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City's rebirth at risk over lack of births

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Half as many children were born in Detroit in 2007 as there were 17 years before, according to a new study that has monumental implications for the city's future health, education and welfare needs.

Detroit births dropped by 49.5% from 1990 until 2007, even as the number of births to women under 20 slightly increased, bucking a national trend, according to a maternal and infant well-being study done by Data Driven Detroit, or D3, which collects and evaluates demographic data about the city and region.

The study found disturbing trends that could affect the city's children -- and its future -- for possibly decades to come. Among them:

- More than 40% of Detroit mothers did not receive any prenatal care in 2007, which risks the children's mortality and development
- Among those leaving the city are primary care physicians, as well as specialists in gynecology and obstetrics (ob-gyns), leaving fewer doctors to handle an increasingly uninsured population and an increasing number of teen mothers.

The main reason for the birthrate drop, quite simply, "is population loss," said Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit. "People of child-bearing age are leaving Detroit and an aging population remains," he said.

Last doctor turn off the lights

Beyond a possibly irreparable loss of total population, the study's second most disturbing

finding is that among those leaving are some of the city's greatest assets, including doctors that women need.

"The number of practicing ob-gyns has decreased significantly," said Dr. Herb Smitherman, assistant dean of the Wayne State University School of Medicine.

He added that the city has only about three or four ob-gyns in private practice outside hospitals.

The state Department of Community Health, which monitors doctors' licenses, could not confirm that because it monitors the licenses of Detroit's 1,232 doctors, but does not keep records on their specialties, according to DCH spokesman James McCurtis.

Doctors are leaving Detroit, Smitherman said, because of high malpractice costs and low reimbursements for service to patients who are uninsured or covered by Medicaid.

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"The number of uninsured continues to rise," he said. "Right now, 22% of residents are uninsured in the city of Detroit."

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"If we don't get health reform, if we don't get those uninsured by some plan," Smitherman said, "the number of uninsured will continue to rise and the number on Medicaid will continue to rise, but the number of physicians to serve that population will continue to decrease."

And like the city, the population of doctors to serve poor people, is shrinking. The number of medical students choosing to enter primary care has dropped by almost 25%, Smitherman said.

A monumental task ahead

Metzger of Data Driven Detroit said he hopes the study will force elected officials and policy-makers, planners and parents to face Detroit's largest question: Where do we go from here?

Mayor Dave Bing knows.

The stunning population drop speaks volumes about the task ahead for the mayor, as well as city education and health officials.

Bing, Detroit Public Schools emergency financial manager Robert Bobb and other city and education officials must rethink and re-plan how to serve residents and children.

As the mayor embraces the reality of how to serve a shrinking city, and Bobb struggles with a declining school population, they must convince Detroiters who either are ignorant of or distrust that same reality.

But it is not a matter of trust. It is a matter of fact.

Detroit lost nearly 200,000 people over 17 years. Because the remaining, mostly older population is having fewer and fewer children, the city also is losing its ability to grow past the loss.

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