

Introduction

Leading Trends Influencing North Dakota's Future Population

North Dakota's population grew only slightly over the past decade. Data from the 2000 Census indicate that the state grew by 0.5 percent between 1990 and 2000 reaching a population base of 642,200. This is the smallest relative growth of all 50 states. Three leading trends are seen to influence the state's future population and comprise the underlying assumptions used to project future county populations within North Dakota: rural depopulation, out-migration of young adults and young families, and an increasing proportion of elderly.

Rural Depopulation

Decades of movement of rural residents to the larger cities have depopulated much of North Dakota. This trend of residential consolidation in North Dakota is very similar to that occurring throughout the Great Plains. In the last decade, population growth occurred largely in the metropolitan and Native American reservation counties of the state. In fact, only six of the state's 53 counties grew between 1990 and 2000 (20 percent in Cass, 15 percent in Burleigh, 8 percent in Sioux, 7 percent in Rolette, 7 percent in Morton, and 2 percent in Ward). The long-term trend of net out-migration is expected to continue. Thus, the majority of counties will continue to lose population. Currently, more than half of the 53 counties in the state have a population base below 5,000 residents. By 2020, nearly half of the counties will have a population base below 4,000 residents.

Out-Migration of Young Adults

In addition to the general trend of rural depopulation, another significant pattern that will have a major consequence on the future of the state's population is the out-migration of young adults and young families. The loss of residents in their twenties and early thirties has increased markedly over the past two decades. This trend has created an age imbalance that is very evident in the population pyramids. The loss of young adults means that there will be fewer parents of childbearing age and therefore fewer children. As a result, the number of children will consistently decline for the majority of counties over the next 20 years.

Increasing Proportion of Elderly

Another noteworthy trend is the increasing proportion of elderly (age 65 and older). In 1980, 12.3 percent of the state's population base was age 65 or older; in 2000, the proportion had increased to 14.7 percent. In addition, 27 of the state's 53 counties had more than 20 percent of their population base older than 64 in 2000. Nationally, the proportion of elderly is only 12.4 percent. In addition, North Dakota has the highest proportion in the nation of elderly 85 years and older. These high proportions of elderly are due, in part, to a modest net in-migration of seniors who are returning to the state to be close to family and friends. Elderly desiring to return to informal care networks, already a growing trend in population redistribution, will contribute to dramatic increases as the baby-boom population ages. If current trends continue, the number of elderly in the state will grow by 58 percent over the next 20 years and represent nearly 23 percent of the state's population. In addition, the number of older seniors (i.e., 85 years of age and older) will grow by nearly two-thirds during that time frame.

These trends pose serious concerns for the state. For example, how will counties remain viable in the face of continued rural depopulation? Population losses, which reduce community size, force residents to face rising costs of, increased travel times to, and decreased availability of goods and services. Can counties and the state ensure adequate healthcare in the face of rural hospital and clinic closings? What will be the impact of further school consolidations on communities across the state? In addition, how will communities address the impact of out-migration of young adults? Young adults provide the natural increase for a population base when they have children. Declining numbers of young adults will have an impact on future population growth. Moreover, young adults add vitality, new thoughts, and new ideas to their communities. They are also the newest generation of workers. The loss of this "human capital" will have significant effects on the state. Finally, are counties and the state positioned to offer services to a growing elderly population? Do they have adequate and appropriate housing? How should they deal with those elderly who are isolated? These and other concerns will be important topics of debate among policy-makers.