

The Next Big Question Facing Cities: Will Millennials Stay?

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Abstract

Do neighborhoods work like habitat for different kinds of households? City populations have rebounded in the past two decades as people who like city habitats have grown in numbers and in their share of the population. Mostly these are the Millennials - adults roughly 20 to 34-years-old, also known as Generation Y or the Echo Boom - who have delayed childbearing, marriage, and even household formation because of a combination of changing culture and economic necessity. Urban living makes sense for these young people. This [article](#) explores one of the most interesting questions for cities in the next 10 to 20 years: How many Millennials will stay there?

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Mostly these are the Millennials - adults roughly 20 to 34-years-old, also known as Generation Y or the Echo Boom - who have [delayed childbearing, marriage, and even household formation](#) because of a combination of changing culture and economic necessity. Urban living makes sense for these young people: compared with suburbs, cities often provide young adults more opportunities to switch jobs, meet friends and potential spouses, enjoy entertainment outside their homes, live without a car, and travel to other parts of the country and world.

One of the most interesting questions for cities in the next 10 to 20 years is how many Millennials will stay there. The last time this big a generation of young people started reaching their late 20s was the Baby Boomers in the early 1970s. Is that transition a good point of reference for the Millennials? Many signs point to no.

In 1970, half of all women had married before their 21st birthdays, and half of men before they turned 24. Most moved straight from their parents' homes to new homes with their spouses. Whether they'd grown up in cities or in suburbs, the logical destination for them, if they could afford it, was the suburbs. Enough of them could afford it that city populations dropped faster in the 1970s than in either the 1950s or the 1960s; fair housing laws, too, enabled people of all races to find suburban housing more easily in the 1970s and 1980s than they could in previous decades.

By 2010, the median marriage age had increased to over 26 for women and over 28 for men. Childbearing has plummeted since the 1970s among teenagers and even women in their 20s, resulting in lower overall numbers of children born per woman and later ages at first birth. Millennials now living in cities like New York, Washington, Boston, and Chicago have started putting down roots in urban neighborhoods. They have generated new demands for local government and businesses so that cities are becoming places where families stay by choice and not just by necessity. Schools are getting better in many cities, and in practically every city, crime has declined. As well, many young families will continue to live in cities out of necessity. Many more young mothers now than in the 1970s are unmarried, increasing their economic insecurity and leading them to rely more than middle- and upper-income families on affordable rental housing, networks of friends and kin, and convenient bus transit.

How big an impact might Millennials have? [Urban Institute estimates](#) suggest that they will form between 15 and 18 million new households between 2010 and 2020 alone. These households aren't just poised to be more numerous than any previous generation; they're also the most diverse generation on record. Because of their diversity and the timing of their coming of age, Millennials may affect tomorrow's cities as much as Baby Boomers have shaped today's suburbia.

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