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D.C., Seattle Draw Families With Kids, Bucking Trend

Good jobs, schools keep kids in the city, but falling birthrates now pose a threat

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Note

Most big, expensive cities are losing kids as families struggle to cover the cost of living. The opposite is happening in Seattle and Washington, D.C., two pricey coastal cities diverging from the broader demographic trajectory.

The population of children under 18 in both cities grew 10% between 2015 and 2024, a bigger increase than in many family-friendly Sunbelt locales. Both places had an influx of affluent young professionals in the 2000s and 2010s who stayed once they had kids.

The cities possess a few common ingredients that seem to have spurred their growing population of children: high-paying jobs and decent local schools.

In Seattle, tech workers said relocating to the pricier San Francisco area would be a lifestyle downgrade. In D.C., home prices are up markedly in the nearby suburbs, which often come with crushing commutes.

Falling birthrates mean both could start to see their child populations decline again soon.

Note

For now, though, there aren't just more kids in these two cities—the makeup of the child population is different than it was a decade ago. In both places, the number of children in families with incomes below $100,000 fell while the number from families with higher incomes rose sharply, even after adjusting for inflation.

Washington, D.C.

Young college-educated professionals began flocking to the nation's capital in larger numbers in the mid-2000s. D.C. experienced the most intense gentrification of any place in the U.S. between 2000 and 2016, according to an analysis from the University of Minnesota Law School.

Many of these young professionals stayed in the city once they started having children, said Yesim Sayin, executive director of the D.C. Policy Center. Universal Pre-K for 3and 4-year-olds, which became law in 2008, was a draw. Families can also choose from schools across the city, including charter schools, she said.

Note

The number of kids in the city living in households earning under $100,000 fell by 9% in the past decade, while those living in families earning six figures rose 37%, The Wall Street Journal's analysis found.

Note

The number of children attending private school rose 37%, though the total number is much smaller than the number attending public school, according to the Journal analysis, which used census data, including some retrieved from IPUMS/University of Minnesota to compare 2014-2015 with 2023-2024.

"It used to be people moved to D.C., had children, and the moment the kids turned 5 they moved out," Sayin said. "The district became much better at retaining families after they had kids."

Caitlin Bergo fell in love with D.C. when she attended law school there in the late 2000s. In 2019, Bergo and her husband, Jeffrey Kiemen, got job offers in the city. The prospect of free early childhood education gave them the financial breathing room to make the move with their 1-year-old daughter from New Orleans to a rented home in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood.

Their daughter is now 8 and attends a bilingual Spanish and English neighborhood elementary school. She is getting opportunities Bergo didn't have growing up in a suburb of Chicago, such as school trips to the National Gallery of Art. The 41-year-old government lawyer and her husband also have a 2-yearold son.

But the D.C. economy that drove the influx of young professionals has faltered since the pandemic. The number of births peaked in 2016 and has fallen steeply since. The number of kids under 5 in the city is down 9% in the past decade, even as the number of children overall is up.

Seattle

Seattle saw an influx of highly educated young professionals in the 2000s and 2010s, many of them tech workers, said professor Sara Curran, director of the University of Washington's Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology. In the decade ended in 2024, the adult population in Seattle grew 15%, the Journal's analysis found. The number of kids jumped 10%, from about 100,000 to about 110,000.

"There are a ton of parks, lots of activities, it's very outdoorsy," Curran said. There is no state income tax, and housing is cheaper than in places like San Francisco that have similar job opportunities.

Even after the recent increase in kids, Seattle still has the second-smallest share of children among the 38 cities with more than 500,000 residents in the Journal's analysis.

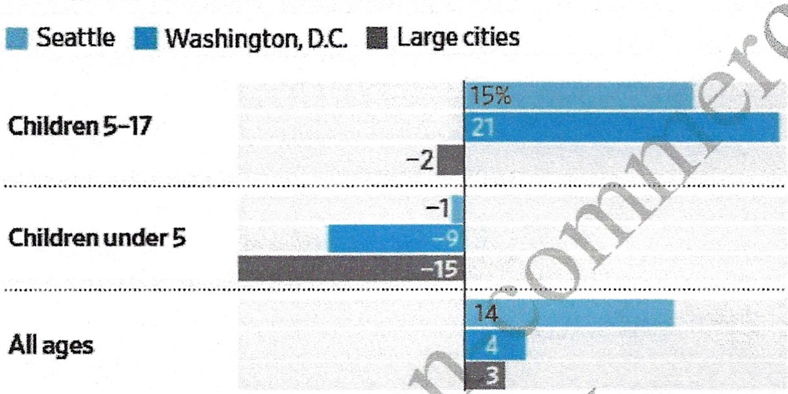
The kids who do live there are increasingly affluent ones. The number of Seattle kids living in households earning less than $100,000 fell 31%, while the number living in households earning more than $100,000 is up 34%, even after adjusting for inflation.

Mari Pierce-Quinonez and Austin Morton moved to the city in 2015, eventually landing tech jobs. The couple bought a home in the Beacon Hill neighborhood in 2020 and now live there with their three children, ages 6, 4 and 1.

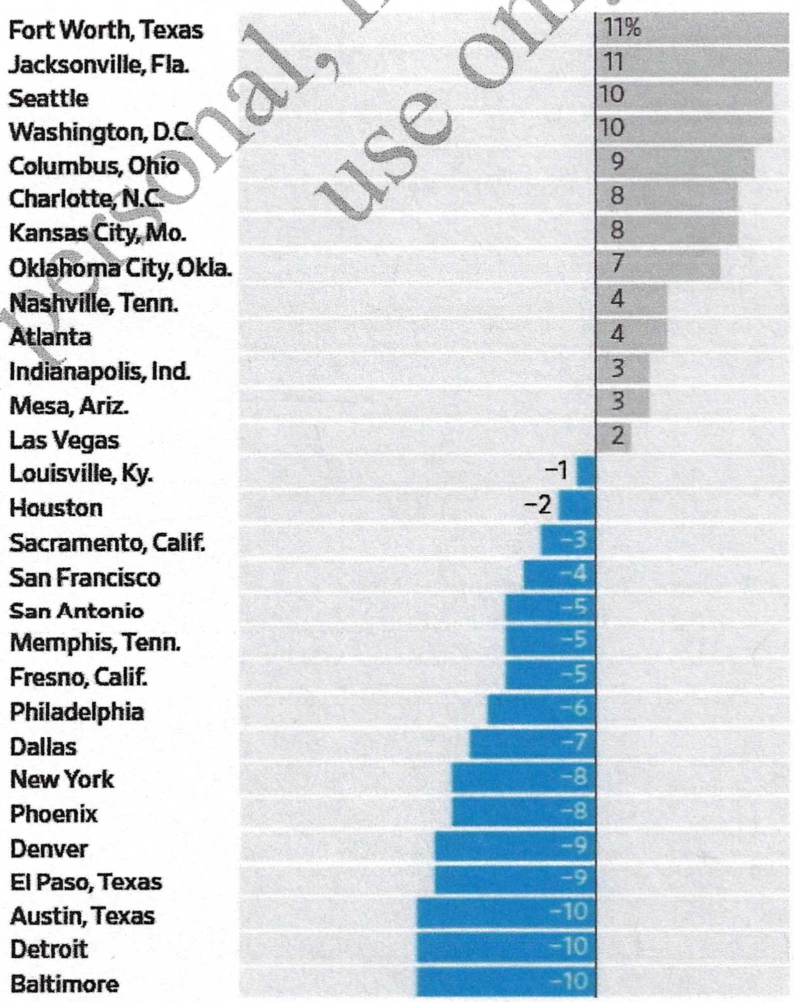
Pierce-Quinonez grew up in Berkeley, Calif., and Morton grew up in rural New Jersey, where his dad commuted two hours each way to his job in New York. "Neither one of those options sounded great, Pierce-Quinonez said.

They are staying put. "Why move? We have a good mortgage rate. We have some good public schools nearby," Morton said.

Change in population from 2015 to 2024



Change in child* population from 2015 to 2024, in large cities

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