

Nonmetro Population Rebound Continues and Broadens

As the decade of the 1990's has progressed, the nonmetro population has received a substantial net influx of people, leading to sharp reduction in the number of counties with population decline. Growth has been especially rapid in recreation, retirement, and metro-adjacent communities, but has also affected the more traditional manufacturing, farming, mining, and mixed economy areas that are not close to metro places. The pattern is increasingly similar to the nonmetro growth that prevailed in the 1970's.

The broad revival of population growth in rural and small town areas that became apparent after 1990 continued in the year ending July 1, 1995. In this most recent 1-year period with available data, the estimated rate of nonmetro population increase (1.0 percent) was slightly above that in metro areas (0.9 percent), similar to the pattern of the 1970's.

For the first half of the 1990's as a whole, the nonmetro population rose by 5.1 percent, (2.6 million people), or nearly twice the growth of the entire 1980-90 decade (table 1). Metro growth was 5.8 percent. Nonmetro residents are currently 20.4 percent of the total U.S. population. While 3.8 million people moved from abroad into metro areas, a net of 1.3 million others moved from metro to nonmetro areas.

All Types of Counties and Regions of the Country Affected

The rebound in rural and small town growth since 1990 has been very pervasive. It is not confined to certain types of counties or to a few areas. Although there were still 562 nonmetro counties that had some degree of population decline from 1990-95, their rate of loss was not as rapid as in the 1980's. All broad economic classes of counties (farming, manufacturing, mining, government, services, and nonspecialized) had higher population growth, as did other types such as retirement or recreation areas, commuting counties, and those with persistently high poverty levels. Remarkably, all of these county types experienced some of their growth through net inmovement of people.

At the national level, 1.3 million more people moved from metro America into rural and small town areas than moved in the opposite direction in 1990-95—a pattern of domestic net population flow contrary to that of any other time in the 20th century except for the 1970's and possibly the first half of the 1930's. In metro areas, the domestic outflow was much more than compensated for by the net inmovement of 3.8 million people from other countries. Nonmetro areas received only 4 percent of the net influx of people from abroad. Immigration, plus a sizable excess of births over deaths, allowed the metro population to increase at a modestly faster rate than the nonmetro population in 1990-95, despite the net outflow of people to rural and small town locations.

The sources of growth in nonmetro counties were 50 percent from domestic immigration, 40 percent from the excess of births over deaths, and 10 percent from immigration from outside the United States, including the return of American citizens from abroad. By contrast, metro growth stemmed 75 percent from excess of births and 25 percent from all

Table 1

Population change by county growth types, 1980-95

Nonmetro people have been three times as likely to live in rapid-growth counties since 1990 as in declining ones

Type	Counties by 1990-95 growth	Population			Change		Change	
		1995	1990	1980	1990-95	1980-90	1995-95	1980-90
		Number	Thousands					Percent
Total	3,105	262,755	248,718	226,542	14,037	22,176	5.6	9.8
Nonmetro	2,292	53,489	50,903	49,577	2,586	1,325	5.1	2.7
Declining	562	6,929	7,118	7,712	-188	-595	-2.6	-7.7
Modest growth	965	25,794	25,103	25,163	691	-59	2.8	-2
Rapid growth	765	20,765	18,682	16,702	2,084	1,979	11.2	11.9
Metro	813	209,266	197,816	176,965	11,451	20,851	5.8	11.8

Notes: 1993 metro definition. Modest growth is below the national average of 5.6 percent during 1990-95; rapid growth is above it. Number of counties reflects the aggregation of Virginia independent cities with their counties of origin.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

migration, with over 30 percent of growth from international exchange offset by domestic outmigration to nonmetro places. Thus, nonmetro and metro America continue to differ widely in their components of population change, but in a manner different from the past when so much farm-to-city movement took place.

A Majority of Growth Is Going into Rapid-Growth Areas

A third of the nonmetro counties grew at a rate higher than the Nation as a whole (5.6 percent) from 1990-95, and such counties had three-fourths of all nonmetro growth. These counties are most prevalent in a broad swath of mountains and interstitial plateaus and valleys extending from the northwest Rockies to the Mexican border. Other smaller but more densely settled areas of above-average population growth are found in the Ozarks, the lake country of the Upper Midwest, in Florida, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and on the outskirts of thriving metro areas.

The most rapidly growing county type consisted of counties with amenities that attract retired people sufficiently to be classed as retirement destinations (13.8-percent increase). Although these counties had just 10 percent of the nonmetro population in 1990, they attracted 46 percent of the net migration into nonmetro areas. It is important to note, though, that most of the growth in retirement counties consists of young and middle-aged people, attracted to the same amenities that appeal to retirees.

The broad middle range of nonmetro counties that experienced growth at a slower pace (less than 5.6 percent), contains nearly half of the nonmetro population. The economies of these counties typically depend on manufacturing or government jobs, or are unspecialized, with employment in various industries, such as a mix of manufacturing, services, and commercial farming. In the 1980's, these counties had seen a slight overall loss of population.

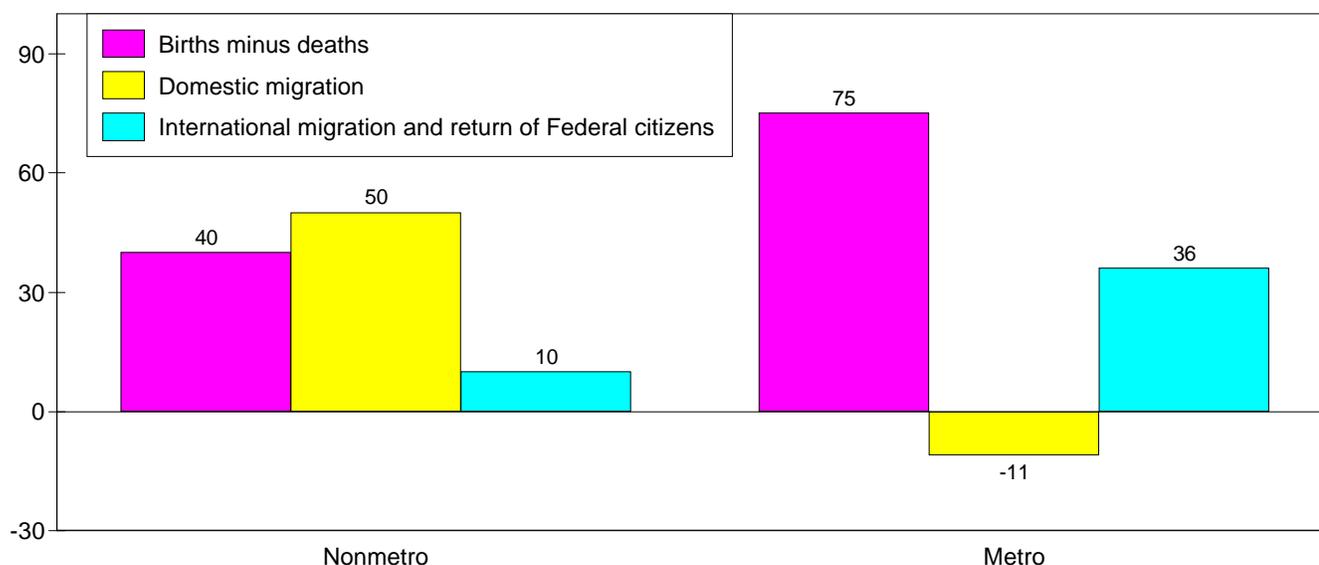
Despite the general broad rebound of rural population growth, about 25 percent of the nonmetro counties had population decline. In most cases, the loss was a continuation of past trends, but with relatively modest rates of recent loss compared with the past. The declining counties averaged only half the size of growing counties (less than 13,000 residents vs. 25,000), and during 1990-95 less than a seventh of the nonmetro population lived in areas where the population was decreasing. These areas are located disproportionately in the Great Plains and Corn Belt, plus the Mississippi Delta and scattered mining districts. Half of them are experiencing more deaths than births.

Figure 1

Sources of population growth, 1990-95

Nonmetro population increase has depended primarily on migration, while most metro growth has come from the surplus of births over deaths

Percent



Source: Bureau of the Census.

Despite Growth, “Natural Decrease” of Population Has Become More Common

One of the more notable features of nonmetro population change since 1990 is the large number of counties estimated to have had more deaths than births, despite the national rebound in nonmetro growth. The existence of “natural decrease” of population is not new in rural areas that have seen many young people of childbearing age move away or that have had retired people move in. It has been observed in some areas since the 1960’s, but it has become more common. By 1990-95, a fourth of nonmetro counties had this condition. Usually it stems from a shortage of young families rather than an influx of retirees.

In counties having outmigration, natural decrease has been typically only a minor element in overall population loss. But, with rural outmigration having widely moderated or even ended in so many places since 1990, there are about 100 current or former farming-dependent counties in which natural decrease is now the principal source of remaining decline or more than offsets a modest trend of net immigration. Where inmovement of working-age people occurs, such growth will act to correct the distortion of rural age composition over time by buttressing the childbearing population. But communities do not drift into an excess of deaths over births overnight, and it will take a period of sustained inmovement to end it.

Regional Data Continue to Highlight the West

Among major regions, nonmetro population growth continued to be much faster in the West than elsewhere, with an 11.8-percent rise from 1990 to 1995. With this high pace of growth, the West acquired a third of all nonmetro increase despite having just 14 percent of the Nation’s nonmetro residents in 1990. A majority of this growth has gone into the thinly settled Mountain States.

The Central region, which consists primarily of the Great Plains and Corn Belt, had the slowest growth, 2.0 percent. In the past, an increase this low over 5 years would have implied some net outmovement. But the margin of births over deaths is now so low in most Central States that the 2.0-percent increase was reached only with some net immigration. The North

Table 2
Regional population change, 1980-95
All regions have had net migration of people into nonmetro areas since 1990

Region	Population			Change		Net migration		Net migration rate	
	1995	1990	1980	1990-95	1980-90	1990-95	1980-90	1990-95	1980-90
	Thousands			Percent		Thousands		Percent	
United States:									
Metro	209,266	197,816	176,965	5.8	11.8	2,875	6,576	1.5	3.7
Nonmetro	53,489	50,903	49,577	5.1	2.7	1,554	-1,371	3.1	-2.8
North:									
Metro	76,451	74,959	72,744	2.0	3.0	-925	-1,803	-1.2	-2.5
Nonmetro	12,955	12,484	12,098	3.8	3.2	241	-183	1.9	-1.5
Central:									
Metro	22,758	21,744	20,711	4.7	5.0	73	-717	.3	-3.5
Nonmetro	10,698	10,492	10,926	2.0	-4.0	108	-856	1.0	-7.8
South:									
Metro	60,613	55,628	46,855	9.0	18.7	2,590	4,531	4.7	9.7
Nonmetro	21,685	20,627	20,037	5.1	2.9	645	-421	3.1	-2.1
West:									
Metro	49,444	45,485	36,655	8.7	24.1	1,137	4,564	2.5	12.5
Nonmetro	8,152	7,299	6,516	11.7	12.0	560	90	7.7	1.4

Note: See appendix for definitions of regions, p. 53.
 Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

and the South had population growth rates in rural and small town areas that were below the rate of the total U. S. population, but were well above their growth in the 1980's.

The only subregional exceptions to the overall pattern of more rapid nonmetro gain in the 1990's than in the 1980's were California, Hawaii, and the Florida Peninsula, where growth levels had fallen but were still high by national standards, and New England, where both metro and nonmetro growth was very modest, in keeping with the economic slowdown there.

1970's Redux

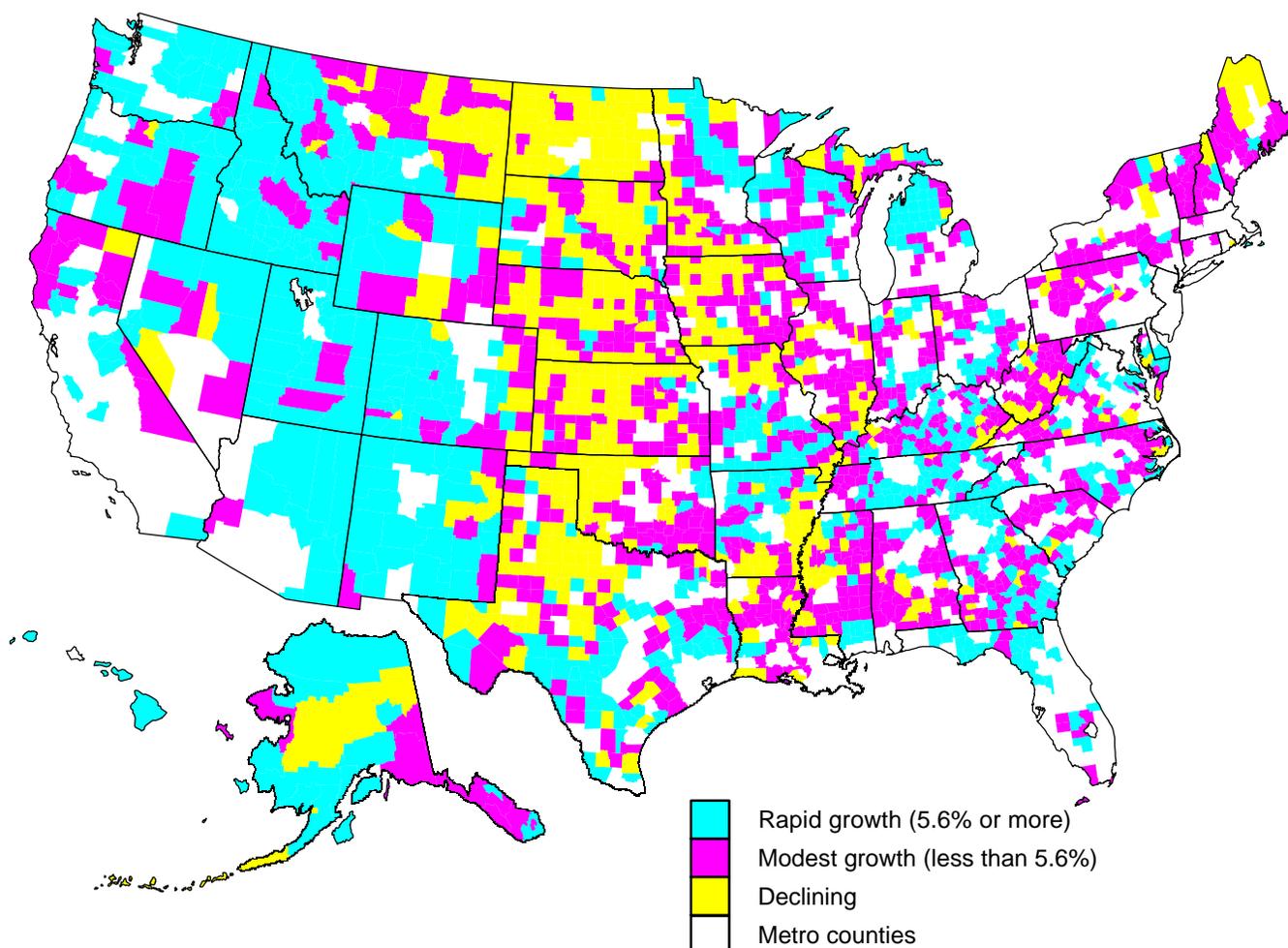
By 1994, the nonmetro population trend was becoming increasingly similar to that of the "rural turnaround" years of the 1970's, and the data for 1995 add to this analogy. It is obvious from the location of new growth that amenity-based considerations are important driving forces, as is continued metro sprawl. But nonmetro counties have also had superior rates of job growth, especially during 1991-93, when metro areas were in or just recovering from the predominantly metro recession of the early 1990's. Employment data show that this job growth advantage ended by mid-1995.

From other sources including the article that follows, we know that the shift to nonmetro net immigration from 1990-94 came as much from reduced outflow of people to the metro

Figure 2

Nonmetro population change, 1990-95

A third of all nonmetro counties grew faster than the Nation as a whole, but a fourth declined



Note: National average growth for this period was 5.6 percent.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

areas as it did from a stepped-up inflow of newcomers. Whether rural outmovement will swell again if metro America resumes a superior rate of job opportunity remains to be seen. But for the moment, rural and small town growth is widespread and was on a par with metro growth by 1995. [*Calvin Beale, 202-219-0482, cbeale@econ.ag.gov*]