

Crowded Cities, Deserted Countryside (July 9, 2015)

Abstract

Based on the findings of a study released by the Bertelsmann Foundation, a German think tank, the reporter outlines the varying impact of demographic developments on regions within Germany. Population decline particularly affects rural areas and regions in the eastern part of the country.

Source

Only the old remain

The rural population in Germany will shrink strongly by 2030. Berlin will be bursting at the seams – and Munich will be one of the youngest municipality.

“My, Berlin is huge,” Otto Reutter already marveled back in 1913. His popular song goes: “Once you think you know Berlin, it’s already grown bigger than it seemed before.” At the time, the population of the metropolis on the Spree had just surpassed the two million mark. What Reutter could not know at the time: the population would rise to more than twice that between the First and Second World War – a population density that Berlin would never attain again after 1945. But we could be there soon. The new population projection by the Bertelsmann Foundation predicts where most Germans will be living in 2030, which regions are bleeding out demographically, and how the breakdown between young and old within society will change. According to the study, Germany will shrink by more than half a million within the next fifteen years, to then 79.97 million.

A look at Berlin reveals how unevenly this population decline is distributed across the Republic. The city will be bursting at the seams in 2030: 3.71 million people will be living in the capital by then, another 340,000 more than today. With a projected growth of 10.3 % since 2012, Berlin heads the ranking in terms of population growth, followed by Hamburg. That port city will have around 1.86 million inhabitants in 2030, a plus of 7.5 %.

Those who cannot make it into the cities – for example, because they are unable to pay for the expected surge in rents resulting from the onslaught – will get as close as possible: into the suburbs. There, too, the study expects population increases of up to one quarter of the number of current residents. Places identified as being particularly promising with respect to growth are Unterföhring and Feldkirchen near Munich, Teltow south of Berlin, and Ilvesheim in the Rhein-Neckar region, between Mannheim and Heidelberg. In each location, the population will increase by one quarter. Things will get more crowded overall in Bavaria (plus 3.5 %), Baden-Württemberg (2.1 %), and Hesse (1.8 %).

While the study does consider the projected influx of migrants, many of the new residents in the growth regions will be coming above all from Germany’s rural areas. Looking into Germany’s future, these areas will be the big losers, especially in the East. Saxony-Anhalt will be hit the hardest: by 2030, 13.6 % of the residents will leave the state. [...] Thuringia will lose a total of 9.9 % of its inhabitants by 2030. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saarland are each heading for losses of 7.9 %.

The big challenge for these shrinking regions is their aging population. The more rural the region, the harder it is to keep young people. The young move away, into the cities, where there are educational opportunities, culture, work. The elderly stay behind, within a crumbling infrastructure that they would desperately need, especially in old age. Trips to doctors are often disproportionately long there,

especially family practices in the countryside are forced to close because they can no longer find a younger generation to take over. Village stores hardly still make economic sense, the large supermarkets are then located outside the small towns in industrial areas. And anyone who wants to go into the city, to the movies or the theater, has to coordinate show times with the public transportation schedules if they do not own a car. A vicious cycle, which simply drives away even more of the younger people and keeps others from moving in.

Within fifteen years, the number of those eighty and older will double in Germany

[...] The numbers confirm what the lowest birth rate in the world will do the country. Across Germany, half of all Germans will be older than 48.1 in 2030; at the last survey in 2012, the median age still stood at 45.3. The number of those eighty and older will nearly double, to then 6.3 million senior citizens. [...] Brigitte Mohn, a member of the board of the Bertelsmann Foundation, sees this development as a significant challenge. "The growth in this age group also expands the need of local governments to provide support and care." Her demand: "It is important to counteract ahead of time the danger of shortages because of a lack of caregivers."

But the modern rural exodus is also a challenge local governments must increasingly face up to. One creative approach is the project "dial4light" by the public utility in Lemgo, North Rhine-Westphalia. With the help of a mobile phone, one can activate street lamps where needed. Dörentrup is one community that is already using the mobile service. It, too, has seen a decline in population. And the small town is responding.

Source: Anne Kostrzewa, "Nur die Alten bleiben," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 9, 2015.

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