

Recent Trends in Older Population Change and Migration for Nonmetro Areas, 1970-2000

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We have become accustomed to hearing about the rapidly rising number of older people in the Nation's population, and with good reason. The population at age 65 and older more than doubled from 16.6 million in 1960 to 35.0 million in 2000, while the rest of the population rose by just one half. Increasing length of life and the aging of ever-larger numbers of middle-aged people both contributed to this trend. The aging of the population is already having considerable impact on such major social issues as future funding of the Social Security program and the

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Rural areas and small towns tend to have larger proportions of older people than the country as a whole because many young adults have moved away—especially from farming areas—and because many rural locales have attracted urban retirees. The older nonmetro population did not grow as rapidly as the younger population in the 1990s. Its growth was much slower than in the 1980s, and it did not contribute to the overall rebound in nonmetro population growth that was so prominent in the 1990s. The reduction in growth stemmed mostly from smaller numbers of people reaching age 65. There were wide differences in the extent of older population growth by regions and types of counties. As the “baby boomers” begin to reach age 65 late in this decade, the older nonmetro population is once again likely to increase rapidly.

funding and provision of health care for the elderly.

Yet, there is substantial variation in the growth of the elderly at both the regional and metro-nonmetro level. This follows from the general locational shift of the U.S. population in recent decades, along with differences in the age composition of local populations. This article compares population growth of the older and younger populations since 1970, comparing metropolitan (metro) and non-metropolitan (nonmetro) areas, but with emphasis on the nonmetro sector where the elderly can face unique problems due to small population size and distant services. Also emphasized are the separate roles of migration and aging-in-place in determining growth or loss in the older population. Because of expected differences in trends by region and types of counties, we

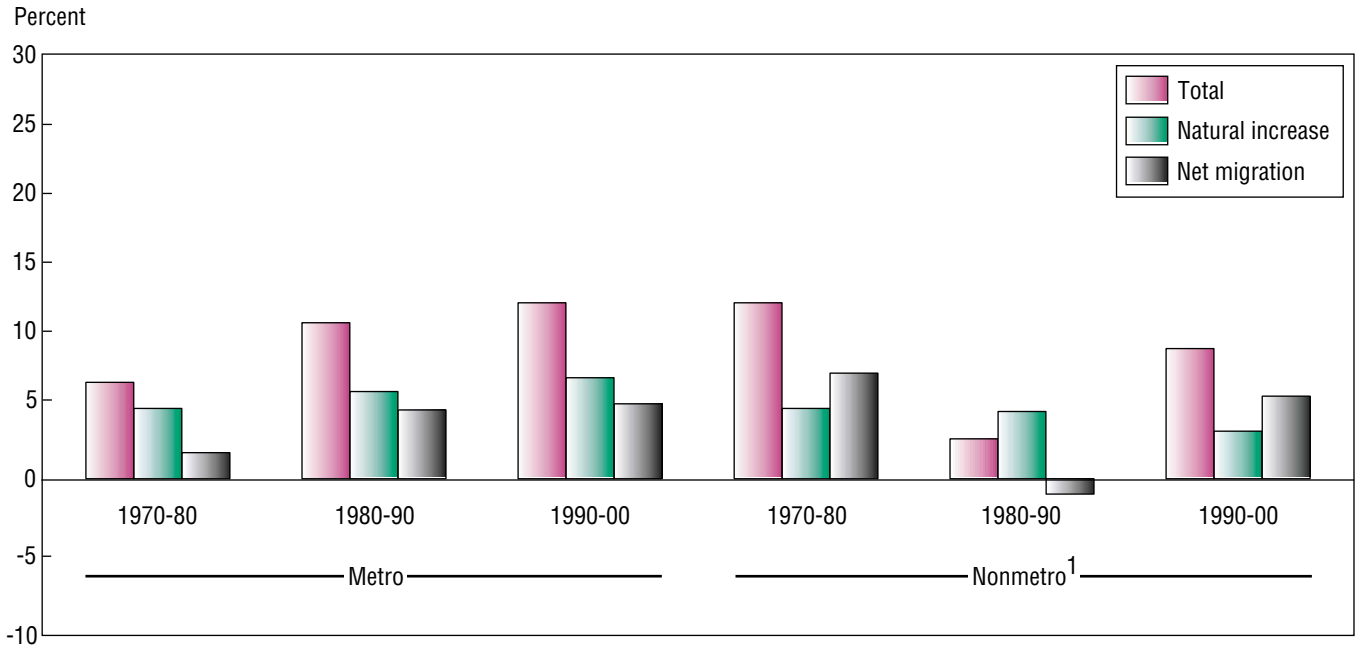
also examine data for six regions and for nonmetro counties grouped by primary economic function.

Since 1970, internal migration has affected the older population in many nonmetro areas. Many older people left the rural North for traditional southern metro retirement areas, such as in Florida or Arizona, and were lost to the nonmetro community. But in the 1970s especially, a rapidly growing number of nonmetro counties with attractive amenities became retirement destinations for both metro and nonmetro retirees. This rapid growth occurred also in areas far removed from warm winter climates, such as the Upper Great Lakes country and parts of New England and the Northwest, along with the Ozarks, the Blue Ridge mountains, and the Atlantic coast. For nonmetro areas as a whole, this inmovement more than offset the loss of older people

Figure 1

Growth of the population under age 65 by components, metro and nonmetro

Metro growth and migration increases; nonmetro areas recover from the 1980s reversal

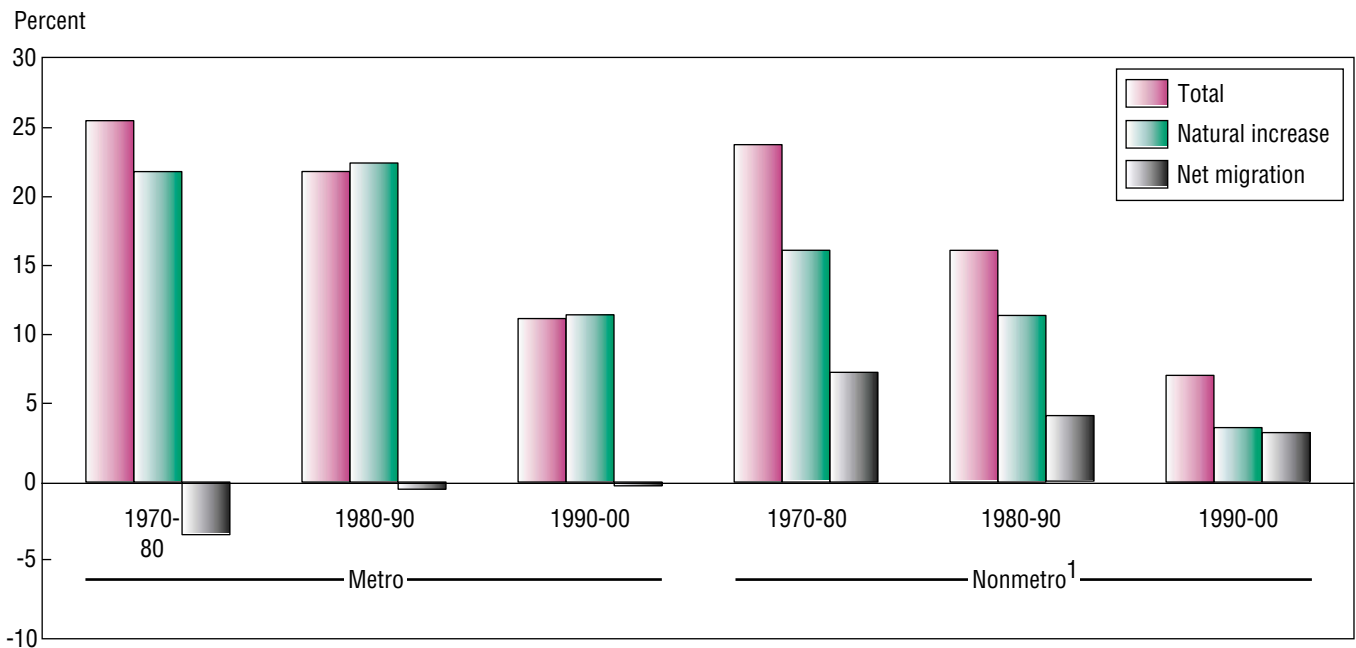


¹Nonmetropolitan as of the beginning of each decade.
Source: Analysis by authors from Census Bureau data.

Figure 2

Growth of the population age 65 and over by components, metro and nonmetro

Metro and nonmetro growth and natural increase declined

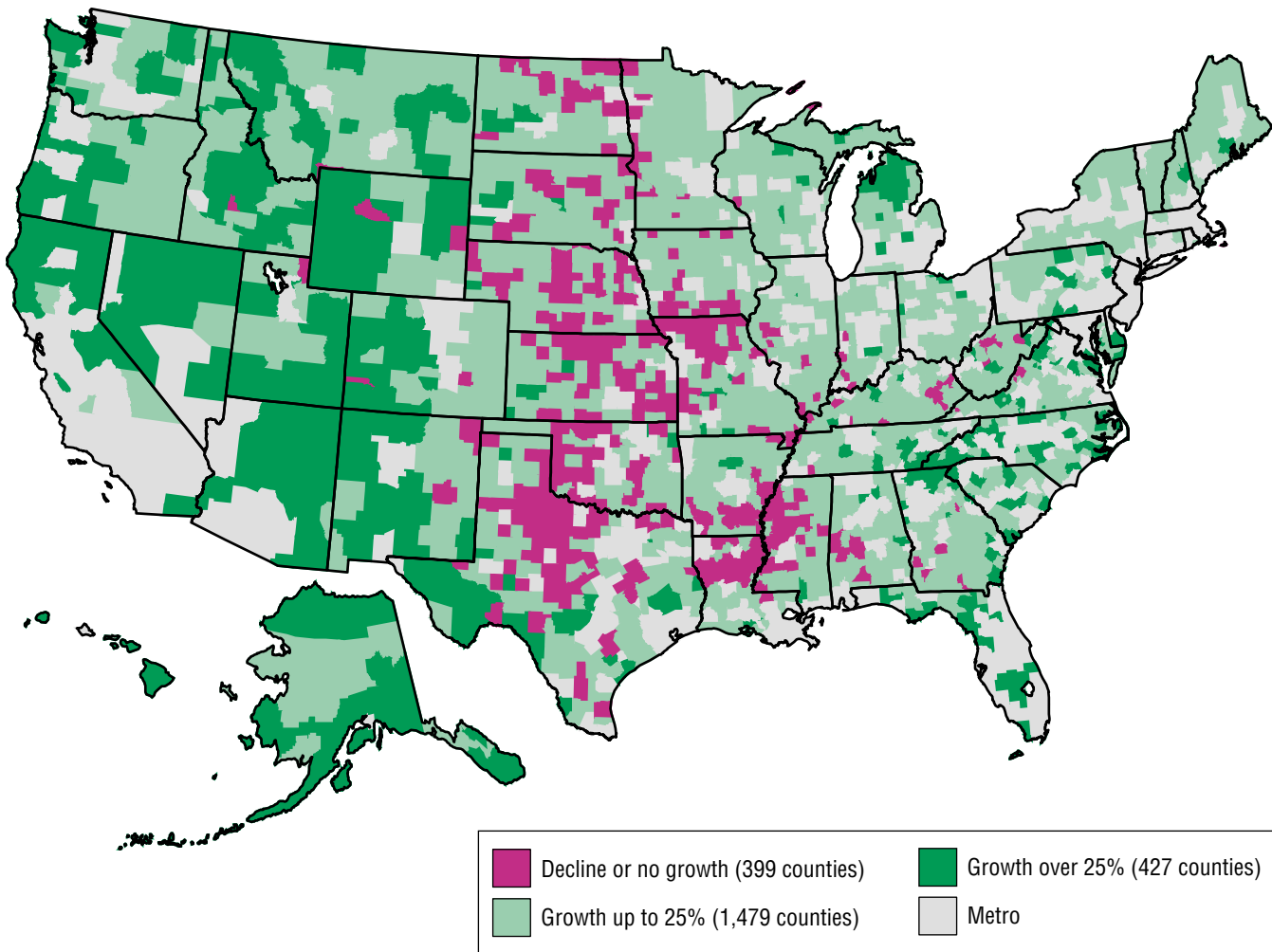


¹Nonmetropolitan as of the beginning of each decade.
Source: Analysis by authors from Census Bureau data.

Figure 3

Change in the nonmetro population age 65 and over, 1980-90

Most nonmetro counties experienced growth among the elderly in the 1980s



Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Census Bureau.

from other nonmetro settings, such as the Corn Belt and the Great Plains.

In many areas, however, the process of elderly natural increase or aging-in-place has been even more important than migration in changing the number of older people. Natural increase of the elderly—that is, the growth of the older population from the aging of late-middle-aged people, minus the deaths of older people—may be influenced not only by birth rates six decades before, but also by migration into or out of an area since that time. Thus, aging-in-

place growth is now low or absent altogether over broad areas, due to the prior chronic outmigration of young adults from rural and small-town places, especially in the post-World War II era when millions of people left farming.

Nonmetro Population Rebound Absent Among the Elderly

A comparison of growth rates of the population under age 65 for recent decades shows three distinctive metro-nonmetro patterns: (1) the turnaround of the 1970s, with higher nonmetro than metro total growth and net movement of many

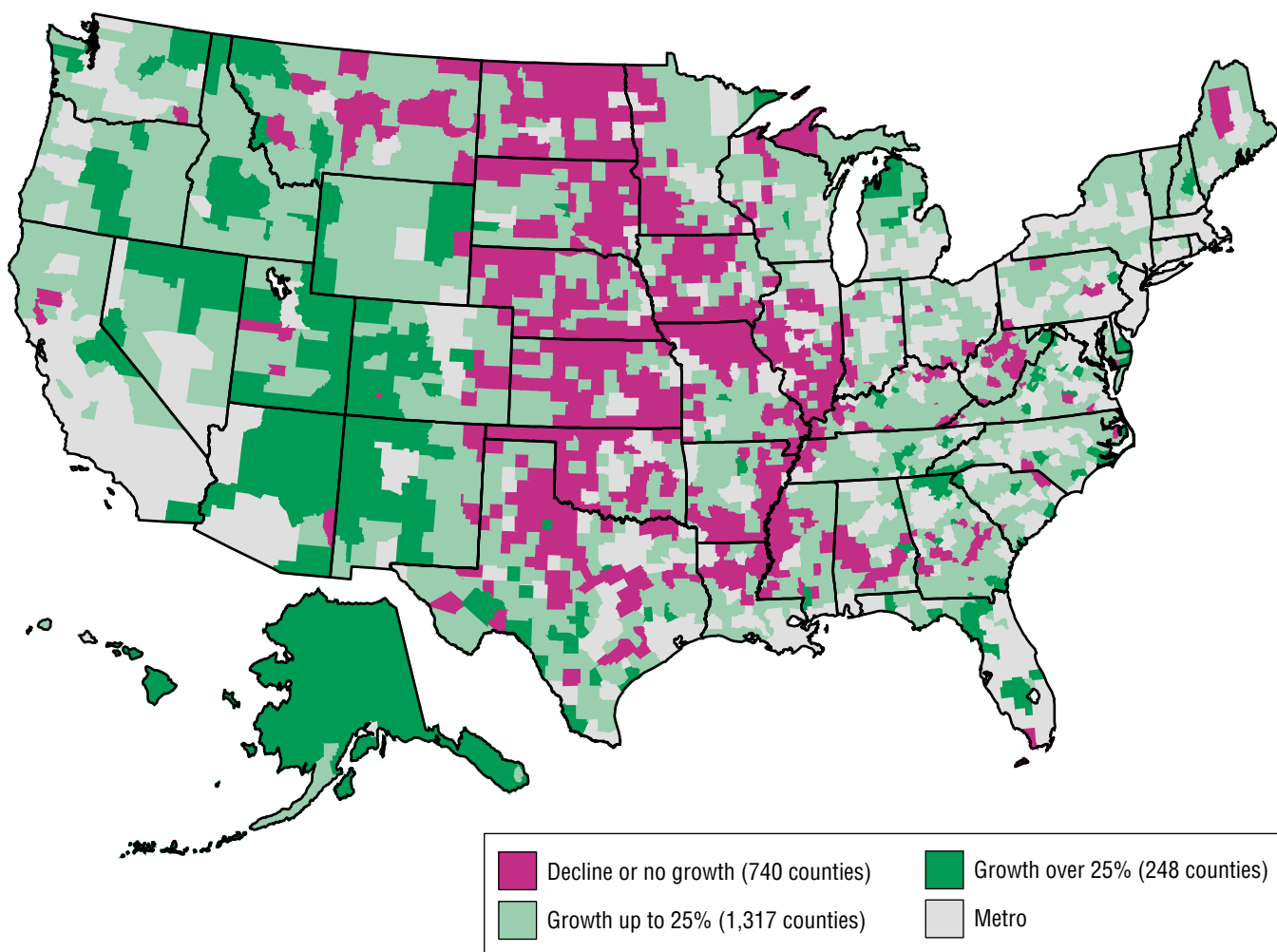
people into nonmetro areas; (2) the reversal of the 1980s, with considerably slower growth in nonmetro than in metro areas, and net outmigration from nonmetro areas; and (3) the rebound of the 1990s, with a marked increase in nonmetro total growth compared with the preceding decade caused by resumed net immigration (fig. 1).

In the 1990s, the nonmetro net migration rate was about the same as the metro rate, but figure 1 shows a continuation and widening of another trend—the difference between metro and nonmetro natural increase, with metro rates

Figure 4

Change in the nonmetro population age 65 and over, 1990-2000

The number of nonmetro counties with declining elderly population increased sharply in the 1990s



Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Census Bureau.

about twice as high as nonmetro rates by 2000. This widening is due to growing differences in age composition that produced a higher nonmetro average age—leading to a higher death rate in nonmetro areas—and to an unprecedented shift to lower levels of childbearing in nonmetro than metro areas. As a consequence, persons under age 65 continued to increase more rapidly in metro than in nonmetro areas during 1990-2000, despite the slightly higher nonmetro net in-migration rate (fig. 1) for both residence groups. Although precise data are not available to subdivide

the migration rate into domestic migration and foreign immigration, it is known that the net flow of domestic migration was from metro to nonmetro locations. All of the net movement into metro areas in the 1990s was from immigration, whereas that into nonmetro areas stemmed from both metro flight and foreign immigration.

The 1990s pattern is rather different for the population 65 and over, which had no recent rebound of nonmetro growth or net in-movement (fig. 2). Across the three decades since 1970, there was instead a consistent decline in

both natural increase and net migration for the older nonmetro population. By the 1990s, the contribution of elderly natural increase was only one-fourth as high as in the 1970s, falling from 15.8 to 3.8 percent, and the rate of net migration also dropped, from 7.5 to 3.5 percent. In the entire period, metro rates of elderly natural increase have been above nonmetro levels, although both declined considerably in the 1990s when the small birth cohorts of the 1930s Great Depression era began to reach age 65. The nonmetro elderly net migration gains of the 1970s were

paired with metro net migration losses, but in the two succeeding time periods, metro rates were essentially zero while nonmetro rates continued to be positive, though lower than before. (Because of immigration from abroad, it is not necessary for the two residence groups to have opposite trends in net migration. Both can be positive.)

Overall, the nonmetro elderly population grew at a high rate in the 1970s, slightly above that of the metro population. But by the 1990s, the growth rate of the nonmetro elderly was only two-thirds that of the metro elderly. The coincidence of the small 1930s Depression-era birth cohort begin-

ning to reach age 65 in the 1990s with the entry of millions of young adults through immigration caused the national percentage of the population 65 and over to decline for the first time in U.S. history, although the change was nominal (from 12.46 percent in 1990 to 12.43 in 2000).

There has been a growing incidence of nonmetro counties with declining older population. In the 1980s, 399 nonmetro counties (of 2,305 total) had a decline in persons 65 and older (fig. 3). In the 1990s, the number rose to 740 counties, or 33 percent of all nonmetro counties (fig. 4). These counties were concentrated in the Great Plains, the Corn Belt, and the

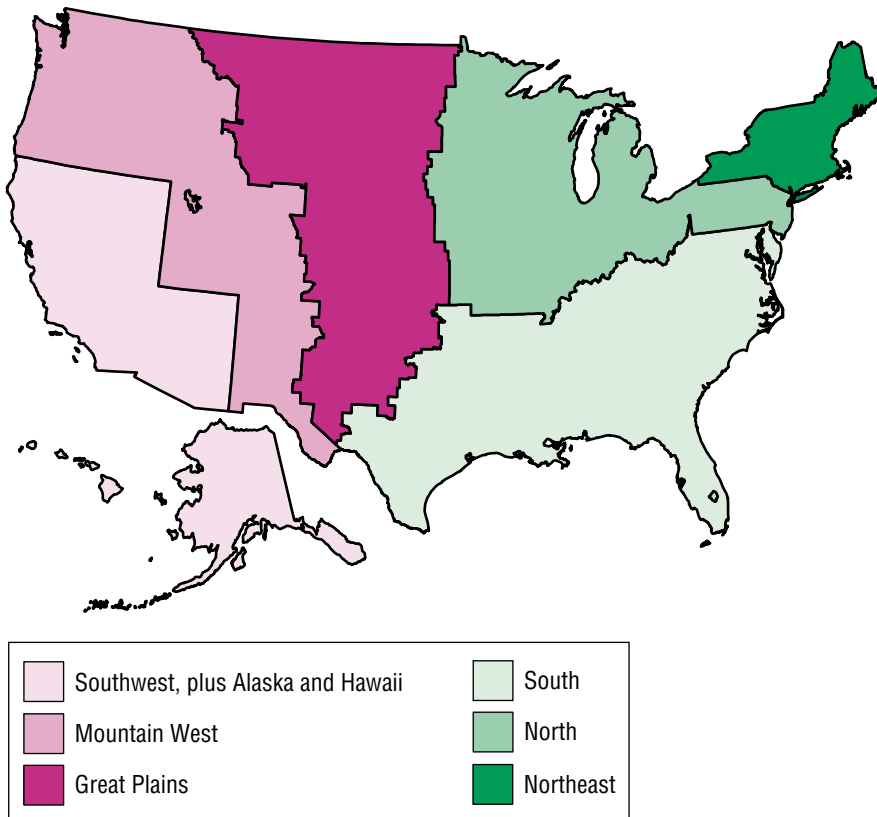
lower Mississippi Valley, where decades of outmigration of younger people have resulted in the recent outright decline of the elderly, as those reaching age 65 are outnumbered by the deaths or outmovement of those who are already 65 or older. These counties had more than double the rate of natural decrease for the elderly (-4.9 percent) as they had from net migration loss (-2.1 percent). Thus, natural decrease, rather than outmigration, has been the major cause of the loss in the number of elderly persons in counties where they have declined.

In contrast, 248 counties had an exceptionally rapid increase of older people (25 percent or more) in the 1990s (fig. 4). These counties are in many parts of the West and in scattered retirement centers in the East. In line with the general downturn in growth of older people, the number of such counties was considerably smaller than it had been from 1980 to 1990 (fig. 3).

Regional Change Varied Widely

There was much regional variation in trend across the 1970-2000 period. Therefore, we define six geographic areas as a framework for highlighting these differences (fig. 5). Because not all of nonmetro America experienced the 1990s population rebound that characterized the country as a whole, we first identified regions that were such exceptions. A large area in the Southwest had substantial population growth, but at a slower pace than in the 1980s (table 1). At the opposite end of the country in the Northeast (New England plus New York), nonmetro population also increased more slowly in the 1990s, but from a much lower rate of former popula-

Figure 5
Regions for use in growth analysis



Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Census Bureau.

Table 1

Nonmetro growth by components, elderly and nonelderly, by geographic region, 1970-2000¹*The Mountain West and Southwest had the most rapid growth and net migration*

Decade/region ²	Younger than 65			65 and older		
	Total	Natural increase	Net migration	Total	Natural increase	Net migration
<i>Percent change</i>						
1990-2000:						
Nonmetro total	8.5	3.1	5.4	7.4	3.8	3.6
Northeast	1.6	2.3	-0.7	8.3	6.5	1.8
North	4.9	2.1	2.8	2.9	1.2	1.7
South	10.3	2.8	7.6	9.1	4.9	4.2
Great Plains	0.5	4.2	-3.8	-1.4	-1.3	-0.1
Mountain West	19.2	6.0	13.2	18.4	7.0	11.4
Southwest	16.9	6.8	10.0	22.5	14.3	8.2
All U.S. counties	10.9	5.9	5.0	10.3	9.7	0.6
1980-1990:						
Nonmetro total	2.6	4.5	-1.8	16.0	11.5	4.5
Northeast	7.2	3.4	3.8	13.5	11.7	1.9
North	-2.9	3.1	-6.0	10.8	9.2	1.7
South	3.9	3.6	0.3	17.5	12.6	4.9
Great Plains	-6.0	7.6	-13.6	6.7	5.5	1.2
Mountain West	5.8	8.4	-2.6	28.6	17.6	11.0
Southwest	25.6	9.4	16.2	44.6	22.0	22.6
All U.S. counties	8.5	5.4	3.1	20.0	19.1	0.8
1970-1980:						
Nonmetro total	11.5	4.6	6.9	23.3	15.8	7.5
Northeast	8.1	3.2	4.9	19.4	14.5	4.9
North	6.3	3.5	2.8	15.8	11.6	4.2
South	13.0	4.6	8.4	29.3	18.9	10.4
Great Plains	5.3	5.6	-0.3	14.4	13.0	1.4
Mountain West	24.7	8.1	16.6	30.8	21.3	9.5
Southwest	30.2	7.4	22.8	47.3	21.8	25.5
All U.S. counties	7.7	4.6	3.1	22.1	22.2	-0.1

¹Nonmetropolitan designation as of the beginning of each decade.²See text for regional definitions.

Source: Analysis by authors from Census Bureau data.

tion growth than was true of the Southwest.

All six regions had lower growth of older population in the 1990s than in either the 1970s or 1980s (table 1). This pattern held true both for natural increase and immigration. Lower 1990s growth was also true of the population under 65 in the Southwest and in the Northeast. Thus, from a broad geographic and age standpoint, the 1990s nonmetro population rebound as a whole was produced only by trends in the population under 65 outside of the Southwest and Northeast.

In the nonmetro **Southwest**, the net influx of older people had been the fastest among all six regions in both the 1970s and the 1980s, but slowed dramatically in the 1990s, dropping to just 8.2 percent compared with 22.6 percent in the 1980s (table 1). Despite this major slowdown, the growth rate of the older Southwestern population in the 1990s was still higher than that of any other region because of a natural increase rate of the elderly (14.3 percent) that was by far the highest in the country. This unusual level of natural growth stems in part from the high rate of inmove-

ment of younger people to this region in earlier decades who are now reaching retirement age, and to some extent from the presence of minority populations whose life expectancy is rising. In both the Southwest and the Northeast, the older population grew more rapidly than the population under 65 in the 1990s, from natural increase and immigration alike.

Both older and younger populations grew rapidly in the 1990s in the **Mountain West** (18.4 percent for persons 65 and over and 19.2 percent for those under 65). This region has a variety of retirement situations ranging from the coast of Puget Sound, to Cascade and Rocky Mountain resorts, to the mild winter climates of southern New Mexico and southern Utah. Immigration of older people remained high at 9.5 percent to 11.4 percent per decade from the 1970s to the 1990s. Migration of the younger population was much more volatile, becoming slightly negative in the 1980s, with the retrenchment in mining and timber work in that decade, before rebounding in the 1990s from amenity-based settlement.

In the **Great Plains**, where dependence on agriculture has been highest, overall nonmetro population growth has been negligible to nonexistent for the past two decades. And in the 1990s, the population 65 and over showed a small decline (-1.4 percent), in contrast to other regions (table 1). This came almost entirely from the onset of natural decrease of older people in the region for the first time. Yet despite a declining older population, the Great Plains region fared better in retention of those under 65 in the 1990s (0.5-percent increase) than it had during the farm crisis of the 1980s, when the

under-65 age group fell by 6.0 percent. For many counties in the Plains, “rebound” consisted of population decline in both decades, but at a slower pace in the 1990s than in the 1980s. Also embedded in the region are a majority of the Nation’s counties where the 1980s loss was followed by more severe loss in the 1990s, but most of these counties are so thinly settled that they carry little demographic weight in the overall regional picture.

East of the Plains, we have divided the country into two regions (fig. 5), along North-South

lines, except for the Northeast region discussed earlier. In line with the general southward drift of U.S. population for many years, the growth of nonmetro population—older and younger—was consistently higher in the South than in the North over each of the last three decades, from both natural increase and net migration. The natural increase of older people in the **North** was just 1.2 percent in the 1990s, versus 9.2 percent a decade earlier (table 1). The western parts of the North have many farming counties that share some of the demographic history of the Great

Plains and have little or no recent natural increase of older population. The eastern part has many diminished industrial areas where population retention is difficult and natural increase is low.

The **South** covers a large territory from Delaware into Texas. Although it contains economically struggling subregions such as the Delta or the southern coal fields, much of the region has had “Sun Belt” growth ever since the 1960s. Nonmetro population increase occurred at about equal rates in the 1990s for persons under 65 (10.3 percent) and 65 and over (9.1 percent). But whereas immigration was by far the principal source of under-65 growth, natural increase somewhat exceeded immigration among older people, despite the presence of many well-known retirement areas. In part, this may reflect the fact that people retiring and moving before age 65 are eventually counted as aging-in-place natural increase for the 65-and-over group in their new location rather than as immigrants.

Older Population Growth Highest by Far in Recreation Counties

Another way to consider the diversity of nonmetro America is to distinguish counties by dominant economic character. We first employ a classification of nonmetro counties specializing in recreational activity, such as lake and ocean resorts, ski resorts, national parks, or second homes (Beale and Johnson). Such counties have attracted both elderly and younger migrants in recent decades. Then, all nonrecreation counties were typed by whether they specialized in one of three major economic activities—manufacturing, farming, and mining—or were in a residual group dependent

Table 2

Nonmetro population growth, elderly and nonelderly, by economic function, 1970-2000¹

Recreation counties have the highest growth and net migration in each decade; growth and net migration decline for the elderly across all decades for all functions

Decade/Function	Younger than 65			65 and older		
	Total	Natural increase	Net migration	Total	Natural increase	Net migration
<i>Percent change</i>						
1990-2000:						
Recreation	15.5	2.7	12.8	18.6	6.3	12.2
Manufacturing	7.8	2.7	5.1	7.3	5.7	1.6
Farming	7.2	3.4	3.9	0.1	-2.0	2.1
Mining	-0.3	2.1	-2.4	3.8	7.1	-3.3
Other nonmetro	8.0	4.0	4.0	5.4	2.3	3.2
1980-1990:						
Recreation	10.8	4.7	6.2	27.6	14.0	13.6
Manufacturing	.9	3.2	-2.3	15.7	14.7	1.2
Farming	-2.1	4.7	-6.8	8.9	4.8	4.1
Mining	-6.3	5.5	-11.8	12.1	15.7	-3.6
Other nonmetro	4.8	5.5	-0.7	15.4	9.4	6.0
1970-1980:						
Recreation	20.2	4.0	16.1	32.4	15.7	16.7
Manufacturing	8.1	4.2	3.9	22.5	19.3	3.2
Farming	4.0	3.8	0.2	15.2	10.6	4.7
Mining	15.3	6.1	9.2	20.3	21.2	-0.8
Other nonmetro	14.6	5.2	9.4	25.3	13.8	11.4

¹Nonmetropolitan designation as of the beginning of each decade. Source: Analysis by authors from Census Bureau data.

Methods

Elderly natural increase is the number of people reaching the onset of old age—here age 65—over a time interval, minus those elderly persons who die during the interval. Natural increase of the younger population is the number of births minus the number who attain age 65 or who die over the interval. Net migration for either age group is simply the number of persons moving into any area minus the number moving out over the interval.

County net migration estimates for persons age 0-64 and 65 and over, 1970-1980, were taken from files prepared by White, Mueser, and Tierney. The authors prepared the estimates for 1980-1990 (Fuguitt and Beale, 1993) and for 1990-2000, as reported here. Each set of migration estimates was derived by subtracting a measure of natural increase from population change over the period, with a positive or negative difference being attributed to net migration. Estimates of this nature are not perfect, but we believe them to be adequately reliable. Errors in estimating natural increase and differing errors in measuring undercount and overcount for each census affect the results obtained.

Because of differences in completeness between the censuses of 1970 through 2000, the reported population data for 1970-1980 and for 1980-90 were adjusted by using age-sex-race undercount estimates from demographic analysis made by the Census Bureau at different times. Similarly, for 1990-2000, we used the 1990 undercount estimates cited above and for 2000 abridged estimates (five age groups by sex and race) reported by Robinson. Thus, changes in the number and proportion of elderly population across the decades are measured using these adjusted figures.

In comparing population change for the three 10-year time periods, we used rates per 100 population. These rates were allocated into additive components due to natural increase or net migration by weighting the total growth rate for an age group by the proportion of absolute increase over the time period attributable to natural increase or to net migration. **For further details on our methods, contact Glenn Fuguitt, 608-263-7976.**

on services and trade or unspecialized economies (Cook and Hady). There is no overlap among the five groups. This classification is for the 1980s, currently the only period for which the recreation variable is available.

All growth rates for both elderly and younger people are much higher for nonmetro recreation counties than for any of the other functional groupings (table 2). In the 1990s, both older and younger populations had net migration into the recreation counties of better than 12 percent. No other county type had more than 3.2 percent in-movement of the elderly or 5.1 percent of younger people in the 1990s. The recreation counties are not concentrated geographically. Some are in warm winter places such as Florida, Arizona, or Hawaii, but most are in such scattered locations as the lake country of

the upper Midwest, or the hills and mountains of the Ozarks, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Great Smokies, and the Rockies. Although many of these areas are meccas for the retired, they also attract younger people at by far the highest rates of all functional types. Counties that receive elderly migrants have an economic stimulus from this in-movement that produces growth in the working-age population as well. And the presence of recreation and related amenities is attractive to younger adults as it is to older people, whether for vacationing or permanent residence.

Among the functional groupings, manufacturing counties had the second highest level of growth for those 65 and over, except in the 1970s (table 2). All of the groups had their lowest levels of elderly growth and migration gain during

the 1990s. For the elderly population, all of the nonrecreational types had low net in-migration rates for each period, and even net out-migration from mining counties. Farming counties consistently had the lowest elderly growth, and in the 1990s shifted to elderly natural decrease (-2.0 percent).

As a result of earlier out-movement of working-age people, there were smaller numbers of people remaining to enter old age than there were older people who died. In contrast, mining counties—although not numerous—had the largest rate of elderly growth by natural increase in the 1990s (7.1 percent). Although the younger population of these counties grew more slowly than that of farming counties in the 1990s, it had grown considerably faster in the 1970s. It is evidently this cohort, with rapid in-movement at younger ages in the

mining boom of the 1970s, that swelled the aging-in-place elderly growth for the mining counties in the 1990s.

For the population under age 65, all economic groups follow the general pattern of having lowest levels of growth and migration gain during the 1980s, between the 1970s turnaround and the 1990s rebound.

Conclusion and Implications

During the 1990s, the growth rate of the older nonmetro population slowed disproportionately, even before all of the small Depression-born cohorts of the 1930s entered this age group. This slowdown can be attributed to declines in both elderly natural increase and net immigration. One result is the emergence of a large block of nonmetro counties with a decreasing older population, especially in agriculturally dependent areas. But over much of the country, nonmetro immigration of persons under 65 rebounded in the 1990s to near-1970s levels. This was true for each county economic type and four of the six geographic regions. With this rebound of the young and middle-aged population, and a slackening of growth in the older population, the overall growth rate of the older nonmetro population in the 1990s was below that of younger people for the only time in the 20th century.

The decline in elderly natural increase appears to be due largely to the smaller cohort of people reaching age 65 in the 1990s (a result of the low birth rates of 1925-35), and to the pattern of outmigration of younger adults from farm-dependent areas in the 1940s and 1950s. The low nationwide rate of elderly natural increase in

the 1990s also reduced the pool of potential retirees available to migrate to nonmetro places from metro areas. The decline in rates of elderly net migration across most functional groupings and four of the six geographic areas may be explained in part by aging within the elderly cohort.

Previous research has shown some return movement of the oldest retiree migrants to metro areas, often to allow them to be near their children or other relatives in advanced age or widowhood. As a retirement destination matures, one would expect a higher proportion of the population to be of advanced age and subject to some outmigration, thus offsetting somewhat the continued inmovement of persons in their 60s or early 70s. This point warrants further research.

We should stress that the systematic downturn in nonmetro elderly population growth does not invalidate the attention that has been given to retirement-destination counties as a rapidly growing type of nonmetro area. Their high growth continues, but

only because their population has been bolstered by increased numbers of younger migrants whose entry has offset a reduced although still large influx of older people.

To the extent that traditional rural and small-town counties have come to be seen as places with a serious surfeit of older people, the current trend is serving to ease this burden slightly, and should do so until after 2010 when the baby boomers begin their entry into old age. Ironically, in many small counties with declining numbers of elderly, nursing homes are among the largest employers, and unless there are increased admission rates, their level of occupancy and need to employ could be reduced. For thinly settled counties with limited nonagricultural economies, this reduction in older residents could continue for some time. In most areas, though, the 1990s and the current decade are just an intermission before major resumed growth of the nonmetro elderly, both from aging of the very large middle-aged group and outflow of retirees from the cities. ^{RA}

For Further Reading . . .

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