

## Pete McMartin: Youth exodus is urban folklore

By the statistics: The number of young workers has been growing steadily in Metro. And moves from Vancouver to Surrey don't count in what is, essentially, one big city

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST MARCH 1, 2016



TransLink's SkyTrain zips over Hwy 1 as Hwy 1 crosses over Boundary Road. The distinction between the city of Vancouver and suburbs is so blurred that there is nothing here to indicate that Boundary is, well, the boundary between Vancouver and Burnaby.

**Photograph by:** Ric Ernst, Province

---

One narrative of the new Vancouver goes like this:

High real estate prices have made it impossible for anybody to live here except Shanghai money launderers, dot-com wunderkinds and Chip Wilson.

Our youth, weary of apartment buildings where the hallways smell of soup and cigarettes, phone up U-Haul, pull up stakes and flee to that promised land where the good jobs hang from the trees and the real estate market has been in hibernation since the 1970s.

Stories describing this phenomenon are big on anger but short on numbers. Examples are given without context, or without a clue of how prevalent the phenomenon is. The stories are often anecdotal, as so many of the stories on real estate in Vancouver are. They knew a guy who knew a guy who was moving to New Denver, where life is so much better, even if it is hard to find really good sushi.

All of these stories are by way of describing Vancouver's end, that the city is hollowing out and being bled of its vitality. They're eulogies, and like eulogies not necessarily based on fact.

They're also insistently — and I would say maddeningly — urban-centric, as if they could not conceive of looking at life east of Boundary Road or south of the Fraser River.

But reality resides in the numbers, and the reality is this: The suburbs are home to three-quarters of the Lower Mainland's population, and the boundaries between city and suburbs are now so indistinct that to differentiate between the two is meaningless. There is no City of Vancouver any more, really: There is only the city, and it goes all the way out to Chilliwack now.

Still, the question remains: Are our youth fleeing to more affordable places, as these stories insist?

The numbers and past history suggest otherwise.

In Statistic Canada's latest population estimates, the ages 25 to 39 demographic in Metro Vancouver — that is, the working young — shows an overall increase from 2011 to 2015 of 23,054 people.

Much of that increase, said Andrew Ramlo, executive director of Vancouver's Urban Futures Institute, a research and consulting firm specializing in demography, is due to international migration and domestic interprovincial migration. The domestic migration particularly, he said, is much more dependent on economic factors.

"I've got tables going back to 1976," Ramlo said, "and if I look at growth of the 30 to 39 age group, it did see an absolute decline between 2000 and 2006, but that was a point in the Lower Mainland's history when we saw among the slowest total population growth rates and very, very slow economic growth."

Those years saw many of B.C.'s working young people going east to booming economies in Alberta and Saskatchewan. But except for that six-year period of declines, Ramlo said, the number of Lower Mainland's 30 to 39 olds has posted increases every year since 1976. And since 2006, he said, "it's grown and it's grown and it's grown."

There is a caveat to this. While the 30 to 39 cohort has shown net growth, primarily through international and interprovincial migration, the Lower Mainland has historically shown an outward intraprovincial migration of 30 to 39 year olds to other areas of the province. This was happening long before the recent rise in real estate prices, and Ramlo believes it is due to young people from other parts of the province coming here to go to school or to take their first job, and then deciding after a few years to return home.

"There may certainly be some," Ramlo said, "that are saying, 'Ya, you know, it's really expensive here and I'm going to get out.' But, I think, on the whole, you can't say whether high housing prices or housing availability is pushing those long-term residents out of the Lower Mainland."

It's also counterintuitive to think, now that B.C.'s economy is humming along, at least in contrast to Alberta's, that our young would be inclined to move. You go or stay where the jobs are, and right now, the jobs are here.

Have high real estate prices, by themselves, caused an exodus among our young? Hard to say, and hard to ascribe an exodus, if there is one, to any one single reason. Some things can't be measured by statistics.

But the next federal census is coming up. We'll have a clearer picture by next year. My guess is, if there is a change in the numbers, and we do see an exodus of our youth, it will be from an apartment in Mount Pleasant where the hallways smell of soup and cigarettes to a townhouse in Surrey.

[pmcmartin@postmedia.com](mailto:pmcmartin@postmedia.com)

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun