

# **Population Redistribution Trends in Nonmetropolitan America 2000 to 2018**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Given the turbulent economic conditions of the past 18 years, it is an appropriate time to examine population redistribution trends in nonmetropolitan America. The primary focus here is on how the recent economic turbulence has impacted nonmetropolitan population growth and redistribution. Analysis centers on the three major demographic components of population change: (1) internal migration; (2) immigration; and (3) natural increase. The analysis will compare demographic change in different types of nonmetropolitan counties and also examine the differential impact of the recession on population trends in nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas. Our results will provide a rich and nuanced picture of how recent demographic changes have redistributed the population of nonmetropolitan America and how the components of demographic change combined to produce this change.

## **Population Redistribution Trends in Nonmetropolitan America 2000 to 2018**

During the past 18 years, the nation has experienced a protracted demographic boom followed by the worst recession since the 1930s, followed by an uneven recovery. Though economists maintain that the Great Recession ended by 2010, demographic trends tell a different story. Here the primary question is how these turbulent economic forces have reshaped the nonmetropolitan population. Our analysis centers on the three major demographic components of population change: (1) internal migration; (2) immigration; and (3) natural increase.

Following the economic boom of the early 2000s, the Great Recession caused the most extreme economic displacement since the Great Depression. This economic shock profoundly impacted U.S. demographic trends. In response to the constricted economic circumstances, fewer Americans migrated and both U.S. birth rates and the number of births diminished sharply. Such significant changes in critical demographic components had significant implications for population redistribution in rural areas. Though the recession has now waned, its impact continues to reverberate through U.S. demographic trends.

Each of the three major mechanisms of demographic change shifted in unanticipated ways during the boom, recession and post-recessionary period. For example, domestic migration hit extremely low levels after the Great Recession and only began to recover in 2015. Immigration also slowed after more than a decade of unprecedented increases (e.g., nearly 1 million annual immigrants). While domestic migration appears to be recovering and reverting to pre-recessionary patterns, there is no evidence of any recovery in U.S. fertility trends. The general fertility rate hit a record low in 2017. The net shortfall of births between 2008 and 2017 is 4.8 million. Births in 2017 were 10 percent lower than in 2007, even though there were 7 percent more women of prime childbearing age (20-39) than in 2007.

These trends have special relevance for nonmetropolitan America, where natural increase has long been the primary driver of population growth in many parts of rural America. Over the past 18 years, the rate of natural increase has slowed dramatically in rural America and the incidence of natural decrease (more deaths than births) has accelerated. With less natural increase to offset migration losses and widespread outmigration from many rural areas, nonmetropolitan America suffered a net population decline from 2010 to 2015. This is the first time in American history when there has been an absolute decline in the population of nonmetropolitan America.

This research seeks to more fully understand the complex dynamics of population change and redistribution in rural America during this turbulent economic period. Prior analysis suggests that the impact of the recession on migration was immediate and pronounced. In essence, the recession had the effect of “freezing people in place”. In nonmetropolitan areas that grew rapidly during the early 2000s boom (e.g. recreational and retirement counties and those proximate to metropolitan areas), the recession sharply diminished net migration gains resulting in less population growth. Paradoxically, the recession had a strikingly different pattern in formerly declining areas. Here, the recession slowed domestic migration losses resulting in smaller population losses or outright population gains. However, as net migration patterns reverted to pre-recessionary patterns recently, migration losses from rural areas with histories of population loss (e.g. farm counties) appear to be accelerating again resulting in renewed population loss.

Against this backdrop of net migration change, the role of natural increase in recent rural population distribution trends remains unclear. Much of the nonmetropolitan population growth between 2000 and 2010 was fueled by natural increase. Yet, while net migration patterns appear

to be reverting to pre-recessionary trends, this is not the case for natural increase. Nationwide, fertility rates for all groups (except Hispanics) are well below replacement levels. The implications of this fertility falloff for in rural America are likely to be even more pronounced, given that the population there is older and more likely to be non-Hispanic white. Though America's minority populations have accounted for vast majority of the overall U.S. population growth, fertility rates among minorities, particularly Hispanics, have been hard hit by the Recession and post-recession period. What implications these changing fertility patterns have for rural America is not yet fully understood.

It is imperative that we undertake the proposed analysis of how demographic trends in nonmetropolitan America have been influenced by the turbulent economic environment of the two decades. The proposed analysis will compare demographic change in nonmetropolitan areas proximate to metropolitan areas and those remote far from such urban areas, as well as compare different types of rural counties. The results will provide a rich and nuanced picture of how demographic changes over the last 18 years have redistributed the population in nonmetropolitan regions of the United States. In so doing, it will provide important new information to scholars, policy-makers and the media at a time when interest in rural America is extremely high.