# Introduction

A dramatic jump in births in mid-1946 marked the beginning of the baby boom, as couples affected by the Great Depression and separated by war began to make up for lost family-building time. Widespread economic prosperity and family-friendly government programs helped sustain high birth rates for nearly 20 years—an unforeseen interruption in long-term U.S. fertility decline. Births surpassed 4 million per year between 1954 and 1963, and the fertility rate surged to over 3.5 children per woman (fig. 1). Today's 83 million baby boomers, ranging in age from 45 to 63 years old, represent 28 percent of the total U.S. population. Never before has such a large share of the U.S. workforce approached retirement. By comparison, 42 million people, or 17 percent of the population, were in these middle-aged years in 1990.

Figure 1
U.S. live births and total fertility rate
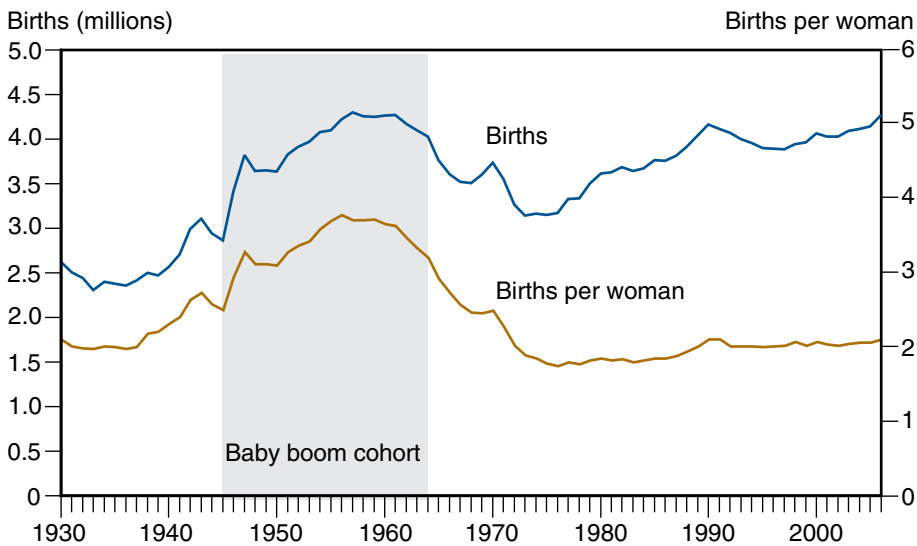
Note: Total fertility rate (births per woman) is the sum of age-specific birth rates for women ages 15-44.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the National Center for Health Statistics.

Between 2010 and 2020, "boomers" will make more than 200 million residential moves. Most moves will be within or between metropolitan (metro) regions, where 80 percent of this cohort now reside. However, boomers also will increase the size and reshape the demographic character of rural areas and small towns throughout the country. Older boomers are moving through a life-cycle stage marked by peak employment earnings, the end of child-rearing duties, changing housing preferences, and early retirement options. Quality-of-life considerations have begun to replace employment-related factors in decisions about when to move and where to live. Boomers as a group have already demonstrated, at times, a higher preference than older or younger cohorts for staying in or moving to nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties. Demographically speaking, they are poised to move rural and small-town America in new directions.

This report focuses on age-specific population change at the county level, particularly on change caused by net migration—the difference between the number of people moving into and out of a county. The research has two parts:

1. Analysis of age-specific net migration rates during the 1990s (the most recent data), which shows how county-level patterns of net migration shift with age.

2. Population projections for the baby boom cohort for different types of metro and nonmetro areas (see appendix). The projections are constructed by asking: What will happen to future population trends if age-specific net migration patterns measured in the 1990s stay the same?

The volume of migration flows into and out of rural areas shifts periodically, sometimes quite suddenly, as was the case with the "rural turnaround" of the 1970s and its subsequent demise (Beale, 1975; Johnson and Fuguitt, 2000). However, migration tends to persistently favor counties with specific attributes—employment opportunities, scenic amenities, reasonable real estate prices, proximity to large cities, among others (Cromartie, 2001). Age patterns of those migrating fluctuate within relatively narrow confines from one decade to the next, especially for older age groups (Johnson et al., 2005). Thus, recent net migration rates can be used to project a range of future population outcomes for different types of counties.

Counties are the unit of analysis because they are the smallest geographic unit used to report age-specific, net migration. The selection of counties characterized as "rural and small town" for purposes of this study includes those designated as nonmetro. Metro counties are divided into two groups— those that contain a predominantly urban core population and those on the periphery that are predominantly rural in character (see box, "County Classifications Used in This Report").

County Classifications Used in This Report

The classification of counties as "rural and small town" for purposes of this analysis includes a four-level typology that begins with counties designated as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget in 1993 (based on data from the 1990 Census). Projections for 2000 and beyond are based on counties considered to be nonmetro for the 2000 Census. Nonmetro counties are defined as those counties lying outside urban cores of 50,000 people or more and their immediately adjacent commuting zones. For more information on how metro and nonmetro areas are defined, see the Measuring Rurality briefing room on the ERS website: www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rurality/newdefinitions/

We further divide nonmetro counties into those that are adjacent to metro areas and those that are more remote, based on the ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Code (Beale, 2004): www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rurality/ruralurbcon/

We also divide metro counties into two types: those that include the urban core of the region and those on the periphery ("rural metro"), in which a majority of the population reside in census-designated rural territory. The official, census definition of rural includes people living in open countryside and places with populations less then 2,500. Most U.S. counties contain both rural and urban populations, whether or not they are classified as metro or nonmetro. ERS's Measuring Rurality briefing room includes a comparison of rural and nonmetro populations: www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rurality/whatisrural/

Most of the 262 rural-metro counties included here were newly reclassified from nonmetro to metro in 1993. Many are in the middle of a transition to a landscape dominated economically and socially by suburbs but retain much of their rural character (Cromartie, 2006). They were among the most rapidly growing counties in the country in the 1990s. We include them in the regression analysis and discussion of results because they have been quintessential migration destinations for boomers seeking both rural "quality of life" and access to urban amenities.