

Net Migration Projections, 2000-20

Population projections answer “what if” questions, in this case, about future population change from net migration. Post-2000 data on age-specific, net migration will not be available at the county level for several years. Even so, it is possible to project population growth from net migration in rural and small-town areas, for this decade and the next, using data from the 1990s. Net migration projections are combined with projected estimates of the overall size of age groups and the effect of immigration to project the size of future baby boom cohorts in different types of metro and nonmetro counties (see appendix for more details).

Migration flows between counties are affected by employment trends, housing prices, and other factors subject to much uncertainty, especially given current economic conditions and prospects. Also, baby boomers may pioneer new migration paths that differ from those of preceding generations as they age into retirement. Projections provide useful analytical and planning information, but they must be considered within a probable range of outcomes. As is typical of most population projections, three scenarios are calculated here representing high, medium, and low possibilities in terms of nonmetro population change for baby boomers during this decade and the next.

Projected Population Change from Net Migration of Baby Boomers

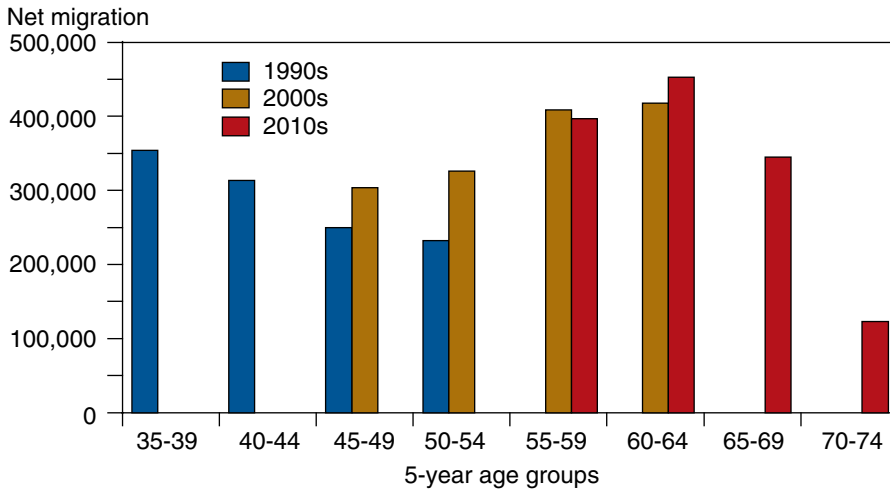
Net migration increased the number of baby boomers living in nonmetro areas by 1.1 million during 1990-2000. If baby boomers continue to demonstrate an increased proclivity for living in nonmetro areas, as they did in the 1970s and 1990s, but otherwise follow the same patterns of migration as their predecessors, their presence in nonmetro locations will increase by 1.5 million in this decade and 1.6 million during the 2010s. If they do not continue to exhibit an increased preference for nonmetro areas but simply follow the patterns of older cohorts during the 1990s, nonmetro population will grow from net migration of boomers by 1.2 million and 1.1 million for this decade and the next. A midrange projection can be calculated as the average between these two scenarios—1.3 and 1.4 million, respectively.

These projections represent a substantial increase in nonmetro population growth for the age groups they represent—45-64 year olds in 2010 and 55-75 year olds in 2020—compared with growth in previous decades. For the baby boom cohort, the midrange projection for each decade represents an increase in the cohort’s already large gains during the 1990s, despite the sharp decline in the overall propensity to migrate as people age beyond their thirties and forties toward and into retirement.

Baby boomers span a wide range of ages and thus will experience their peak nonmetro population gains at different times (fig. 7). In the current decade, nonmetro population growth among 45-54 year olds will likely increase at a higher rate than in the 1990s because of the younger cohort of baby boomers, but older boomers will account for the bulk of net migration gains. In the coming decade, older boomers will be entering their early seventies, the age

Figure 7

Net migration of baby boomers in nonmetro counties by 5-year age groups, 1990-2000



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics.

when rates of net migration to nonmetro counties begin to fall. The impact of this decrease in migration for older age groups will be offset by strong net migration growth for the younger boomers, who will then be in their late fifties and early sixties.

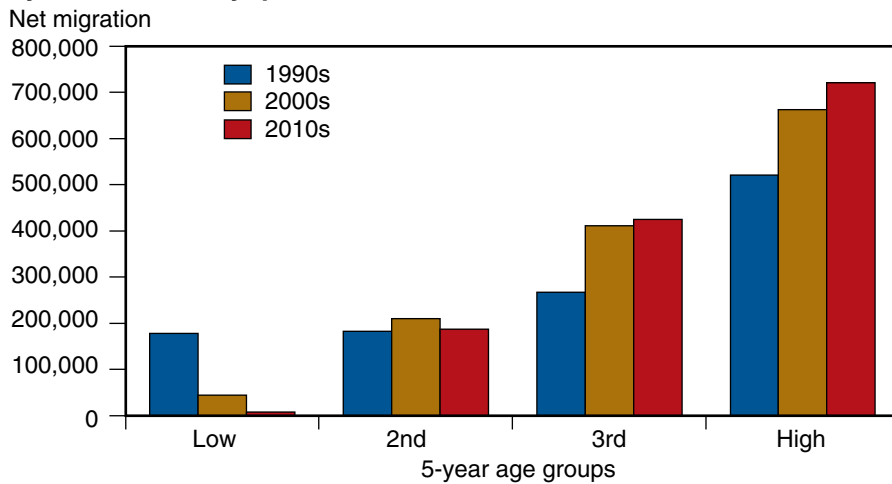
During 2000-20, baby boomer migration will likely contribute to a significant deconcentration of the population. Assuming the midrange projection between the two sets of outcomes described earlier, baby boomer net migration to core (predominantly urban) metro counties will switch from a gain of 979,000 during the 1990s to a loss of 643,000 during the 2010s. Fringe (predominantly rural) metro counties experienced the highest rates of baby boomer migration in the 1990s (a 17-percent increase, compared with a 9-percent increase for nonmetro counties) but are projected to see boomer migration decline to 8 percent during the 2010s. Fringe counties, along with adjacent nonmetro counties, received the bulk of past suburban expansion, but movement to metro fringe areas is a declining component of migration among baby boomers.

Measured in terms of relative change, populations in more remote (nonadjacent) nonmetro counties will experience the most dramatic changes from baby boomer migration. While nonadjacent counties gained 277,000 in population during the 1990s from baby boomer net migration, midrange projections indicate that boomer net migration will increase these counties' populations by nearly 362,000 and 383,000 during this decade and the next.

Whether adjacent to big cities or less accessible, counties with desirable physical attributes—pleasant climates, mountains, beaches, lakes—are likely to increase their already high share of baby boomer migration. Among the 500 nonmetro counties with the lowest ERS Natural Amenities Index scores, net migration is projected to decrease from 180,000 in the 1990s to near zero in the 2010s (fig. 8). At the same time, boomer net migration in the 500 counties with the highest scores will increase from 520,000 in the 1990s to 720,000 in the 2010s. Counties in the third highest quartile of amenity scores

Figure 8

Net migration of baby boomers in nonmetro counties by natural amenity quartiles, 1990-2000



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and vital statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics. Scenic amenities were measured using the ERS Natural Amenities Index (McGranahan, 1999).

are also projected to experience a large increase in baby boomer population during this decade and the next, compared with their increases in the 1990s.

Differences between projected and actual population outcomes are potentially greater for rapidly growing counties, such as those with scenic amenities and booming recreation-based economies. In the past, net migration has declined as such areas “fill up,” often in response to higher housing prices. Counties in the third quartile, with attractive physical features but possibly not the most desirable qualities, could gain in attractiveness among boomers in reaction to this filling up of the highest quartile counties. The current mortgage foreclosure crisis, particularly strong in recreation towns that experienced a recent housing boom, creates uncertainty about filling up and future demographic trends in scenic areas.

Projected Impacts of Baby Boom Migration on the Nonmetro Retirement-Age Population

Except under the most dire future economic and housing market conditions, baby boom migration will increase the size of rural America’s retirement-age population. Assuming a midrange projection, the rural population of 55-74 year olds will increase by two-thirds, from 8.6 million to 14.2 million, between 2000 and 2020 (table 1). The overall rate of growth among this age group has probably more than tripled to 30 percent during the current decade, compared with growth in the 1990s, and will remain close to 30 percent in the next decade. Without net migration, the rate of growth for this age group would drop by about half, 18 percent in this decade and 15 percent during 2010-20.

The coming increase in nonmetro populations age 55-74 will vary geographically. These trends are projected to affect not just traditional retirement regions in the South and West but nonmetro areas throughout the country. The biggest absolute increases will be in the South, where the nonmetro population age 55-74 is projected to increase by almost 2.5 million between

Table 1

**Recent and projected nonmetro population change among
55-74 year olds by region**

U.S. region	Nonmetro population ages 55-74				Population growth rate		
	1990	2000	2010	2020	1990s	2000s	2010s
	<i>Millions</i>				<i>Percent</i>		
Northeast	0.886	0.925	1.276	1.686	4.4	37.9	32.1
Midwest	2.633	2.685	3.235	3.944	2.0	20.5	21.9
South	3.480	3.868	4.972	6.272	11.2	28.5	26.1
West	0.957	1.152	1.708	2.251	20.3	48.2	31.8
Total	7.957	8.631	11.191	14.152	8.5	29.7	26.5

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics.

2000 and 2020. The largest percentage increase will be in the nonmetro Northeast, which is projected to grow slightly faster than the nonmetro West during the 2010s. The Midwest is also projected to increase in population growth rates among this age group, from just 2 percent in the 1990s to over 20 percent in both the current and next decades.