AIN'T NO VALLEY LOW ENOUGH: A CASE FOR SMART DECLINE

A Review of Progress, Challenges, and its Impact Across Canada

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SUMMARY

Smart growth policies have been used in growing cities across Canada to create sustainable cities. Yet, while the country's total population continues to climb and some cities are experiencing tremendous growth, many Canadian cities are shrinking. Smart Growth counterpart, smart decline, has existed for decades, yet is rarely used as a strategy to improve living conditions in shrinking locales. This article maps out municipal population trends to better understand the spatial distribution and severity of decline occurring in Canada. We then reflect on the potential of smart decline policies for cities experiencing persistent decline.

SOMMAIRE

Les politiques de croissance intelligente ont été utilisées dans des villes en pleine expansion à travers le Canada pour créer des villes durables. Pourtant, alors que la population totale du pays continue d'augmenter et que certaines villes connaissent une croissance fulgurante, de nombreuses villes canadiennes sont en décroissance. La contrepartie de la croissance intelligente, la décroissance intelligente, existe depuis des décennies, mais elle est rarement utilisée comme stratégie pour améliorer les conditions de vie dans les localités en décroissance. Cet article présente les tendances démographiques municipales afin de mieux comprendre la distribution spatiale et la gravité du déclin au Canada. Nous réfléchissons ensuite au potentiel des politiques de décroissance intelligente pour les villes qui connaissent un déclin persistant.

INTRODUCTION

Canada's population is growing. However, growth is disproportionately occurring in mid-sized and large cities. From 1971 to 2021, cities with a population of over 50,000 grew an average of 264%, compared to an average growth of 190% in cities with a population between 10,000 and 50,000. Moreover, the majority of Canadians live in mid-sized and large cities, with 36% of Canadians living in Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal's metropolitan areas. Many cities have implemented smart growth policies to ensure growth and development occur in a sustainable way.[1]

While some cities are facing the challenges associated with rapid growth, others are struggling to grow at all. Elliot Lake, ON, for instance, has lost 37% of its population since its peak in 1986, making it the most severely shrinking city in Canada.[2] Cape Breton Regional Municipality, which boasted a population of over 125,000 in 1971, has since lost 26% of its population. Communities often experience population decline due to the loss of primary industry. However, globalization is playing an increasingly prominent role in urban shrinkage, as growth and resources become concentrated in a small number of larger global cities.[3] As a result, cities located beyond these areas of growth grapple with the challenges associated with long-term population decline, such as a decreased tax base, a lack of local economic activity, and high unemployment rates.[4]

Instead of relying on traditional growth strategies, many scholars recommend that shrinking cities embrace their smaller population size by implementing smart decline principles. Smart decline "requires thinking about who and what remains", as opposed to continuing to plan for their peak population size.[5] This may involve the creation of additional green space or reducing surplus housing or infrastructure through rightsizing.[6] While there are a limited number of examples of smart decline in practice in North America, the outcomes of these policies have emphasized the importance of applying a social justice lens to smart decline – a bottom-up approach that allows multiple voices to be acknowledged, provides respectful opportunities for deliberation and is transparent.[6]

Despite the demographic peaks and valleys occurring across Canada, smart growth's counterpart, smart decline, is rarely used as a strategy to improve living conditions in shrinking locales, as planning tools to guide and respond to population change remain overwhelmingly growth oriented.[6] This article will outline the spatial distribution of municipal and neighbourhood population decline in Canada and will provide insight into the role of smart growth and decline in community planning.

DATA AND METHODS

Our study examined population decline and the potential for smart decline across Canada. We investigated population trends occurring in 410 Canadian municipalities with populations over 10,000. For this study, census subdivisions (CSDs) are proxies for municipalities as they are used by Statistics Canada as a municipal equivalent for census data. All data were retrieved from Statistics Canada for each quinquennial census between 1971 and 2021. To account for boundary changes, the population data was appropriately weighted for each census year. The past peak population method was used to measure shrinkage using the peak population year as the base year to calculate population change.[7]

UNEVEN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

The examination of the population dynamics of the 410 studied municipalities across Canada found that 90 municipalities had passed their peak population. In other words, almost one quarter of Canadian municipalities have experienced a decline in population after reaching their peak at some point in the past. On average, shrinking Canadian municipalities have lost approximately 8% of their population. The two most common peak population years were 2016 (22% of shrinking municipalities) and 1971 (19% of shrinking municipalities). While the latter may reflect long processes of deindustrialization and economic restructuring, the former may be capturing the more recent reshuffling of Canada's urban population geography resulting from the maturation of the baby boom echo and the pandemic-induced opportunities to work-from-home prior to the 2021 census.

The geography of Canadian municipalities whose population peaked between 1971 and 2016 (Figure 1) demonstrates the pervasiveness of the trend – there are shrinking municipalities in every province except Prince Edward Island (and none in any of the territories). Quebec has the highest number of shrinking municipalities (30), followed by Ontario (20), and Alberta (10). However, these provinces are also home to higher absolute numbers of municipalities. Examining the proportion of shrinking to total municipalities at the provincial level, the Atlantic Provinces jump off the page. Almost three quarters of Nova Scotia's (73%) and half of New Brunswick (46%) and Newfoundland and Labrador's (43%) municipalities were found to be shrinking.

Looking closer at individual municipalities highlights the pan-Canadian nature of shrinkage. The five municipalities that experienced the most extreme levels of population loss are actually located in five different provinces. Elliot Lake, ON is Canada's most severely shrunken city having lost 37% of its 1986 peak population. In rank order, it is followed by Thompson, MB (31%), La Tuque, QC (30%), Bathurst, NB (27%), and Corner Brook, NL (26%). The four top municipalities ranked after Elliot Lake all peaked in 1971. Despite geographic diversity, all five of these advanced shrinking municipalities have similarities in their economic foundations rooted in extraction industries. Elliot Lake was once dubbed the uranium capital of the world and Thompson once boasted the world's second-largest nickel-producing mine. Bathurst was largely built on zinc mining and the pulp and paper industries. Both La Tuque and Corner Brook were also pulp and paper towns.

It is important to note the wider context of growth that surrounds these patterns of population loss. It is one thing to lose population locally amidst ubiquitous population loss like cities in eastern Germany post-reunification. It is quite

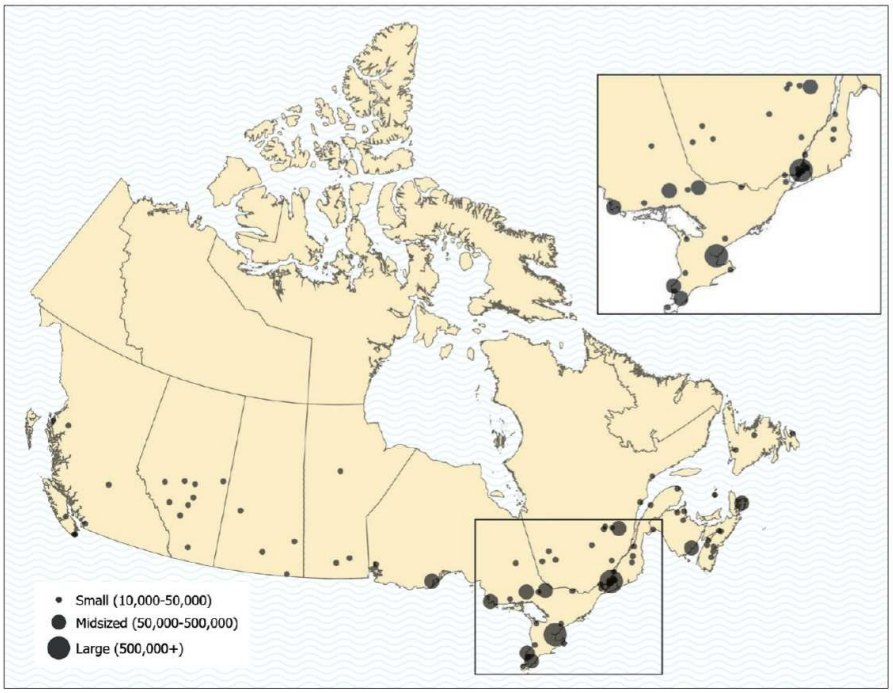

Figure 1: Map of Canadian shrinking cities (past peak 1971-2016)

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another to shrink next to or within regions with high levels of growth. While four of the five aforementioned municipalities peaked in population in 1971, much of the country has had quite the opposite experience over the past 50 years. Between 1971 and 2021, the Canadian population grew 77% from about 21.5 million to over 38 million. At the extreme growth end of the municipal spectrum sits the Montreal suburb of Saint-Lazare which has grown 940% since 1971. Such a wide spectrum of potential population change scenarios underscores the importance of a broad scope of planning tools and approaches.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The demographic trends highlighted here can be valuable to Canadian planners as they approach change in their own communities. Those places experiencing population increases can learn much from smart growth approaches to managing land use and development, to ensure that new populations are effectively housed, environmental resources are preserved, and quality of life levels are sufficiently maintained. But the same is equally true for the staggeringly high numbers of cities and towns across the country that have been losing population. While nobody wants to plan for decline, research across the globe has shown compelling evidence that doing so has important positive benefits for communities.[7, 8, 9] Rather than viewing population decline as some version of fatalism or pessimism, we argue that there is a demographic reality here in Canada that is not likely to change anytime soon: communities outside the major population growth centres have been quietly shrinking for decades and we can project similar trends into the future.

With the past as our guide, we can turn to the increasingly well-documented power of smart decline to help places manage depopulation and become better and smaller. Planners can embrace policy tools like relaxed zoning that builds housing vacancy data into a dynamic code that automatically relaxes zoning for residential districts to allow other uses – reducing the likelihood of widespread building abandonment and vacancy. A phenomenon seen in the port city of New Bedford, Massachusetts (USA) of urban absorption can also be useful to Canadian planners.[9] As New Bedford lost population year after year, the city was active in reusing vacant lots for gardens and passive green space, repurposing abandoned buildings for museums, actively demolishing derelict structures, and building parks on those lots. New Bedford became a less dense city with fewer buildings and with more park space. Through this urban absorption process, New Bedford weathered population decline quite well and stands as a model for how Canadian cities can likewise reduce the ill effects of depopulation.

The research presented here offers a compelling window into how geographically diverse population change is throughout the country. These demographic peaks and valleys can also be felt at the local level, with some neighbourhoods experiencing more severe decline than others.[10] Though there are benefits to approaching smart decline from a regional level, smaller localities within the region should have control of how these processes are implemented.[6] This method allows for a more targeted approach, permitting neighbourhoods to consider their unique opportunities and challenges in the implementation of smart decline policies.

Planners must be students of the demographic patterns at work in their communities and astute observers of where things are headed. Doing so can help reduce the ill effects of either growth or decline. Just as sherpas guide mountain climbers up and down the Himalayas, informed planners can utilize smart growth and decline to lead policymakers and the wider public through the emotional and complex peaks and valleys of planning for population change.

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ENDNOTES

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