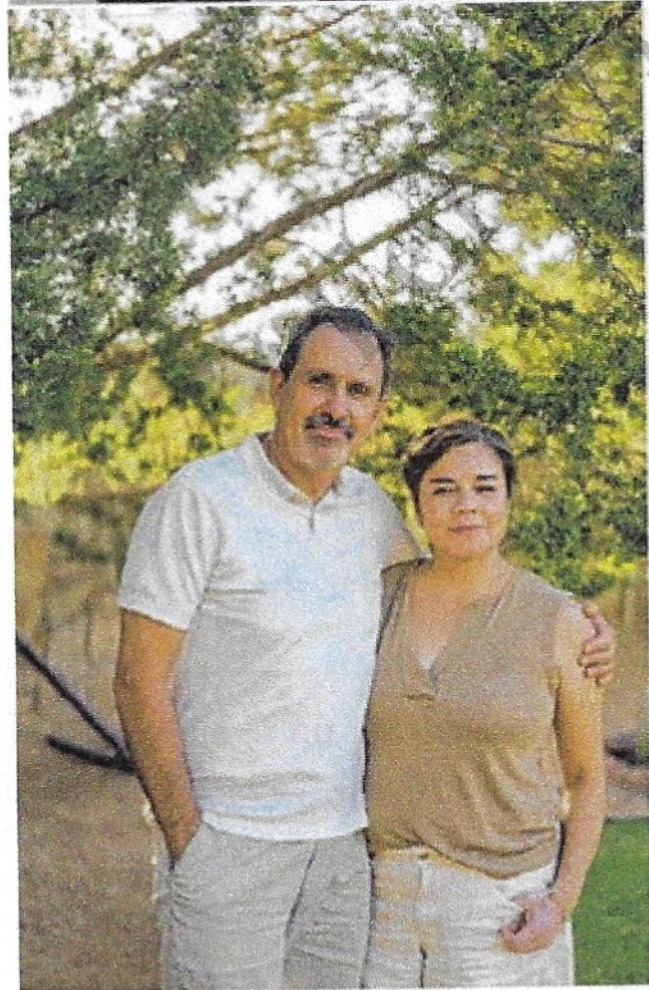


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Raheim and Kierra Bazile with their son in Easton, Pa., above left. Raheim previously lived in New York City. Fernando and Patricia Escobedo, above right, have noticed the number of kids dwindle in their El Paso neighborhood. FROM LEFT: LIAM KENNEDY FOR WSJ; PAUL RATJE FOR WSJ

U.S. Cities Face Drop in Children

Big metro areas confront rapid decline of resident families with kids

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BY RACHEL LOUISE ENSIGN AND PAUL OVERBERG

When Fernando and Patricia Escobedo moved to the Willows, an affluent neighborhood in El Paso, Texas, 25 years ago, kids were everywhere.

About half of the homes on their cul-de-sac had children. Growing up, the couple's twin daughters used to ride their scooters outside with other neighborhood kids. At an annual block party, they jumped around in a bouncy house and climbed into the local firetruck.

The twins are now in college—and the neighborhood feels a lot different. The Escobedos also have a 12-year-old at home, and Fernando said she is one of a few children under 18 on the block. The local elementary school

has noticeably fewer kids. Fernando said he's more likely to see a retired neighbor gardening than a child on a bicycle.

"It's not the vibe it was 10 years ago when there were still kids here," he said.

With the nation's fertility rate at record lows, the number of children under 18 is falling across the U.S. The decline is especially pronounced in big cities, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis.

The number of children under 18 living in big U.S. cities is down 6% in the past decade, the Journal found, compared with a 1% decline nationwide. The drop is especially stark among families with little kids: The number of children under age 5 in big cities fell 15%, compared with a drop of 7% nationwide. Even cities that are gaining population are losing children. Note

In all, the number of children declined in about two-thirds of the 38 U.S. cities with more than 500,000 residents. The Journal analyzed census data from 2015 through 2024, the most recent data available. Note

Families with children cite concerns about costs, safety and quality of life in their move away from cities. Also contributing to the drop is a growing number of childless residents opting to stay that way, worried about the financial implications and lifestyle trade-offs of having a family. Net

The drop is happening in cities across the economic spectrum. In San Jose, Calif., where median household income is nearly twice the U.S. level, the number of kids under age 5 has dropped 34% in the past decade—more than any other large city.

Ernie and Samantha Solis both grew up in the San Jose area and lived in the city for the early years of their two sons' lives. Buying a home was out of reach on their respective salaries as a firefighter and teacher. Daycare cost about \$25,000 a year for each child. They worried about state vaccine mandates. In June 2021, they moved to Star, Idaho, a small town a short drive from Boise.

"I was just over it," said Ernie. He flies into the city every Monday for his job, stays in free dorms for firefighters during the week, and returns to Idaho every Friday. He's met other dads—electricians, HVAC technicians and auto body shop owners—doing the same commute.

In California, the family rented an older 1,400-square-foot home. In Idaho, they own a 2,300-square-foot house with space to park their RV. They had a third child, a daughter, after moving.

Among relatively affordable cities, the number of children has fallen 15% in Albuquerque, N.M., and 11% in Milwaukee.

City economies are starting to feel the shift. Families are important contributors to a city's tax base, and middleclass families in particular drive demand for goods, such as affordable groceries, that benefit everyone. Fewer kids means less support for public schools, often one of the largest employers in many cities, and tough choices as classrooms empty out.

Some municipalities are rolling out free child care, but it isn't clear if it will be enough to convince people to have children or families to stay.

National trends

After the 2008-09 financial crisis, people stayed in cities because that's where good jobs were. But as economic growth became more widespread later in the 2010s, families started leaving for opportunities elsewhere, said Connor O'Brien, a fellow at think tank the Institute for Progress.

The decline in city kids started in 2017 and picked up with the pandemic. Covid opened the door for remote work, leading many to re-evaluate their lifestyles. Some moved to the suburbs—or even farther. “Families had more exit options and they took them,” O'Brien said.

The falling birthrate is also a major factor. The number of births in the U.S. has fallen 9% in the past decade, largely due to fewer women having children in their teens and 20s. Nationwide, the birthrate is falling even more dramatically for Hispanic women, who make up a sizable share of the population in some cities.

An analysis by O'Brien found that birthrates in large urban counties fell 18% between 2010 and 2024, the biggest drop of any county type.

Of the 38 U.S. cities with over 500,000 residents, the Journal found, 13 saw the number of kids grow. Those cities, many in the Sunbelt, are often relatively affordable for middle-class families. They saw the number of children increase 7% over the past decade—while their overall population grew 12%.

Seventeen other large cities saw their populations grow while the number of children living there dropped.

In some cities that are losing kids, the falling birthrate is a bigger factor in the drop. In others, it's families moving away.

In Albuquerque, about half of the 15% decline in children is from more families leaving than arriving, according to the Journal's analysis. The rest is from the falling birthrate. Births in Bernalillo County, where the city dominates the population, have dropped 20% in the past decade.

In more affluent Denver, the number of children has dropped 9%, a combination of a small loss due to more families with children moving out than in and a drop of 7% in the number of births. Across a decade, that translates to almost 7,000 fewer births than if totals had remained steady.

Expensive cities

In New York, where the cost of living is high, the number of children is down 8% over the past decade.

Since 2000, the city has lost a net 80,000 households with people aged 30 to 54 who are married or have at least one child under 18, a decline driven by middle-income families, said Melissa Pumphrey, chief economist of the city's Economic Development Corporation. Over that period, New York gained a net 670,000 households of single people or families without kids under 18.

Parents have to earn \$334,000 to be able to comfortably afford child care for a 2-year-old, according to an analysis from the city's comptroller. The median rent for apartments with three or more bedrooms is \$5,495 citywide, according to StreetEasy.

A couple of years ago, Raheim Bazile was paying \$750 a month to rent a room in a home in Queens. That was about a quarter of the monthly take-home pay he earned working as a truck driver for the U.S. Postal Service.

When Bazile got engaged in 2023, he and his long-distance fiancée immediately started making plans to leave. He had started considering a move years earlier, when he was living in public housing with a daughter he had from a prior relationship, who is now 12.

Bazile looked into the Long Island suburbs, but they were too expensive. He and his now-wife, Kierra Bazile, eventually settled in Easton, Pa., which has about 30,000 people, last year. Their son was born earlier this year. "Here, I feel much lighter," said Bazile, who now works in real estate.

New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani is rolling out free child care to help families stay in the city. So far, the new program covers a small group of 2-year-olds.

Brooklyn resident Jenna Edwards always assumed she and her husband would have children, but they had trouble conceiving. They started visiting a fertility clinic in 2019 but learned the projected bill for the initial treatments would be \$4,000 to \$22,000, even with insurance. There was no guarantee it would work.

She worried about other potential costs, too: the hospital bill, daycare, nursery school. The couple, who live in a below-market-rate, rent-stabilized apartment, would probably have to move. Edwards, now 44 and a freelance content creator, decided against doing IVF.

"Finances definitely influenced just how hard we were willing to try," she said. "It's easy to get almost angry or resentful that it influenced so much every step of the way."

Rising costs

Even in less expensive cities, the prospect of having a child can be financially daunting. In Philadelphia—where kids are down 6%—Nija Rivera, 39, grew up working class in a row house with her siblings, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. She now runs a grant-writing consulting firm and lives in a two-bedroom condo that she owns with her husband, who works as a mariner.

Rivera does hot yoga daily and takes dance and acting classes. Her husband is taking a yearlong guitar program. Having a child would likely mean sacrificing the time and money they spend on those activities. Rivera also wants to be able to support her own mother and stepfather if they need help in the future.

Homes in El Paso are less expensive than in other cities, but they're still up 32% over the past five years, according to Redfin. El Paso's total population is flat over the past decade, but the number of kids has dropped 9%. That was driven by a 30% drop in children under 5. With enrollment down, the El Paso Independent School District is closing elementary schools to save money.

Fernando Escobedo, who is 55 and works in finance, said his elderly parents' block in the city, where he spent his childhood summers roaming freely with other kids, is also quiet. The annual block party on his own cul-de-sac never came back after Covid. "The people who are left are the parents, older parents," said Escobedo.

Economists worry about an aging population because it means fewer working-age taxpayers. Some cities that have faced a drop in kids have been able to pare spending on public schools, but others have struggled to do so, leaving a bloated level of per-student spending, said Jeff Clemens, a professor at the University of California, San Diego.

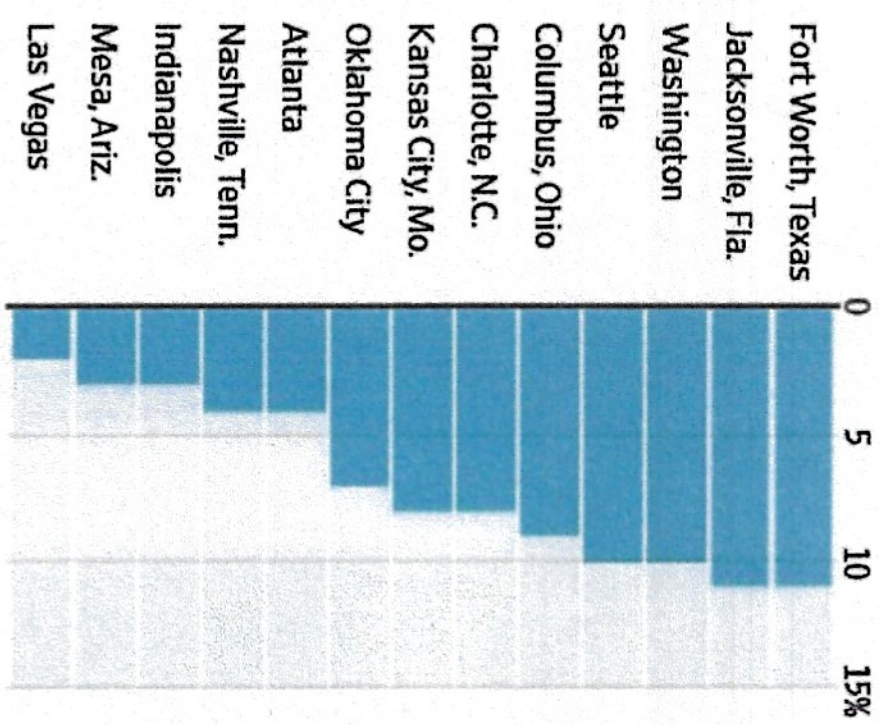
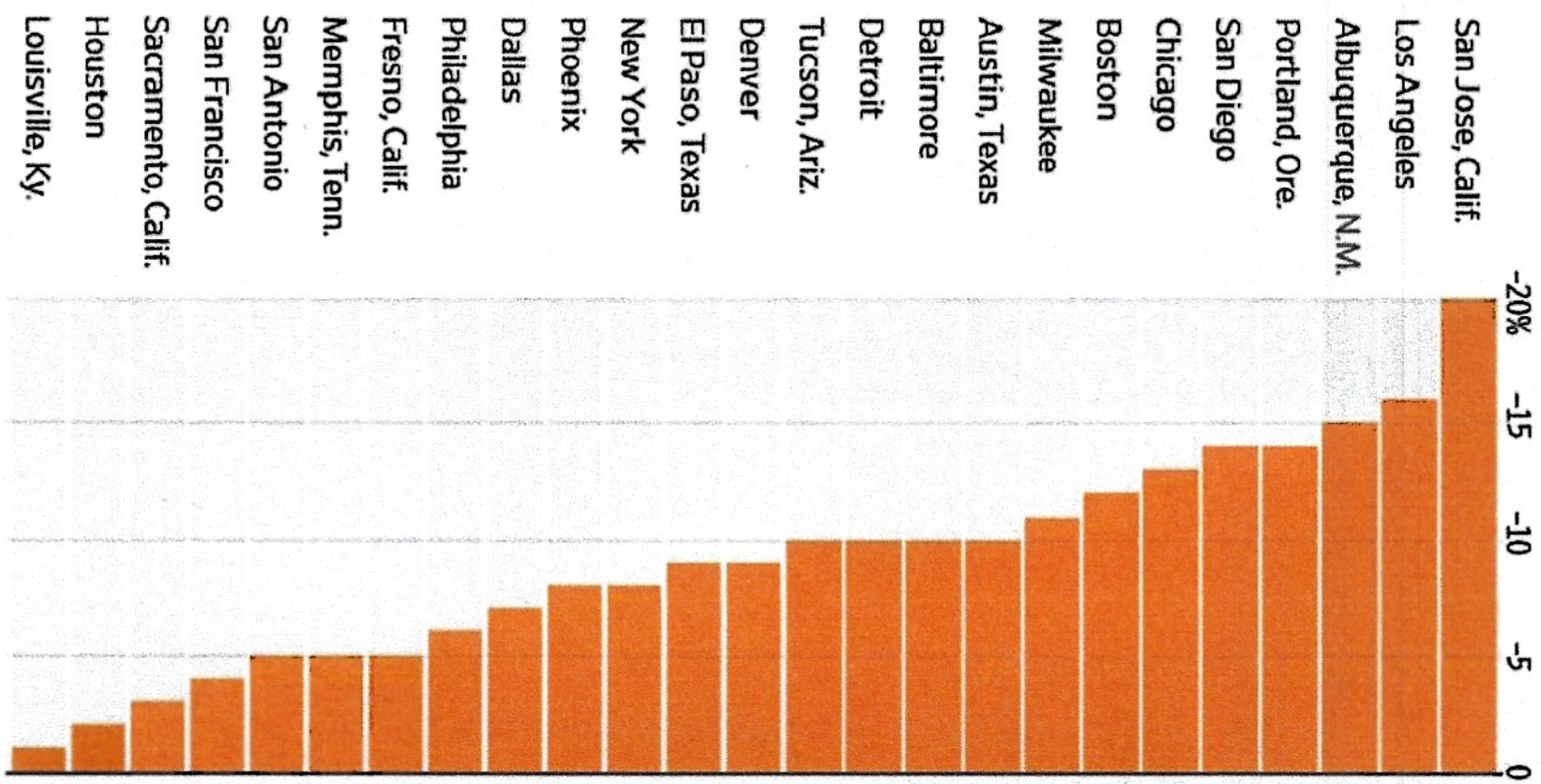
The big risk is that a decline in families is a part of a broader population decline and erosion of a city's tax base. The places that are effectively replacing families with affluent childless adults are so far avoiding this fate.

Taneal Jordan enjoyed attending local festivals and other events when she lived in Milwaukee after graduating from a local college. Jordan, who is 38 and works in corporate training, was aware of the city's relatively high crime rate but felt she could keep herself safe.

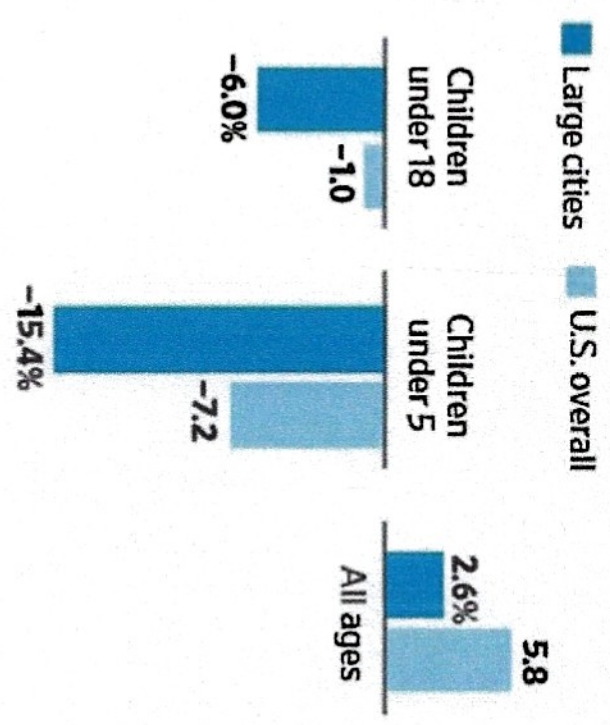
She's soured on city living now that she and her husband have a 3-year-old. Their doorbell camera has captured people stealing packages from their stoop. A nearby playground has rusty and broken equipment.

The couple is planning a move to the suburbs of Green Bay, Wis., where they hope their son will be able to attend good schools and play with neighbors. "It just seemed like a very nice place where I would have no problem letting my kid ride a bike down the street," Jordan said.

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



Change in population from 2015 to 2024



*For children under 18
Note: For 38 cities with more than 500,000 residents in 2024

