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Counting Cornhuskers: Population Trends in Nebraska

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Inspecting the components of population change (births, deaths, domestic migration, and international migration) is important to understand the reasons for observed population trends. Due to historically low fertility rates in the United States, domestic and international migration is now essential to determining whether a state population will flourish or wither.

Percent Change

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Census), between 2010 and 2020, the population in Nebraska grew by more than 7 percent to over 1.961 million people. However, in that same 10-year span, 69 counties in the state lost population, and only eight counties grew by more than 5 percent. At the time of the 2020 Census count, Douglas and Lancaster counties increased by 13 percent in 10 years, while Sarpy County saw a 20 percent population increase since 2010.

Historically, the United States population has increased by an average of 1.4 percent each year since the 1910 Census. Nebraska has grown more slowly than the nation since then, by 0.6 percent annually. However, between 2010 and 2020, the U.S. and Nebraska populations increased at the same rate: 7.4 percent (0.7 percent annually).

Urbanization

Examining the year 1900 in Nebraska, more residents lived in rural counties compared to metropolitan (metro Madison, L

Adams counties), leaving just 28 percent of the Nebraska population (less than 550,000) residing in the remaining 82 counties.

Illustrating recent urban migration inside the state, from 2010 to 2020, nearly 4,500 Nebraskans per year (net migration) moved from non-metropolitan counties to one of five "core metro" counties: Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Hall, and Dakota. The Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR) predicts that the urbanization trend will continue through the year 2040.

Natural Change

Natural change, or natural increase, is defined as the difference between the number of births and deaths occurring in a population. The rate of natural increase refers to the difference between the number of live births and deaths as a proportion of an area's population expressed as a number per 1,000 people or as a percentage.