The Case and Means for Family-Friendly Core Cities

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Many core cities have enjoyed growth since the early 2000s by attracting millennials and Gen Z workers, who flocked to urban centers and stayed longer than members of prior generations. However, this growth faces mounting challenges: more young families have begun or are poised to begin suburbanizing with their children, the next generational cohorts are considerably smaller, changes in remote work allow more people to choose more affordable places to live, and international migration (as the sole driver of population growth) is unpredictable. Absent a change in strategy, core cities risk entering a vicious cycle of population and economic decline and rising concentrations of poverty. Consequently, core cities[1] face an urgent need to invest in retaining families through tailored approaches related to housing, public education, safety, and child care. Although investing in families requires changes in resource flows and planning, retaining families (especially middle- and high-income families) can yield immediate economic returns, stabilize long-term workforce supply, and provide broad-based benefits to all urban residents.

This brief draws on academic research on demographic change, migration, and urban economic development to explain the sources of core cities' population and economic growth since the early 2000s and the structural shifts now threatening that model. It highlights the economic role of families, draws on recent technical research into the conditions that shape family migration decisions, and identifies investments that can help cities retain families and support durable, inclusive growth. We illustrate the principles presented with a Washington, DC, case study.

Many US Core Cities Have Relied on Inflows of Young and Childless Workers to Fuel Their Recent Population Growth and Economic Vitality

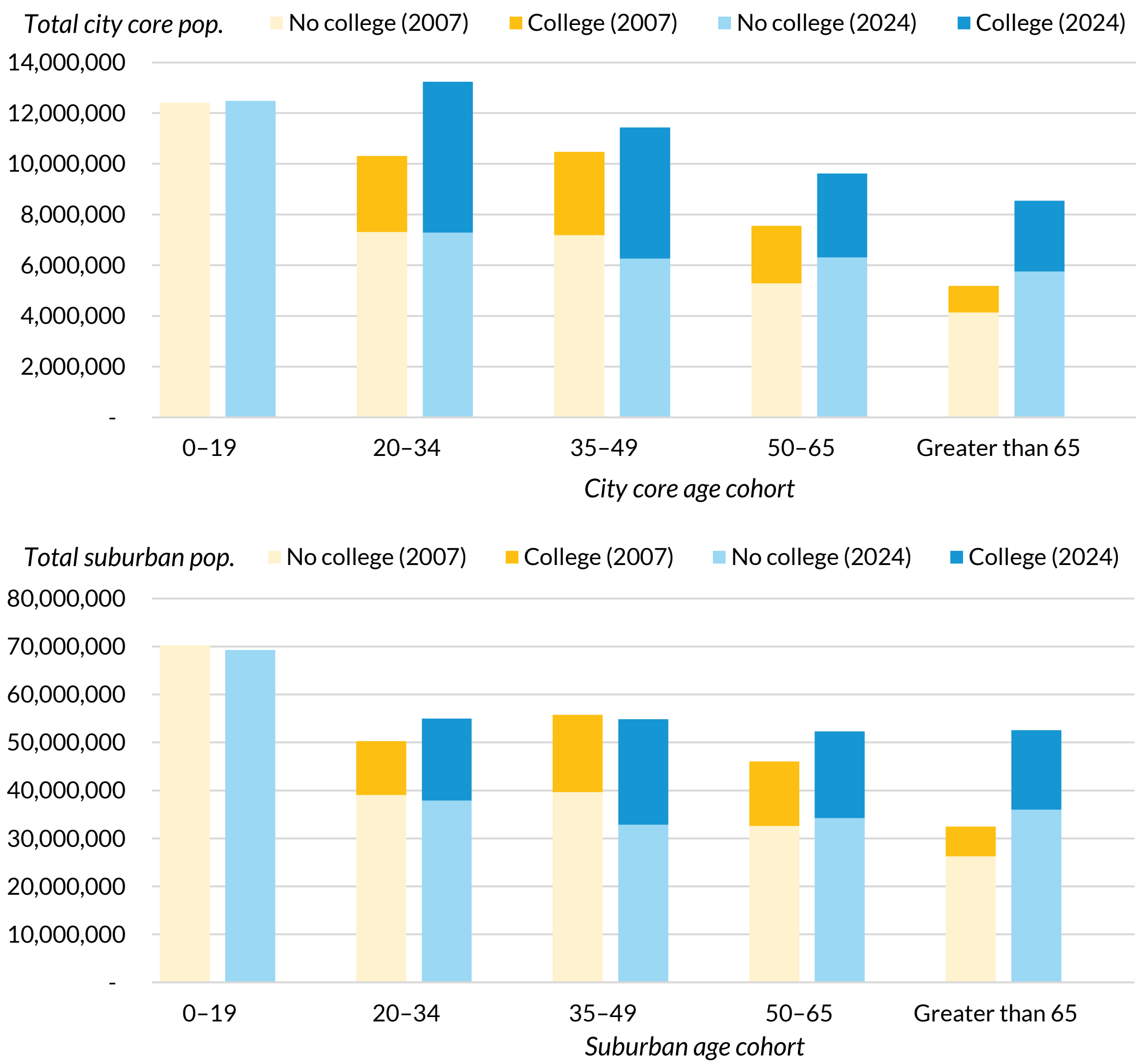
After several decades of population loss, many US core cities attracted significant young adult in-migration beginning in the early 2000s. During the postwar period from 1950 through the 1990s and beyond, most US core cities' population growth either stagnated or declined and suburbs expanded rapidly (Baum-Snow 2007; Rappaport 2003; Redding 2022). In 1950, 58 percent of metropolitan Americans lived in core cities, but by 2000 that share had fallen to 36 percent (Boustan and Schertzer 2013). However, starting in the early 1990s, successful crime reduction paired with changing consumption tastes, technological commercial advances, delayed family formation, and the rise of knowledge and innovation economies drew young adults back to core cities (Couture and Handbury 2020; Florida 2012; Glaeser and Gottlieb 2006; Hwang and Lin 2016; Moretti 2012). Young professionals (25- to 34-year-olds) increased from 13 percent of metropolitan downtown populations in 1970 to nearly 25 percent by 2000, and that concentration deepened further by 2010 as the central business districts in large metropolitan statistical areas—which accounted for 5 percent of their population—experienced 24 percent of the total increase in the young college-educated population between 2000 and 2010 (Birch 2005; Couture and Handbury 2020; Kolko 2016).

Core cities that flourished over the past twenty years have leaned heavily on highly educated, prime working-age adults without children for economic growth. City populations have grown more educated since the early 2000s. In 2007, roughly 32 percent of core cities' young workers were college graduates. By 2024, that share had grown to 50 percent (figure 1). Concentrating young, educated workers in core cities raises local productivity, wages, innovation output, and fiscal capacity (Florida 2011; Glaeser and Saiz 2003; Moos et al. 2019; Moretti 2012). The Great Recession slowed suburbanization among millennials, accelerating central city population growth between 2007 and 2015 (Frey 2024). This period of millennial retention and delayed childbearing coincided with measurable gains in urban income concentration and economic growth (Couture and Handbury 2020; Moreno-Maldonado and Santamaría 2024). This resulted in median household income, educational attainment, and home values growing faster in core cities than in suburban areas between 2000 and 2018 (Fry 2020).

FIGURE 1

The Number of Young, College-Educated Workers Living in Core Cities Grew Dramatically Between 2007 and 2024 but Remained Mostly Steady in the Suburbs

Age structure by education level, city core, and suburban status 2007–24



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Source: American Community Survey IPUMs 1-year data from 2007 and 2024.

Notes: pop. = population. city core = any public use microdata area (PUMA) with a population density of > 6,000 people per square mile; suburban = all other PUMAs within metropolitan areas that have densities of < 6,000 people per square mile. Data reflect residents in metropolitan areas only.

Core cities have also attracted a substantial share of international immigrants, further contributing to their growth and economic prosperity. Foreign-born population growth accounted for the majority of population growth in many of the largest core cities in the country since 2000, and in some cases prevented population decline (Boustan and Shertzer 2013; Frey 2017). Higher shares of immigrants in core cities were associated with reduced crime and thus better conditions for urban economic recovery (Glaeser and Gottlieb 2006; Sampson 2008). Additionally, immigrants complement domestic workers' labor, boosting everyone's wages and improving core cities' innovation capacity (Moretti 2012; Ottaviano and Peri 2012; Peri 2016). Beyond its role since the early 2000s, international immigration sustained core cities' populations and economies during COVID and drove half or more of all population growth after COVID (Frey 2025).

Historical patterns suggest that most workers (especially those with high incomes) relocate to the suburbs when they have children. People typically migrate between core cities, then outward toward suburbs as their wages rise and they have children (Boustan and Shertzer 2013; Gould Ellen, Horn, and Reed 2019; Plane, Henrie, and Perry 2005; Reia et al. 2022). High-income households are especially inclined to move to the suburbs upon having children, mostly in search of good schools and larger housing (Li and Su 2026; Jia et al. 2022; Moreno-Maldonado and Santamaría 2024; Owens and Rich 2023; Schachner 2022). In recent years, lower-income families have increasingly been migrating out of extremely high-cost core cities, although their out-migration rates are still lower than those of middle- and high-income households in most other areas, and are less likely to be affected by employment or economic shocks (Dragan, Gould Ellen, and Glied 2019; Jia et al. 2022; Perry and Eisner 2024; Song and Chapple 2024).

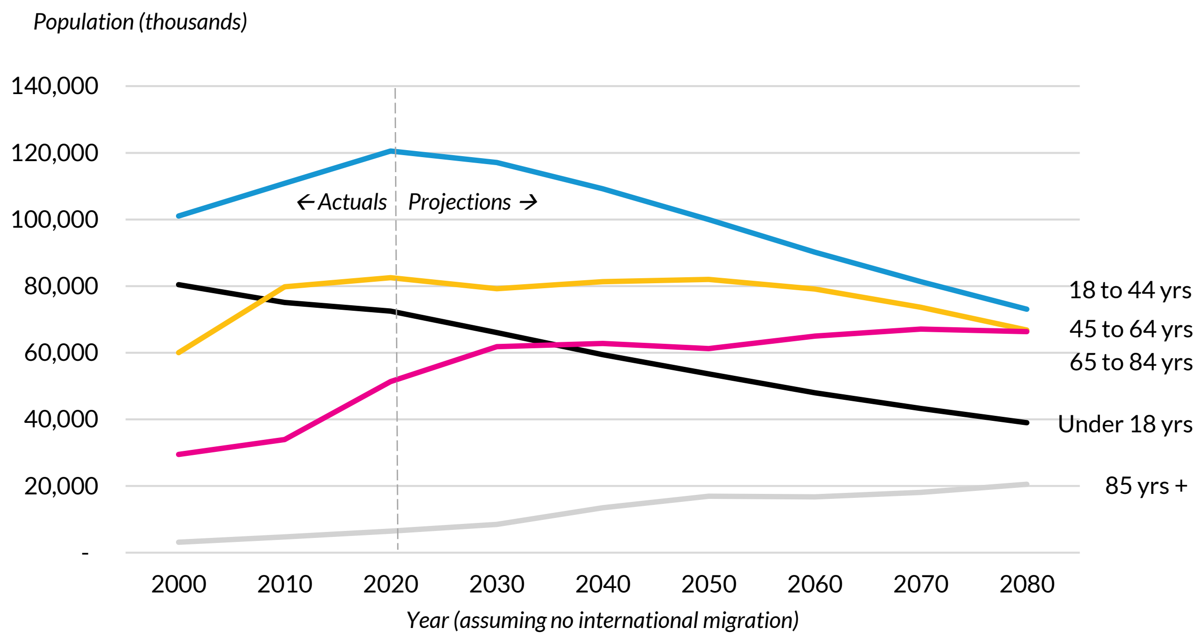
Major Social and Demographic Shifts Will Challenge This Strategy Going Forward

The millennial generation, which is very large, is now in its peak parenting years. Thus far, millennial out-migration from central cities has been slow. Today, more millennials and Gen Z workers live in core cities than prior generations would have at their ages (Frey 2024; Lee 2020; Lee, Airgood-Obrycki, and Frost 2024). Indeed, if millennials and Gen Z urban residents suburbanized at the same rate as Gen X and Boomer generations did prior to 2009, a straight-line estimate suggests that roughly 5 million fewer people would be living in core cities across the nation (Lee, Airgood-Obrycki, and Frost 2024; Whitaker 2019).[2] However, early millennials have begun migrating to suburbs as they enter their 30s and have children (Lee 2020; Li and Su 2026; O'Brien and Zagare 2026). As one of the largest generations, millennials' slow out-migration has meant core cities' growth has tempered since the late 2010s and early 2020s (Frey 2020; Lee 2022). Given delays in childbearing, their out-migration rates may continue to increase in the coming years (Lee, Airgood-Obrycki, and Frost 2024).

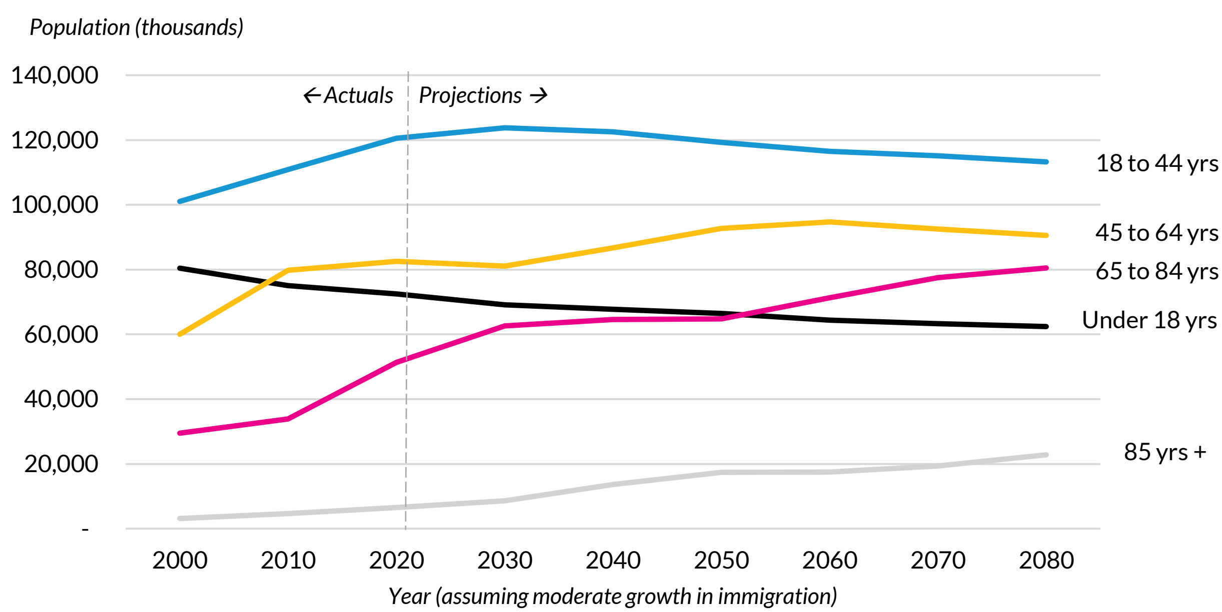
FIGURE 2

Falling Birthrates Will Quickly Shrink the Supply of Young Workers Absent Growing International Immigration to Compensate

Total US domestic population by age bracket, real and projections with no immigration, 2000–80



Total US domestic population by age bracket, real and projected assuming moderate growth in immigration, 2000–80



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Source: US Census Bureau Decennial Census 2000, 2010, 2020; US Census Bureau 2023 population projections.
Notes: yrs = years. Age groupings in census records in 2000 for the under 18 years category include 18- and 19-year-olds as well.

Cohorts entering young adulthood now are smaller as US birthrates decline. Since their peak in 2007, US birthrates have fallen to an all-time low of 1.6 babies per 1,000 women in 2024 (Martin, Hamilton, and Osterman 2025; O'Hare and Mayol-Garcia 2023). Given these declining fertility rate trends, natural population increase is projected to become negative in 2038, after which, all population growth will depend on immigration (CRS 2024). Even by 2030, growth of young working populations will stop and the share of population below age 44 will shrink progressively through 2080 as the share of people age 45 and older (especially those 65 and older) grows (figure 2). Consequently, core cities will have increasingly fewer young adults to attract to fuel economic growth and sustain population sizes, even if younger generations of workers are currently clustered in core cities (Kearney and Levine 2022; Lee 2022).

The rise of remote work means young adults may no longer choose to live close to office jobs, settling instead in suburban and exurban areas with lower housing costs. The impact of remote work opportunities on residential patterns is still unknown. However, the rise of remote work since the COVID pandemic allows workers to locate farther from employment centers, and high-income workers are more likely to leave core cities to work remotely (Li and Su 2026; Ramani, Alcedo, and Bloom 2024). Indeed, the share of people working from home has risen from 4 percent in 2013 to 13 percent in 2024. When moving out from core cities, millennials and Gen Z workers have chosen more far-flung exurbs than prior generations because of the freedom offered by remote work, further reducing the likelihood that their spending will contribute to core cities' economies (Lee, Airgood-Obrycki, and Frost 2024; Li and Su 2026).

International immigration may not provide a reliable source of population growth. The US Census bureau projects that future US population growth will be entirely reliant on immigration, but international immigration is the most dynamic and volatile source of population change, subject to shifts in sending-country economic conditions, geopolitical events and relationships, and domestic immigration policy (US Census Bureau 2023, 2026). Although international immigration is projected to continue growing slowly, China and India (the second and third largest sources for international immigrants to the US) have both experienced dramatic declines in their fertility rates in recent years, and if their economies continue grow even as their populations decline, the US may attract fewer of their workers (Gramlich and Passel 2024; Muttreja 2023; White and Subedi 2008). Fluctuations in immigration rates stemming from shifts in US policies during the past three administrations have demonstrated how much federal policy can affect the constancy of immigrant labor supply.[3] Net international migration experienced an unpredicted and unprecedented decline of over 50 percent in 2025 (US Census Bureau 2026). Thus, it is not clear whether core cities can count on international immigration as a reliable source of economic growth and workforce sustainability.

Most Core Cities Will Need to Attract and Retain More Families to Thrive in the Decades Ahead

Without a steady supply of young workers to sustain population growth, core cities need a stable population of families or risk entering a vicious cycle of economic and population decline. Fewer young workers living in core cities means fewer new households will form and fewer young children will be born there. Historically, core cities have not seen a higher share of families migrating in than out (Gould Ellen, Horn, and Reed 2017). Core cities with shrinking child populations face school closures, reduced housing demand stability, declining innovations and startups, and fiscal imbalance, which ultimately depress long-run economic growth—even if per capita income is higher and city expenses are lower in the short term (Council, Goulas, and Monachou 2025; Glaeser and Gyourko 2005; Liang, Wang, and Lazear 2018; Manville and Kuhlman 2018; Steinberg and MacDonald 2019; Zhang 2021). Thriving school systems form the basis of neighborhood property values, which in turn determine local government property tax revenues (Black 1999; Hussain 2023; Zhu and Pardo 2020). When city populations fall, the per capita (and often gross) size and cost of local government rises for the remaining residents as cities expand safety net and core services to counteract declining economic conditions (Berry, Grogger, and West 2015). If core cities' aging populations are not balanced by families with children and young workers, economic models predict they will (in the long run) face higher per capita tax burdens, lower gross domestic product growth rates, and overall lower gross domestic product per capita (Maestas, Mullen, and Powell 2022; Zhang 2021).

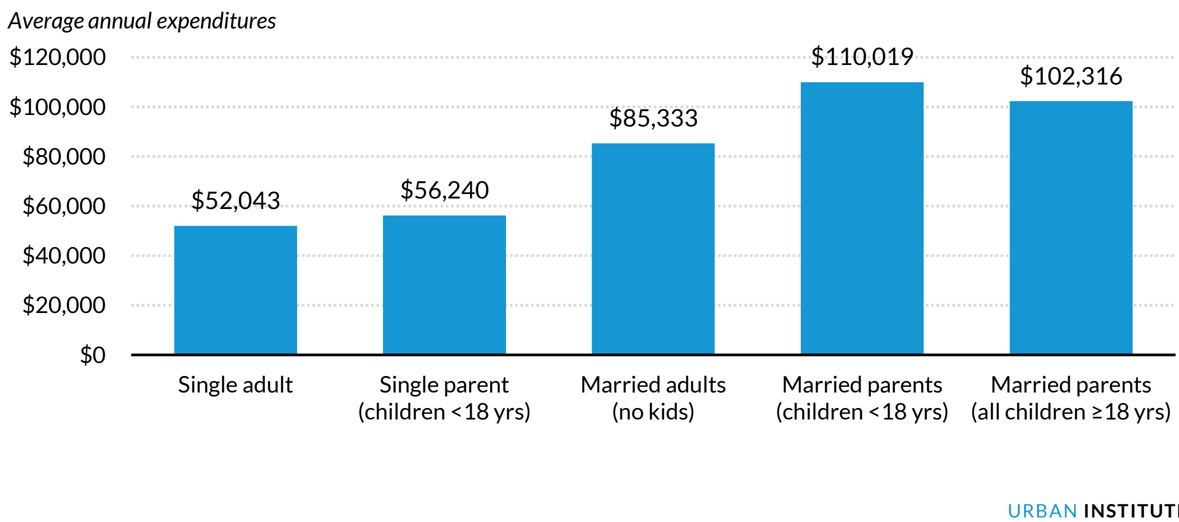
Out-migration of middle- and high-income families also risks concentrating poverty, which imposes high fiscal costs on core cities and reduces upward social mobility. High-income families are more likely than those with lower incomes to move to suburbs (or to more attractive core cities) in search of what they consider to be the best environments for their children; however, middle-income families have also begun migrating out at higher rates (Jargowsky 2014; Owens 2016; Sprung-Keyser, Hendren, and Porter 2022; Whitaker 2019). When middle- and high-income families leave, crime rates in the core cities they left rise, and exposure to violent crime reduces long-term upward social mobility for the children who remain (Jargowsky 2008; Sharkey and Torrats-Espinosa 2017; Sprung-Keyser, Hendren, and Porter 2022). Poverty concentration increases spending on safety net support programs for low-income families and raises the cost of providing general public services (e.g., police, fire protection, and emergency health care services) (Joassart-Marcelli, Musso, and Wolch 2005; Ladd and Yinger 1991; Rothenberg Pack 1998). The departure of middle- and high-income families also increases interjurisdictional income segregation, again reducing upward social mobility for children who remain (Bischoff and Reardon 2014; Chetty and Hendren 2018; Iceland and Hernandez 2017; Owens and Rich 2023; Tach, Pendall, and Derian 2014).

Core cities may increase their prospects for an educated and productive workforce in the future if they retain families now. The tradeoff between prioritizing attracting young, childless workers who offer more short-term economic growth versus investing in family retention for long-term economic sustainability is not an obvious or immediately attractive choice for most core cities, but this choice is necessary for long-term success (Asquith and Mast 2024; Hock and Weil 2012; Sprung-Keyser and Porter 2023; Zhang 2021). Today's children are tomorrow's workers, and the labor pipeline is largely local, with nearly 60 percent of young adults living within 10 miles of where they grew up (Sprung-Keyser, Hendren, and Porter 2022). Adult workers overwhelmingly choose to live near their parents (75 percent within 30 miles), and children who are raised in suburbs are significantly less likely to choose core cities as adults than those raised in dense areas, suggesting that if core cities lose families today they may break the proximity chain for the next generation (Choi et al. 2020). Parental proximity to young families is a direct driver of labor force participation, especially among parents of young children, so a future labor force with nearby parents is a productive labor force (Compton and Pollack 2014).

With the right investments, retaining families (especially high-income families) can be an economic boon. Newer generations of parents are having children later in life but still hit their peak earning years during children's adolescence, meaning core cities that lose families fail to capture their spending as it rises (Das 2024; Nie and Gautam 2019; NVSR 2025). Parents of young children spend more than childless adults or parents of adult children, especially middle- and high-income families (BLS 2022) (figure 3). A middle-income married-couple family will spend roughly $19,000 annually per child on child-related expenses alone (USDA 2017, estimate adjusted for inflation). And higher-income families generate net fiscal surpluses for local governments (mostly through property tax revenues) (Chernick, Langley, and Reschovsky 2015; Reschovsky 2003). Family spending typically goes directly into the local economy (e.g., child care, education, health care, apparel, housing, and food), more so than childless households' spending (BLS 2022; Hubener, Rojas, and Tseng 2018). Capturing these gains requires retaining middle- and high-income families, which requires specific investments in housing, neighborhood safety, child care, and education.

FIGURE 3

Families Spend More per Worker than Childless Adults



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022, table 7.
Note: yrs = years.

Core Cities That Already Attract and Retain Families with Kids Share Key Attributes That Offer a Path Forward

The most important feature core cities with high family populations offer is an adequate supply of affordable, family-sized housing. Families live where there are affordable homes with the forms, sizes, and tenure offerings that complement families' larger sizes, more stretched budgets, and complex spatial needs (Cox and Stone 2025; Lo and Martin 2026; Perry and Eisner 2024). Families with children (especially high-income families) prioritize having more bedrooms and green space, leading them to leave core cities if they cannot afford or access these features (Boustan and Schertzer 2013; Cox and Stone 2025; Lo and Martin 2026; Perry and Eisner 2024; Stone 2024). Core cities that offer more homeownership opportunities and subsidies (e.g., down payment assistance, special purpose credit programs, community land trusts, or tax-increment financed acquisition and affordable sale programs) also generally have higher rates of family formation and retention, because transitioning into homeownership allows families to benefit from wealth increases when home values rise (in contrast to renters who are more likely to forgo having a child or to leave a city as housing prices rise) (Affuso et al. 2022; Dettling and Kearney 2014; Lo and Martin 2026). But most core cities are not building homes for families. The majority of housing built in core cities since 2010 is multifamily construction, with only about 5 percent of these units being sized for families (i.e., having three or more bedrooms). Conversely, in suburban areas, most housing built during this period comprised single family homes, roughly 80 percent of which had three or more bedrooms (Moos 2015; Stone and Fijan 2025).[4]

In family-friendly core cities, neighborhoods pair affordable family-sized housing with admission to high-quality schools. Many urban families do not want to leave core cities but do so to avoid sending children to underfunded or poorly performing schools (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016). Parents of all income levels want to live in a neighborhood that guarantees access to high-quality neighborhood schools (Rhodes and Warkentien 2017). When choosing where to raise their children, high-income households can spend a larger share of their income to guarantee access to quality education by moving to areas that provide access to higher-quality schools (DiSalvo and Yu 2023; Goldstein and Hastings 2019; Hubener, Rojas, and Tseng 2018; Lo and Martin 2026). In addition to high-quality neighborhood-based public schools, core cities that offer options for access to high-quality public charter and magnet schools retain more families with strong education preferences (Bifulco 2025).

In addition to offering higher-quality education, these "package deal" neighborhoods are walkable and pedestrian friendly, with green space. Core cities and neighborhoods with more green space are associated with higher shares of high-income families (Klompmaker et al. 2023; Rigolon, Browning, and Jenning 2018; Yang et al. 2025), and these neighborhoods must be walkable to suit urban family preferences (NAR 2023; Robinson, McCay, et al. 2022). Indeed, walkability is increasingly regarded as attractive among millennial and Gen Z parents, and is associated with higher rates of upward social mobility (Oishi, Koo, and Buttrick 2019). After home prices, parents value low traffic speed limits as the most important factor in identifying "child friendly" neighborhoods (Gong et al. 2025). Beyond green space and walkability, parents perceive neighborhoods with lower traffic volume, lower vehicle speeds, wider sidewalks, less street parking, and more trees as safer for their children (Amiour, Waygood, and van den Berg 2022; Bokharaei and Nasar 2023).

Families with young children need access to affordable, high-quality child care if they are to work and live in core cities. Higher shares of high-income families live in core cities that have higher child care provider density (Lo and Martin 2026). Relatedly, core cities with a higher supply of child care at lower cost appear to attract (and/or retain) families whose mothers prefer to work (Moreno-Maldonado 2025). Furthermore, lower child care costs that improve parents' ability and desire to work subsequently improve household incomes and families' ability to remain in core cities (Landivar et al. 2021; Landivar et al. 2022).

Crime rates and perceptions of crime are low in cities with higher shares of middle- and high-income families. Low crime rates do not guarantee family retention, but rather shape parents' perceptions of safety and investments in neighborhood quality (Gould Ellen and Turner 2003; Hurst 2023; Lacoe, Bostic, and Acolin 2018; Robinson, Kelley, and Hill 2022). Families with children and highly educated households are particularly likely to leave core cities for suburbs when crime rises (Cullen and Levitt 1999; Henry et al. 2019). Core cities that have experienced significant declines in crime rates have also seen large increased retention of high-income and college-educated family populations and reductions in suburbanization (Gould Ellen, Horn, and Reed 2019; Kneebone and Raphael 2011). Core cities that treat safety as a public health and planning issue rather than a law enforcement matter show stronger residential stability and safety outcomes for families across income levels (Branas et al. 2018; Cozens and Love 2015; Delgado et al. 2017; Webster et al. 2013).

BOX 1

The District of Columbia's Recent Growth and Prosperity Illustrates Approaches and Challenges to Family Attraction and Retention

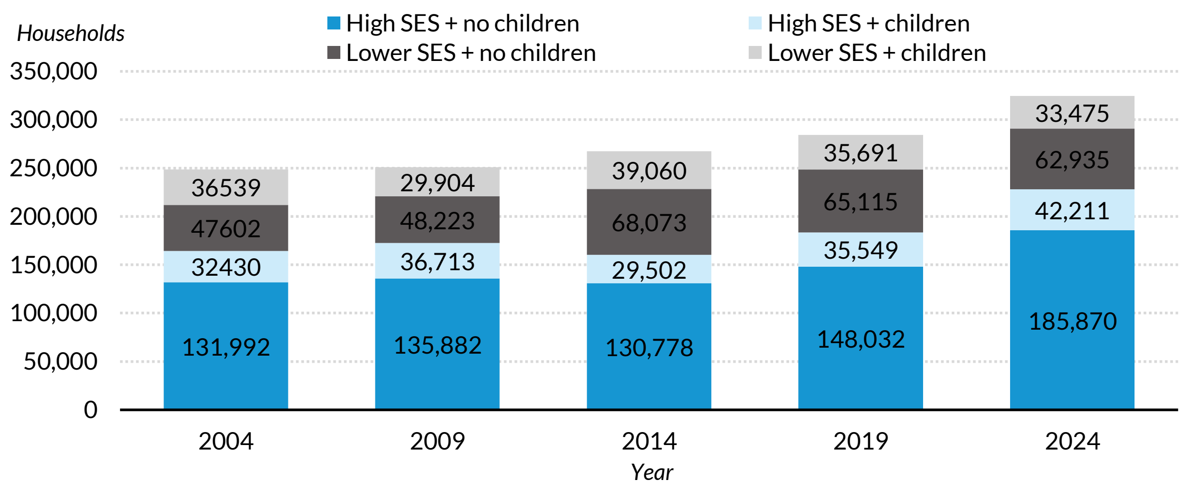
In 2001, policy and thought leaders at the Brookings Institution set an ambitious goal for the District of Columbia to attract 100,000 more residents by 2010 (O'Cleireacain and Rivlin 2001). This goal was intended to reverse the prior decades of population loss and to spur both economic development and fiscal health. The goal specified that half the new residents be families with children and the remaining half be young, highly educated workers. This report projected that increasing the number of families would reduce income polarization and "create neighborhoods with a strong sense of community, whose residents are committed to remaining in the District, participating in its political processes, and working to improve the city and its institutions" (O'Cleireacain and Rivlin 2001, 8).

To that end, the city invested in increasing housing supply, reducing crime, and retaining young adults with parent-friendly policies. Partnering with developers, the city permitted more housing construction between 2001 and 2010 than it had in the past 30 years, and this development centered in the city's core multifamily zoned neighborhoods (Brooks and Schuetz 2023; Tatian et al. 2015). The District invested in crime prevention and homicide clearance, reducing violent crime rates by over 60 percent between 1990 and 2017 (DC Policy Center 2017). To cater specifically to attracting and retaining family-oriented, highly educated young workers, the Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act of 2008 offered publicly funded preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds in DC, which significantly reduced child care costs for young parents (Alam et al. 2024; Malik 2018).

Later mayoral administrations added more family-friendly policies, invested in schools, and oversaw the dramatic expansion of charter school options. Family-centric policies included paid family leave,[5] child care subsidies for low-income workers,[6] the child care worker pay equity fund,[7] and the Healthy Start program.[8] Between 2007 and 2014, the city invested $2 billion in public school capital upgrades even as it implemented a rigorous performance rating, incentive, and development system for improving classroom instruction practices (Gallagher and Bogle 2014). In addition, an explosion of public charter school options (with enrollment nearly doubling between 2006 and 2016) offered families diverse high-quality education options (Tuths 2016).

FIGURE 4

The Number of Low-SES Families in DC Remained Mostly Steady While the Number of High-SES Childless Households and Families Grew



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Sources: Census Bureau ACS IPUMS one-year data from 2004 and five-year data from 2004–09, 2010–14, 2015–19, and 2020–24.

Notes: High SES = families with high socioeconomic status where the household head has a 4-year college degree or higher. Lower SES = families of lower socioeconomic status where the household head has a high school degree or lower.

However, many families are still leaving the District when their kids enter higher grades, due to concerns about school quality, the high cost of family-sized housing, and recent trends in employment. As figure 4 shows, the collective share of households with children dropped steadily from 28 percent in 2004 to 23 percent in 2024. Nearly half of all children born in the District leave the public school system before the start of high school to attend private schools or public schools elsewhere (Coffin and Sayin 2021). DC still lacks an adequate supply of family-sized units, and the rising cost of housing has pushed many households to relocate to suburbs (DC Lab 2018; Tatian, Hendey, and Bruton 2019). Economic challenges arising from federal layoffs in 2025 are also driving out-migration of high-income families.[9]

Core Cities Can Bolster Their Future Economic and Fiscal Prospects with Tailored Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Families with Kids

The urgency for any particular city to attract and retain more families with children depends on its current economic composition. Core cities that have a longer history of attracting young, childless workers (e.g., Boston, New York City) may succeed in competing for the shrinking pool of young workers in the future as long as their opportunities for human capital improvement and employment remain strong (Florida 2011; Florida et al. 2023; Moretti 2012). Other core cities with less diversified economies or more recently emerging industries attractive to young workers (e.g., Seattle, San Francisco) may face a higher risk of population and economic decline if those industries stutter, and thus may need to hedge their growth strategies with increased family retention investments (Leigh and Blakely 2013). Historically slow-growing core cities that are currently riding the recent growth waves of millennial and Gen Z's urban preferences or pandemic-spurred in-migration (e.g., Denver, Atlanta, St. Louis) face the most urgent need to improve their family retention metrics, as the combination of natural population growth declines, out-migration to more attractive suburbs or to family-proximate core cities, and/or the absence of long-standing young worker magnet industries all portend a risk of population loss.

The best strategies for any city depend on its current demographic composition as well as the strength or weakness of its baseline amenities relative to its suburban or peer city counterparts. Middle- and high-income households with children "shop" among local jurisdictions for the package of amenities that best suits their family budget and location constraints (Nechyba and Walsh 2004). Thus, core cities' ability to retain families depends on the attractiveness of their economic opportunities and local amenities (i.e., housing affordability and size, environmental quality and green space, education quality, neighborhood safety, and child care offerings) relative to the attractiveness of the amenities in surrounding suburbs. A strategic inventory of the current and historical composition of a city's youth population—the ages at which it loses families, the neighborhoods most frequently experiencing out-migration, and existing family-supportive programmatic and hard infrastructure—will enable core cities to identify the arenas most needing investment to improve family retention.

Core cities need not imitate sprawling suburban patterns to attract and retain more families but instead can capitalize on existing assets and deploy available planning and investment practices to make themselves more family friendly. Core cities with growing economies that have maintained higher retention rates for middle- and high-income families offer examples of policies tailored to higher-density areas in the following policy arenas:

- **Housing:** Cities facing space constraints can improve the efficient creation of family-sized units (three or more bedrooms) through single-stair reforms enabling point-access blocks, allowing single to multifamily conversions and easier subdivision permitting, using preapproved designs to speed permitting approvals, and lowering minimum parking requirements near transit and high-quality schools (Engelhardt et al. 2010; Gabbe and Pierce 2016; O'Brien and Zagare 2026; Oswald 2019; Smith and Mendoza 2024). Family-focused homeownership programs (e.g., Individual Development Accounts) may also increase families' residential stability and wealth (Engelhardt et al. 2010; Oswald 2019). However, housing and homeownership-focused interventions need to directly target families and must be implemented in areas with appropriate supporting family-focused infrastructure (i.e., green space, walkability, and high-quality schools), because broad-based improvements in housing supply and affordability are equally likely to attract young adults who compete with families for living space and demand different amenities (Lo and Martin 2026).

- **Quality education access:** Core cities that wish to improve their school system's competitiveness relative to suburban districts can leverage examples set by other family-friendly cores. One strategy is district-wide open enrollment options or cross-district school access arrangements (e.g., Massachusetts' METCO program or Hartford's interdistrict magnet and open choice program), which allow core-city students to attend higher-performing schools in surrounding communities and counteract the structural fact that most school quality variation is determined by segregation within and across jurisdictions. Cities can further strengthen education access by investing in teacher attraction and retention, expanding advanced coursework and enrichment offerings in neighborhood public schools, and better coordinating school planning with city planning (i.e., retrofitting existing structures near transit for schools, and waiving minimum school lot requirements for core city infill schools in states and municipalities where they exist) (Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff 2014; Johnson, Jones, and Riveron 2024; Knudson 2019). Because families with young children are most likely to leave during the early school years, prioritizing elementary school improvements is especially critical, because the largest enrollment losses occur in kindergarten and early grades (O'Brien and Zagare 2026).
- **Commuting and play environments:** Core cities can capitalize on their young resident parents' preferences for urban features such as public transit and walkable neighborhoods by embedding family-friendliness in their existing infrastructure. This could involve building playful learning landscapes that transform high foot-traffic areas (e.g., bus and subways stops, vacant lots, and grocery stores) into learning opportunities for children (Hadani et al. 2021), carving out places within the city for families to pause and/or play (e.g., pocket parks[10]), and increasing pedestrian safety (Duncan et al. 2020).
- **Child care supply:** Part of making higher-cost core cities livable for families requires increasing the supply of affordable, reliable child care, which in turn requires diagnosing the barriers to supply (e.g., unaffordable costs for parents, low employee supply, high business overhead costs, or gaps in specialized services) and addressing those with targeted solutions (NAEYC 2026). In addition to providing public child care options (e.g., through universal pre-kindergarten programs) or creative policies that improve providers' ability to afford wages for high-quality employees (e.g., DC's Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund), core cities can lower barriers to child care supply by aligning local policies with state child care guidelines and/or subsidizing

investments in child care providers' buildings (e.g., fire safety, water systems, and play space facility improvements) and updating siting rules that restrict in-home child care providers from operating on upper floors (Jimenez Parra et al. 2025; Lo, Phillips, and Derrick-Mills 2026; O'Brien and Zagare 2026).

- **Neighborhood safety:** Given that family out-migration correlates with crime rates, core cities need to prioritize public safety enhancements. Investing in crime prevention through environmental design—for example, investments in street lighting, infrastructure repair, sightline improvements, mixed and activated ground-floor uses, and improving physical orderliness through "cleaning and greening"—has demonstrably reduced both crime and fear of crime in implementing cities (Branas et al. 2018; Cozens and Love 2015). Additional strategies for improving neighborhood safety include prioritizing hot-spot micro-interventions, attracting and preserving immigrant neighborhoods, and using violence interruption programs (Delgado et al. 2017; MacDonald, Hipp, and Gill 2013; Webster et al. 2013).

Actions that attract and retain more families with children can also benefit lower-income families, childless adults, and elderly people, further boosting a city's economic and fiscal vitality. Diversifying housing forms, tenure options, and price points enables households of differing sizes, incomes, and life stages (young people, empty nesters, elderly people, and families with children) to live in the same city and even neighborhoods (Bayer, Ferreira, and McMillan 2014; Brummet and Reed 2019; Chetty and Hendren 2018; DiSalvo and Yu 2023; Hussain 2023; Lohmeyer 2024; Parolek 2020; Trounstine 2018). Pairing improvements to housing, schools, and neighborhood safety with displacement protections can help ensure that low- and middle-income families benefit from increased investments and that their children experience upward social mobility (Brummet and Reed 2019; Chetty and Hendren 2018; Jespersen et al. 2021; Redding Lallinger 2024). Beyond income-related equity improvements, family-friendly improvements that draw from universal design principles (e.g., offering curb cuts and elevators that improve stroller access, quiet spaces, and easy to read signage) improve core cities' friendliness for elderly and disabled residents as well (NLC 2024; NLIHC 2021). Finally, everyone benefits from improvements in neighborhood walkability, green spaces, and safety (Nwana et al. 2024; Zuniga-Teran et al. 2019). Economically inclusive cities are resilient cities as well; more inclusive cities (i.e., those where residents have a wider variety and more even distribution of incomes and races) tend to recover more quickly from economic downturns (Poethig et al. 2018).

Conclusion

Core cities are approaching a demographic and economic inflection point. The forces that fueled urban resurgence over the past two decades—large cohorts of young adults, delayed family formation, and robust international immigration—are weakening or becoming more volatile. At the same time, the costs of failing to retain families are clear: shrinking child populations, fiscal instability, rising poverty concentration, and diminished long-run labor force vitality. Absent deliberate action, many core cities risk slipping into a self-reinforcing cycle of population loss and economic stagnation that will be far harder and costlier to reverse than to prevent.

The evidence synthesized in this brief demonstrates that families with children are not a drag on urban economies, but a cornerstone of sustainable growth. Cities that retain families benefit from higher household spending, more stable housing demand, stronger fiscal bases, and a locally anchored future workforce. Importantly, these gains are not limited to affluent households alone; investments that make cities workable for families—safe streets, walkable neighborhoods, affordable and appropriately sized housing, high-quality schools, and reliable child care—also improve quality of life for childless adults, older residents, and lower-income families.

Becoming more family-friendly does not require core cities to mimic suburban forms or abandon strategies that attract young workers. Instead, it demands a recalibration of priorities toward amenities and policies that support households across life stages within dense, walkable environments. Cities that succeed understand that family retention is not a single policy choice, but a coordinated package of housing, education, safety, and care infrastructure—one that must be competitive not in absolute terms, but relative to surrounding jurisdictions.

The central question facing core city leaders is not whether families still belong in cities, but whether cities are willing to plan around broader projected population shifts rather than past trends and attract the residents they will need rather than the residents they have or want. Investing in families is an investment in continuity: of population, of economic vitality, and of opportunity across generations. Cities that act now to retain families will be better positioned to weather demographic headwinds, sustain inclusive growth, and remain places where people can build not only careers, but full lives.

Notes

[1] This brief uses the term "core city" to refer to the jurisdictions at the center of metropolitan statistical areas that have at least 100,000 residents living in a high-density (>6,000 people per square mile), census-defined public use microdata area (PUMA). Other studies on family migration patterns have used widely varying definitions of core cities (areas within a certain radius of a selected downtown point, census-designated urban counties, National Center for Education Statistics' designated urban school districts, cities with populations above a certain population threshold, etc.).

[2] Cleveland Federal Reserve 2019 calculations found that net population outflow from urban neighborhoods declined from almost 600,000 people per year before 2009 to an average of fewer than 250,000 since 2009. Taking this statistic and projecting the difference in these rates (325,000 people per year) out from 2009 through 2026 (17 years) yields 5 million fewer residents (or a 7 percent reduction in core city population).

[3] Trump 2.0's Year One: Reshaping US Legal Immigration, Elcano Royal Institute, March 4, 2026, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/trump-2-0s-year-one-reshaping-us-legal-immigration/.

[4] Data are from the ACS IPUMs samples from 2004 to 2024 and use household weighted calculations of core cities dwelling units (by bedrooms and units in structure) constructed since 2000, based on the 86 cities with identifiable data and at least one PUMA with a population density of >6,000 people per square mile. Maria Gatea, 2020, "The Average Home Size in the US: New Homes Bigger than 10 Years Ago but Apartments Trail Behind," *Storage Café*, accessed April 6, 2020, https://www.storagecafe.com/blog/average-home-size-in-the-us-new-homes-bigger-than-10-years-ago-but-apartments-trail-behind/.

[5] DC Paid Family Leave, https://does.dc.gov/page/dc-paid-family-leave.

[6] Office of the State Superintendent for Education, Information for Families, https://osse.dc.gov/subsidy.

[7] DC Child Care Policy Research Partnership, *An Implementation Study of the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund*, Wahington, DC, Urban Institute, https://www.urban.org/projects/dc-child-care-policy-research-partnership/implementation-study-early-childhood-educator.

[8] DC Health, What Is Healthy Start?, https://dchealth.dc.gov/service/dc-healthy-start.

[9] Frederica Cocco and Jonathan Edwards. "DC School Applications Fall Amid Deportation Fears and Federal Layoffs." *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2026. https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/04/12/dc-school-enrollment-applications-lottery/.

[10] *Creating Mini-Parks for Increased Physical Activity*, National Recreation and Park Association, Ashburn, Virginia, https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/f768428a39aa4035ae55b2aaff372617/pocket-parks.pdf.

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