LRO SNAPSHOT

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# Counting Cornhuskers: Population Trends in Nebraska

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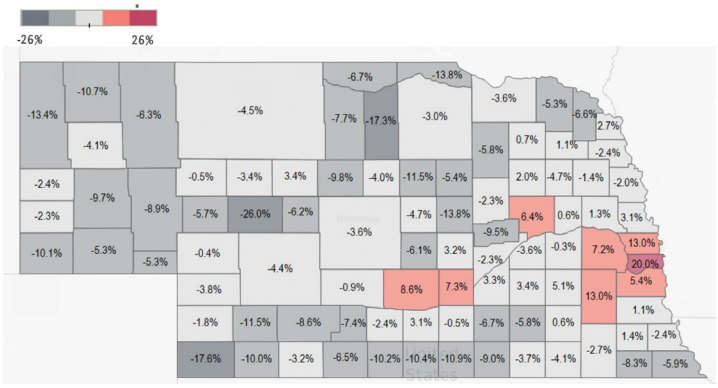
Inspecting the components of population change (births, deaths, domestic migration, and international migration) is important to understand the reasons for observed population trends. Due to historically low fertility rates in the United States, domestic and international migration is now essential to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

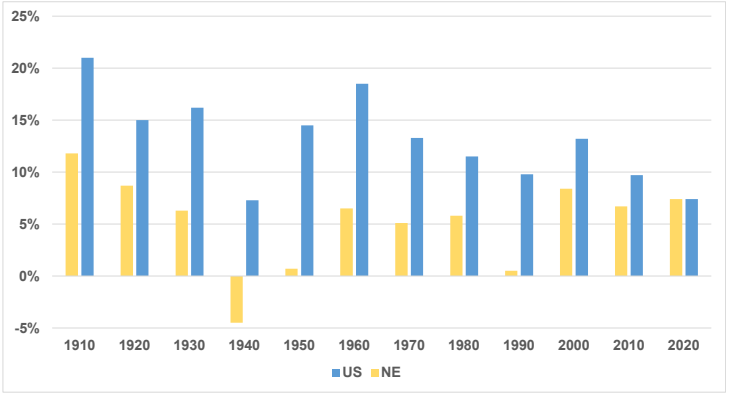
Historically, the United States population has increased by an average of 1.4 percent each year since the 1910 Census. Nebraska has grown more slowly than the nation since then, by 0.6 percent annually. However, between 2010 and 2020, the U.S. and Nebraska populations increased at the same rate: 7.4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

**Percent Change in Population by County (2010-2020)**




Source: U.S. Census Bureau via CPAR

**U.S. and NE Percent Change in Population (1910-2020)**




Source: U.S. Census Bureau

## Urbanization

Examining the year 1900 in Nebraska, more residents lived in rural counties compared to metropolitan (metro) counties. By the 1980s, a majority of the state population resided in metro areas, and current predictions indicate a continued increase in the share of the state's population located in metro counties.

In 2020, nearly 62 percent of the population in Nebraska resided in just one of five counties (Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Hall, and Buffalo). Furthermore, the eleven most populated counties in Nebraska held more than 72 percent of the state's population (including Dodge, Scotts Bluff, Madison, Lincoln, Platte, and 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.

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***In a 2023 presentation to the Legislature's Planning Committee, Dr. Josie Schafer provided members with demographic information and population projections. Dr. Schafer is the Director of the Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR) at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. CPAR is the designated State Data Center for Nebraska.***

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In a recent analysis of Census data, Pew Charitable Trust researchers examined annual and long-term population change trends. From 2008 to 2023, the national average for growth due to natural change was 0.35 percent, while Nebraska saw a more robust natural increase in that time: 0.5 percent. Annual natural increase data from 2023 also shows that Nebraska is naturally growing faster (0.29 percent) than the U.S. overall (0.15 percent).

## Migration

CPAR estimates that, from 2010 to 2022, approximately 45,000 people moved from other states to Nebraska annually. During the same period, however, an estimated 50,000 people left Nebraska each year, which resulted in a net domestic migration loss of nearly 6,000 residents in 2021 and over 4,000 in 2022. According to CPAR, the number of people migrating from outside the U.S. to Nebraska each year accounts for a consistent, albeit small, source of population growth. However, the annual count of international migrants moving into Nebraska is much smaller compared to other states.

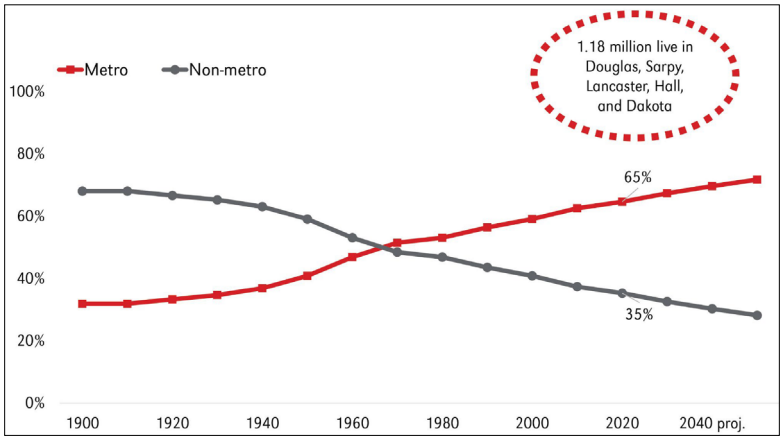
## Population Estimates

Since the 2020 Census count, estimates indicate that the Nebraska population has increased slightly. The Census approximates that Nebraska's population increased to 1.978 million as of July 2023. According to these estimates, the state population increased only 0.8 percent in the three years since 2020, or 0.2 percent annually.

## Population Projections

Nationally, and in Nebraska, population growth rates have recently slowed compared to the robust rate increases in the thirty years between 1990 and 2020. Generally, a conservative estimate of population growth is a 1 percent annual increase.

**Metropolitan and Non-Metro Population in Nebraska (1900 to 2040 Projections)**




Source: University of Nebraska-Omaha CPAR

**2030 Projected Population by Age Group**

| Age Group | 2021 Population | 2030 Projected Population | Percent Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Less than 20 | 537,678 | 542,895 | 1.0% |
| 20-44 | 644,583 | 643,473 | -0.2% |
| 45-64 | 458,598 | 448,682 | -2.2% |
| 65 and Over | 322,833 | 418,738 | 29.7% |
| **Total** | **1,963,692** | **2,053,788** | **4.6%** |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau & CPAR via Nebraska Department of Labor

Between 1990 and 2020, the population of Nebraska increased by more than 24 percent: 1.578 million to 1.961 million people. Increases during this time were between 0.6 and 0.9 percent annually.

CPAR estimates that between 2020 and the year 2050, the population in Nebraska will grow by less than 4 percent in total. At this rate, the population of Nebraska would increase by only 70,000 people to 2.031 million residents overall. CPAR projects that annual population increases from 2020 to 2050 will average 0.1 percent, less than Nebraska's historical annual growth rate (0.6 percent).

## Projections by Age Group

The Nebraska Department of Labor (Labor) and CPAR recently released age group projection data in the 2023 Nebraska Economic Insight and Outlook report. By 2030, CPAR expects the aged 65 and over population in Nebraska to grow by nearly 30 percent. At the other end of the age spectrum, CPAR projects that the number of residents younger than 20 will increase by less than one percent by 2030.

## Looking Ahead

As of the last Census count, the U.S. had the third-largest population in the world (behind China and India). In 2020, Nebraska was ranked 37 in total population among U.S. states. Between 2020 and 2023, the Cornhusker State ranked 24 in population growth among other states.

The Legislative Research Office expects the Census to release additional breakdowns of the 2023 population estimates in May and June. The Census will release 2024 population estimates data in December of this year. Significant changes to population estimates may prompt CPAR to adjust its population projections. However, the national trend of decelerated population rate increases appears to continue in Nebraska.