. Some suggest that highlighting regional assets could help reverse the trend by the 2030 Census. While Massachusetts overall has grown, much of this growth has been driven by Boston and its surrounding areas.

A major concern is the deteriorating condition of roads, bridges, and highways. While Chapter 90 funds are intended to support transportation infrastructure, the allocation system disproportionately benefits more populated areas, leaving Western Massachusetts with crumbling roadways and stalled development. The study identifies a clear need for a structured and sustained investment strategy to ensure public infrastructure in all regions receives equitable resources. Without decisive action, Western Massachusetts will continue to fall behind, exacerbating regional disparities and limiting future growth.

**References:** - [Mass Live - Population winners and losers](https://www.masslive.com/news/2024/05/map-shows-biggest-population-losers-and-winners-in-mass-since-2020.html) - [Census Bureau - City and Town Population Totals](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-cities-and-towns.html) - [NEPM - Western MA trails rest of MA in population growth](https://www.nepm.org/regional-news/2021-08-13/census-shows-western-massachusetts-counties-trail-rest-of-state-in-population-growth) - [mass.gov - Western MA communities have long suffered from inadequate support to maintain and develop public infrastructure](https://www.mass.gov/news/study-shows-western-mass-communities-have-long-suffered-from-inadequate-support-to-maintain-and-develop-public-infrastructure)