

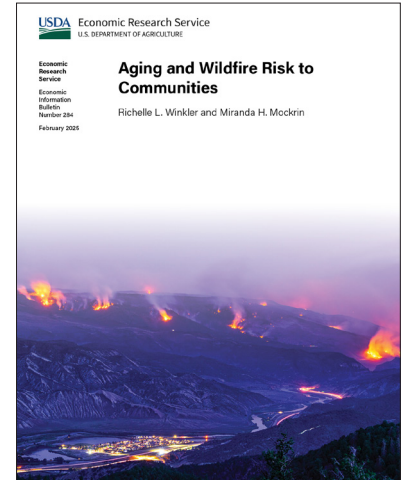


Aging and Wildfire Risk to Communities

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What Is the Issue?

Climate change, expanding housing development into wildlands, as well as legacies of fire suppression and forest management policies have led to increasing wildfire risks to communities. At the same time, the average age of the population in the United States has been increasing as the older population has grown while the proportion of younger people has contracted (i.e., population aging). These shifts may be felt especially in rural areas, where out-migration of young adults, in-migration of older people, and aging in place work together to change the population composition. Older people face a greater relative risk of dying in a fire than younger people, and older people need different kinds of resources and programs tailored to their unique needs to mitigate the risk from wildfire. Information about the combination of aging and wildfire risk across U.S. States, counties, and fire management areas might help in designing wildfire risk reduction programs to address populations at a higher risk or to incorporate fire preparedness into aging services. Older people in rural areas may be particularly vulnerable due to limited emergency response infrastructures and social and geographic isolation.



What Did the Study Find?

This report examined the extent to which (and where) older people live in locations that are at higher risk of wildfire impacting their homes.

- In 2020, about 36 million people in the United States lived in census blocks with moderate-to-high wildfire risk or 11 percent of the population.
- Nearly all (87 percent) of the population growth in higher wildfire risk locations between 2010 and 2020 was among people over the age of 60, many of whom had been living in higher risk places for years and are growing older (i.e., aging in place).
- Compared with their share of the total population, older people disproportionately live in higher wildfire risk areas. Among those living in moderate-to-high risk locations in 2020, 9.8 million (27 percent) were over the age of 60 compared with 23 percent of the total U.S. population. For the population living in the highest risk places, 32 percent were over the age of 60.
- Over the next 20 years, increasing numbers of older people are expected to live in higher wildfire risk places as the population continues to age.

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- Larger numbers of older people exposed to wildfire risk lived in rural areas, retirement destinations, and wildland-urban interface areas compared with urban areas. For instance, 30–35 percent of residents in high-risk and highest risk rural locations were over the age of 60 in 2020 (1.5 million people).
- U.S. States with the highest number of older people living in moderate-to-high risk locations include California (1.4 million), Florida (1.3 million), and Texas (1.1 million).
- U.S. counties and firesheds (forest management units used by the United States Forest Service) with greater numbers of older people living in moderate-to-high risk locations are found across much of the West and the coastal Southeast, as well as in parts of Oklahoma, New Jersey, Arkansas, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This study was based on matching data on age from the decennial Census 2010 and Census 2020 with data on wildfire risks to homes from the Wildfire Risk to Communities dataset (Scott et al., 2024). This report used census blocks as the unit of analysis. Blocks are the smallest unit for which census data are available, and using this small geographic size made it possible to identify where population aging and wildfire risk coincide with the most geographic specificity possible. Data on wildfire risk for 30-meter-by-30-meter units were averaged within census blocks using a geographic information system, classified as low, moderate, high, or highest wildfire risk based on that average risk score, and then overlapped with census data on age. Most (84 percent) of blocks were classified as low risk. Each block was defined as rural, urban and/or part of the wildland-urban interface, which made it possible to summarize results by rurality. Finally, block level data were aggregated to examine the concurrence of risk and age by State, county, and fireshed (Winkler et al., 2025).