

The Young and the Restless: Brain Drain or Life Stage?

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Extended Abstract:

The apparent loss of young talented persons from Upstate New York has sent shock waves rippling through the region. Newspapers have published story after story detailing the losses, and leaders in the public and private sectors have called for economic development programs to stem the tide. An article in The New York Times on June 13, 2006 by veteran reporter Sam Roberts lays out the problem. The headline read, “Flight of Young Adults Is Causing Alarm Upstate” and the lead in the article stated “From 1990 to 2004, the number of 25-to-34-year-old residents in the 52 counties north of Rockland and Putnam declined by more than 25 percent.”

In order to better understand how public and private policies might address the apparent need to retain young talented persons in the upstate region, we seek to decompose the loss of young adults into a four components. These are:

- (1) Baby Boom and Bust Cycle – relative cohort sizes
- (2) Higher Education as an Export Industry – stage of life and regional specialization
- (3) Attraction of Bright Lights – stage of life and regional specialization redux
- (4) Lack of Economic Opportunity for Young Talent – brain drain explanation

What is Upstate? New York State has 62 counties, five of which are the boroughs of New York City. The other five counties making up “Downstate” are Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island; and Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties to the north of New York City. There is no uniform agreement as to which counties get counted as upstate versus downstate, but for the purposes of this paper we’ll accept Sam Roberts grouping—which is a widespread one. We combine the 52 counties of Upstate New York and treat them as a region or pseudo-state in our analysis. The composition of the population and fortunes of population growth and loss are not uniform across the upstate region, yet we choose to ignore the variations with the region and look at the grouping of counties as if it were one area—Upstate!

Loss of Young Adults. In order to understand the composition of population loss among young adults aged 20 to 34 years we focus on the decade of the 1990s and use the 1990 and 2000 Census as our benchmarks. While the data are not as current as the latest Census Bureau estimates they are more accurate, being based on complete enumerations, and yield up more detailed information from the long-form data regarding migration, college enrollment and workforce characteristics. Between 1990 and 2000 the Upstate region of New York State had a 22 percent loss of population aged 20-34 years. In Figure 1a, the total population of Upstate New York by age is displayed for 1990 and 2000. The red arrows connecting the age groups 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34 illustrate the “alarming” drop in young adults.

Anytime demographers are presented with such data we begin looking at change by cohort rather than by age group. In Figure 1b the arrows have been adjusted to connect the cohorts rather than the age groups. A more complex picture of change is taking place. The cohort aged 20-24 in 2000 (aged 10-14 in 1990) has only declined a negligible amount. While the cohorts aged 25-29 and 30-34 in 2000 (aged 15-19 and 20-24 in 1990) have declined at much lower rates than the age group comparison portrays. The cohort aged 30-34 in 2000 (aged 20-24 in 1990) has actually increased in size over the decade. From a cohort perspective then, the rate of change for persons aged 20-34 in 2000 (10-24 in 1990) was -13 percent. That is 9 percentage points different from the -22 percent presented by the age group perspective. While public and private policy may accomplish great feats, changes to cohort size (after the birthing process and assuming little or no loss to mortality) are not to be tackled.

In the remainder of the paper we undertake to explain this 13 percent loss in the cohort aged 20-34 in 2000 by reference to migration based on life stages and relative economic opportunity.

Figure 1a: Age Groups and Population Change in Upstate New York, 1990-2000

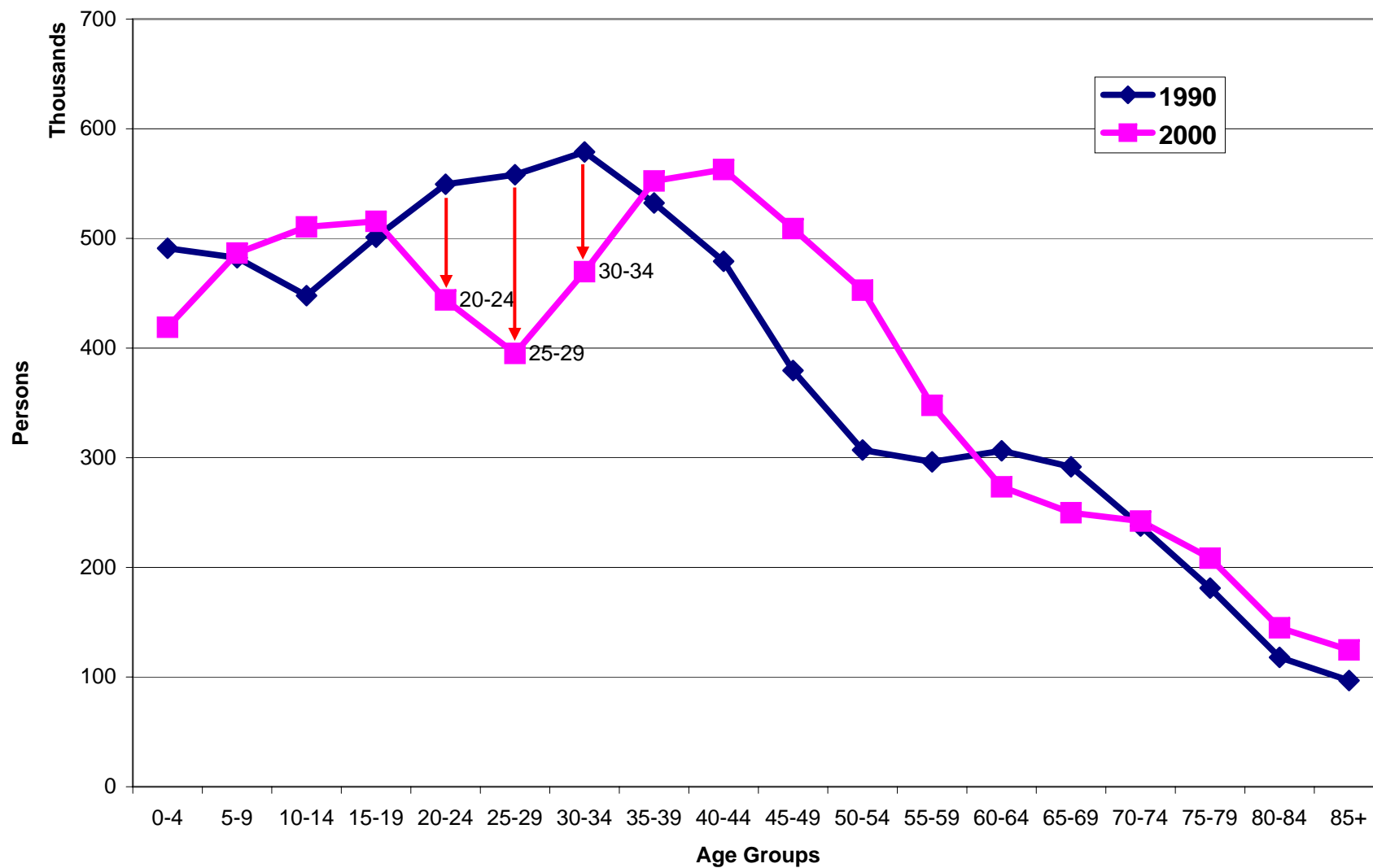


Figure 1b: Cohorts and Population Change in Upstate New York, 1990-2000

