

Nebraska's Rural Population: Growth and Decline by Age

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Overview

Declining rural populations have concerned Nebraska policymakers for decades. Despite an array of state and local efforts to encourage economic development and demographic renewal in rural communities that decline has continued for most non-metropolitan portions of the state, with 69 of 93 counties recording a population loss between the last two census years (2000 and 2010). However, migration flows both ways in even very rural places, and newcomers can effect local places and economies as much as those who leave.

Population Change and Size of Place

Population decline clearly tends to be associated with the most rural parts of Nebraska. In order to better understand how rurality might affect migration outcomes, we have aggregated county level data from the decennial censuses of 200 and 2010 into five groups.

- Metropolitan counties as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) at the time of the 2010 Census.
- Micropolitan core counties, having a population center of 10,000 residents or larger.
- Small Trade Center counties, having a population center of 2,500 to 9,999 residents.
- Small Town counties, having no population center as large as 2,500 residents.
- Frontier counties, having no population center as large as 2,500 residents and a population density of less than 6 residents per square mile.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between current population size and population change for Nebraska counties, with the majority of Metropolitan and Micropolitan core counties experiencing population growth between 2000 and 2010, while only 8 of the remaining 84 counties saw their populations increase during the same period. Note that these data were collected prior to Hall County and its labor-shed being classified as Metropolitan.

The same relationship is true for Nebraska's communities, as demonstrated in map form in Figure 2. Of the 32 communities with 5,000 or more residents in 2010, the majority (25)

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experienced population increases during the period 2000 to 2010. By comparison, of the 504 Nebraska communities with populations smaller than 1,000, only 118 (23%) saw their populations grow during the decade.

In general, the smaller and more rural a community was, the more likely it was to see population declines.

These changes have been occurring for decades, fueled originally by technological changes in agriculture that both increased the size of Nebraska farms and reduced the need for labor on the farm. As employment opportunities in rural places declined, rural residents, and especially young residents, looked to larger places for education, employment, and an array of consumer amenities that were either unavailable or in decline in their rural homes.

This long-term trend supports the view that rural Nebraska is analogous to a great hour-glass, from which the population slowly trickles out. One routinely hears the opinion that at the core of rural decline is the outmigration of youth who tend to be seen as fleeing to larger cities, never to return. The reality of rural population change is, however, somewhat more nuanced than that caricature would suggest.

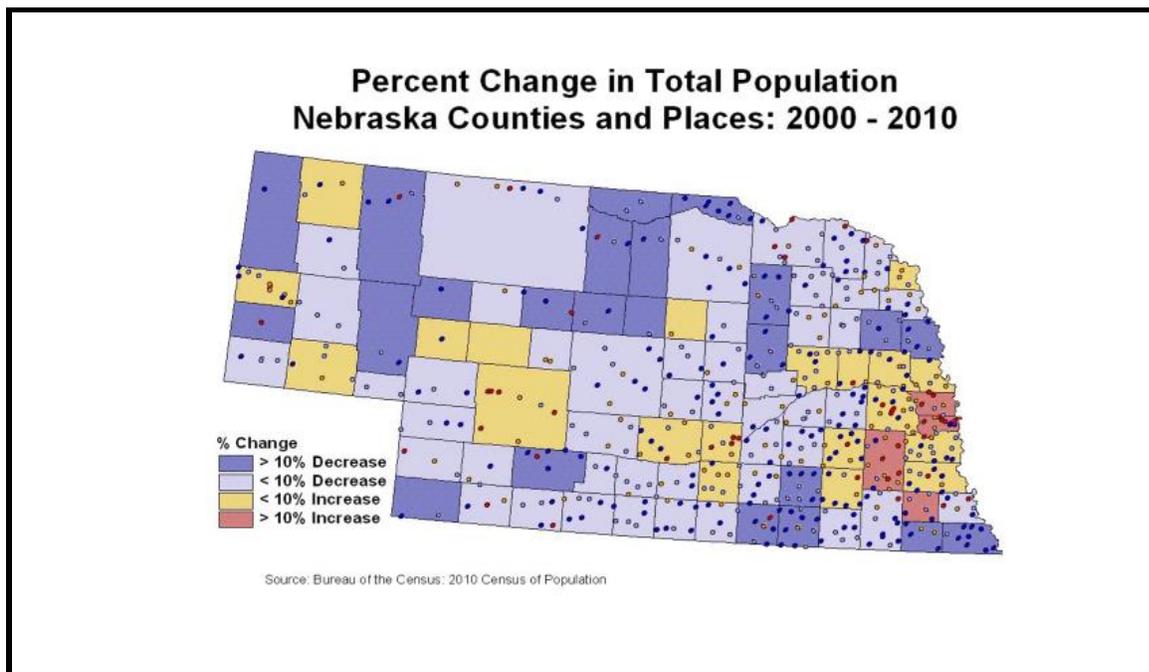
Figure 1: Population Change by County Type, Nebraska, 2000-2010

County Type	Total Counties	Growing Counties	Declining Counties
Nebraska	93	24	69
Metropolitan	9	8	1
Micropolitan Core	10	7	3
Small Trade	24	5	19
Small Town	22	1	21
Frontier	28	3	25

Source: Bureau of the Census

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 2: Percent Change in Total Population Nebraska Counties and Places, 2000-2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census of Population

While it is commonly true that the majority of rural youth leave their communities in the years immediately following High School graduation, it is also true that the exodus of rural youth is far from complete. More importantly, at least from a labor force perspective, rural Nebraska has also been characterized by in-migration among people age 30 to 45 years. That trend has been found in rural regions throughout the Great Plains.

Migration for Age Cohorts

One way to understand migration to rural areas is to examine the difference between “expected” and “observed” populations by age over the decade 2000 to 2010.

Imagine that you live in a community where nothing changes over a decade. The birth rate doesn't change, nobody moves in, nobody moves out, and nobody dies. If in that imaginary place there were 100 20-year old residents in the first year, there would be 100 30-year old residents in the tenth year.

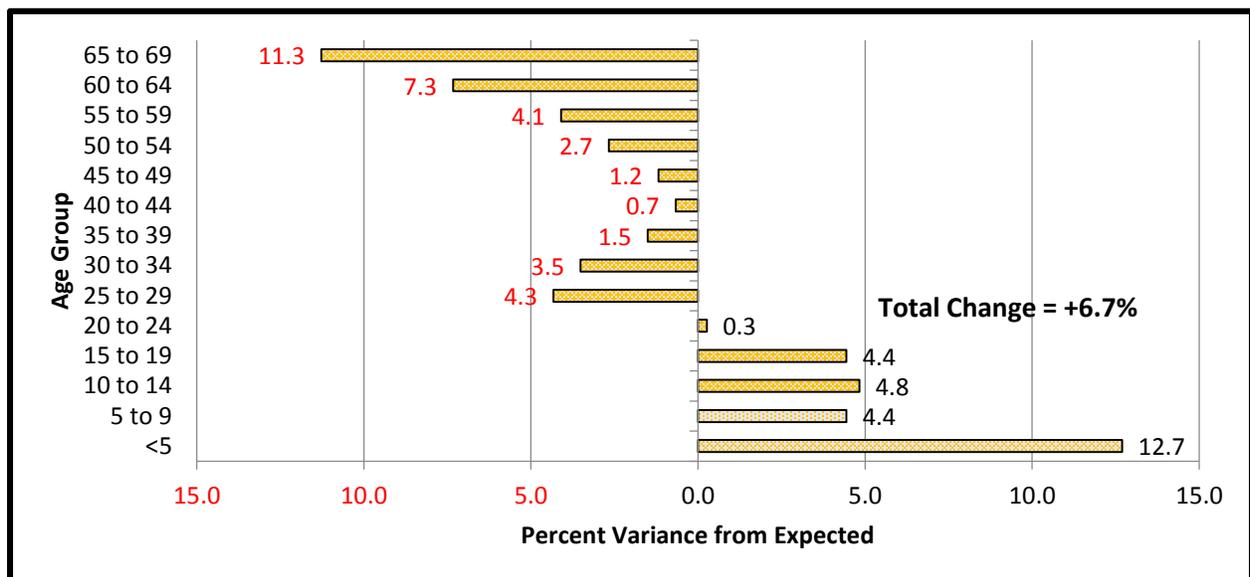
If that cohort numbers less than 100 in the tenth year, the difference can only be explained by out-migration (or to a lesser extent, death).

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If the cohort numbers more than 100, the difference can only be explained by in-migration. Differences found in the number of residents under 10 years of age will indicate changes in the birth rate. This is depicted for the State of Nebraska in figure 3.

In Figure 3, all of the bars to the right of the center line represent populations that are smaller than would have been expected if there had been no change. Bars to the right of the line represent populations that are larger than expected if nothing had changed. These bars can be interpreted as representing out- and in-migration. Numbers at the end of each bar represent the percentage variation from the expected population. The graph ends at age 69, which represents a likely end point for labor force participation and the point at which death becomes a more important contributor to population change.

Figure 3: Percent Variance from Expected Population, Nebraska, 2010

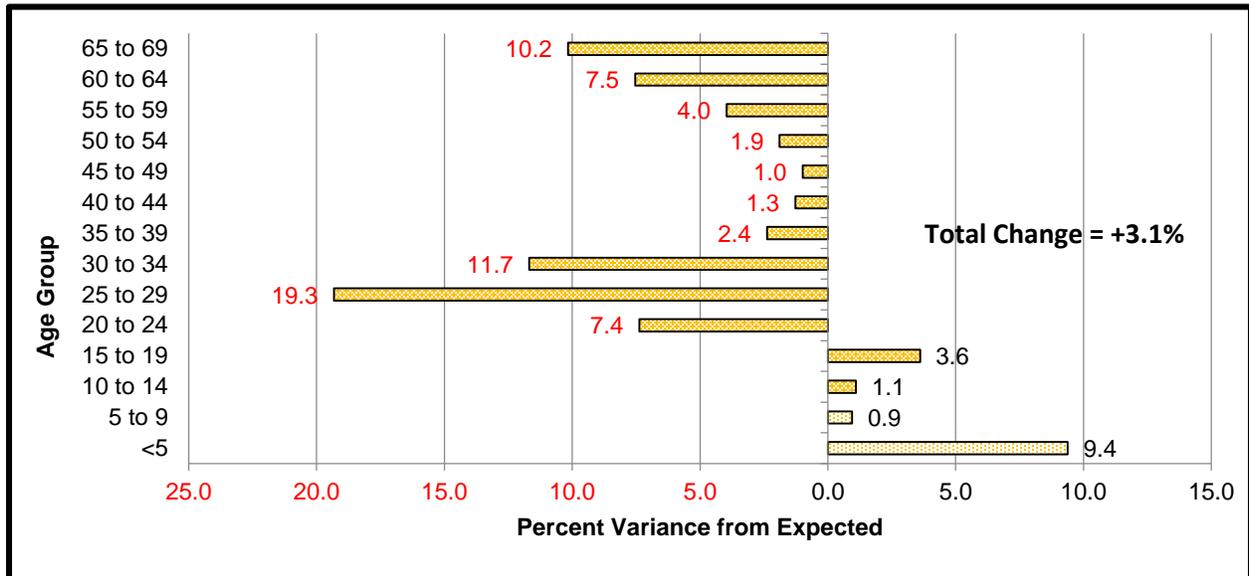


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census, SF1

As seen in Figure 3, Nebraska's population growth during the first decade of this century resulted largely from growth among our youngest age groups and an increase in births. From about age 25 years on, the state was a net population loser for all age groups. The birth rate was, however, significant enough to result in a net population gain of 6.7% for the state.

The pattern is quite different in urban and rural places. Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate this, depicting the same observed versus expected population data but for relatively urban Micropolitan core counties (Figure 4) and Small Town counties (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Percent Variance from Expected Population, Micropolitan Core Counties, Nebraska, 2010



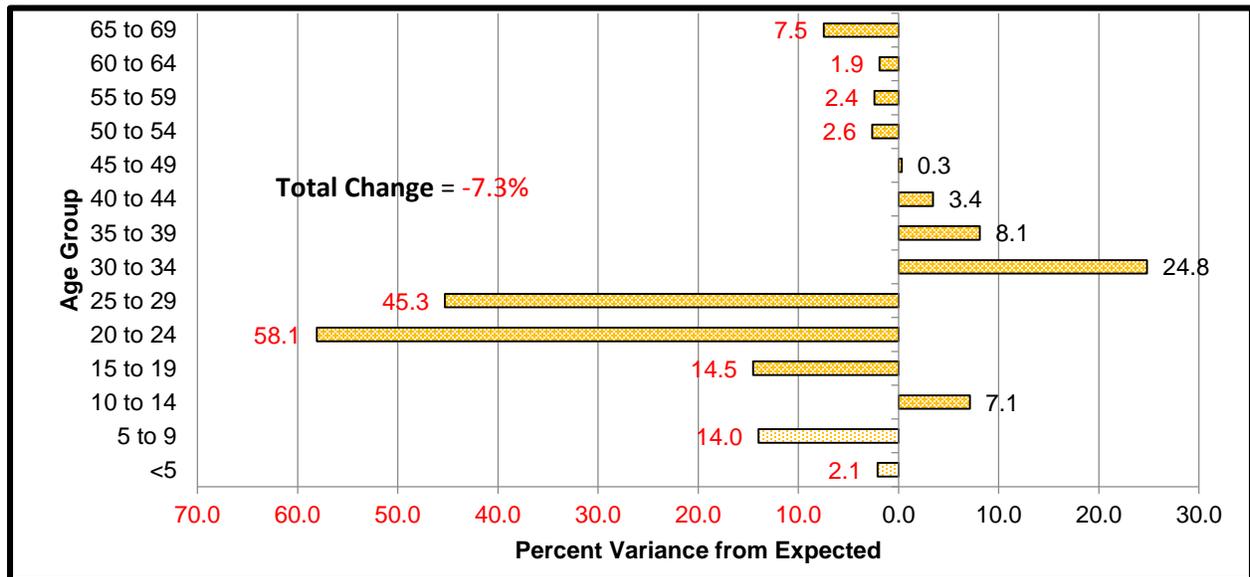
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census, SF1

Like Nebraska as a whole, Micropolitan core counties recorded an increase in births along with a small in-migration of people age 15 to 19 years, likely as a result of movement to those locations by recent high school graduates for educational or employment purposes and also by international migration. However, those counties also experienced out-migration for all age groups over the age of 20 years. In the end, those counties saw a net population increase of 3.1%.

Small Town counties demonstrate a very different migration pattern. In these counties, out-migration is significant among younger residents following high school and through age 29 years. However, for the age groups 30 to 39 years significant in-migration occurred. Nebraska's Small Town counties, in fact, netted nearly 25% more residents in that age group than would have been expected had nothing changed.

The in-migration of persons age 30 to 44 years in rural Nebraska has also been documented in other rural parts of the country and is at the heart of a "brain gain" theory posited by some rural development studies.

Figure 5. Percent Variance from Expected Population, Small Town Counties, Nebraska, 2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census, SF1

What drives these changes?

Migration both to and from rural Nebraska is a response to a variety of both economic and social characteristics of rural places and is much more nuanced than is generally assumed.

The traditional narrative for rural population decline or growth holds that lack of economic opportunity is forcing people out of rural areas and that the trend could be altered simply through successful economic development efforts. Indeed, economic opportunity drives movement, but in both directions.

Young people leaving rural places note the absence of certain career paths and the lure of higher wages in their decisions. Young and mid-career workers find opportunity in the positions vacated by retirees among the aging rural population and also with successful rural businesses seeking new employees with training and skills that are not typically generated locally. Leaving a rural community for higher education does not necessarily preclude rural youth from eventual rural employment in a way that it once might have.

Lifestyle choices are also a significant driver of migration in both directions. According to survey and focus group research conducted at the University of Nebraska and elsewhere, in-migration among people age 30 to 45 years appears to be a response not only to employment opportunities, but also to lifestyle preferences and family connections. In fact, among persons

relocating to rural areas from urban centers, a job is often reported to have essentially been an opportunity factor which supported the possibility of relocating to a desirable rural location. Among the rural amenities reported to have influenced relocation are shorter commutes, more available time to spend with family members, better schools, access to outdoor activities, lower housing costs, and enhanced personal safety.

On the other hand, the relative absence of some lifestyle amenities, especially consumer amenities such as retail shopping and restaurant dining, has been found by the Nebraska Rural Poll to be a significant and growing source of dissatisfaction among rural residents. A desire to obtain access to such amenities can be argued to be a motivation for out-migration, especially among the young.

Conclusions and Implications

Population losses in rural areas are certainly continuing. Understanding those losses is, however, more complex than simply assuming that a lack of economic opportunity is emptying out the rural population. The movement of rural people is, in fact, not one-directional. People also move in to even very rural places.

Economics and jobs are, of course, critical factors in household residential and migration decisions. But, so are lifestyle choices and amenity preferences. Would more jobs and higher wages support population growth (or at least mitigate population losses) in rural areas? Of course they would. However, so would improvements to the quality of life in rural communities. Development professionals today tend to recognize this and, as a result, the distinction between economic development and community development activities is becoming less distinct than it once was.

Young rural Nebraskans will indeed continue to move away from their childhood homes. Note, however, that contrary to the common narrative, not all young people leave rural places. A community from which 60% of high school graduates migrate out still retains 40% of that cohort. Investments in continuing education and skills training might prove valuable in matching those individuals with local labor force requirement.

It is also important to remember that reported changes in rural populations have a great deal to do with the definition of rural. Rural communities that successfully support population growth may simply grow out of a given definition of rural. A current Nebraska example is Howard

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County, with no town as large as 2,500 residents and a total population of just over 6,000. As a result of Grand Island's growth and classification as a Metropolitan place and current commuting patterns, Howard County will now be included in a Metropolitan region.

In the end, policy makers concerned about population changes in rural areas should pay attention to the details in the data and not just to the aggregate results. Counter to the long-term trend, individual communities, even very small ones, have demonstrated the ability to attract new residents.

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