

NEWSDAY [Suffolk](#) LONG ISLAND

5 Suffolk towns account for county's population loss

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Brookhaven Town Hall is pictured in an undated photo. Photo Credit: Newsday / Bill Davis

Brookhaven and four other western Suffolk towns accounted for almost all of the county's loss of more than 5,000 people in a single year, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures released last week.

A total of 5,262 people left Brookhaven, Babylon, Islip, Smithtown and Huntington from July 1, 2015, to July 1, 2016, census figures show. Overall, Suffolk County lost 5,320 people during that time — a 0.36 percent drop.

During the same period, Nassau County gained 1,798 people, a 0.13 percent increase.

Officials and economists are divided over the reasons for Suffolk's loss of residents.

Martin Cantor, director and economist at the Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy in Melville, said the losses reflect an ongoing trend of "out-migration" in Suffolk. He said people leave because of high costs driven by taxes and utility rates.

"The important thing is Long Island, and in particular Suffolk County, has a larger out-migration to other parts of the country," Cantor said. "You have a lot of people who moved out to Brookhaven, aged and now are moving somewhere else."

Cantor said he recently met a Brookhaven Town resident who was moving to Delaware, which has no income tax and waives property taxes for residents whose children don't attend local schools.

"Most people who moved out to Brookhaven and out east are blue-collar workers, and when they retire, they're moving out and moving someplace else," he said.

Brookhaven, by far Suffolk's largest town with 486,599 people in 2016, had the largest numerical population loss on Long Island last year. Census data showed the town lost 1,602 people, a 0.33 percent drop.

Islip, with a population of 333,758 last year, had the largest decrease as a percentage of population, with a loss of 1,491 residents, a 0.44 percent drop.

Babylon, Huntington and Smithtown showed losses of 847, 841 and 491 people, respectively.

Long Island Association chief economist John Rizzo dismissed the western Suffolk towns' population losses as statistically insignificant.

"These are small percentages as a percentage of the population," he said. "Part of the story could be baby boomer retirements."

Brookhaven Supervisor Edward P. Romaine said the town's loss of people was a "minor statistic," and he said the Census Bureau may have undercounted residents.

"I don't think there's a trend. I don't know how accurate the census count is," he said. "Right now, our job is to improve the economic state of the town and improve the town's fiscal status, which we've done."

Cantor said Nassau County saw an increase in population because of its proximity to New York City. Nassau offers shorter commutes for former city residents who moved to the suburbs when their rents became too high, he said.

“Because there’s a short commute to New York City, it gives the appearance that the population is growing,” he said. “If you’re going to commute for more than an hour, you’re not going to do it.”