

### Key Takeaways

- Rural Pennsylvania is in a prolonged period of population stagnation.
- Rural population stagnation is unlikely to change soon because of an aging population and declining birth rates.
- Population stagnation has significant implications for rural schools and the labor force as well as community organizations.
- The population gap between rural and urban Pennsylvania is widening. Closing this gap will be difficult.

*The 2021 Rural Policy Summit is a virtual series that brings together a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, nonprofit leaders, academic researchers, industry professionals, and others interested in rural, to learn about and discuss major policy issues that will affect rural Pennsylvania over the next 5 to 10 years.*

*The five topic areas for the series are education, health care, local services, economic development, and agriculture.*

*The first session, held on July 22 and highlighted here, provided a broad demographic overview of rural Pennsylvania, helping to set the stage for each monthly session that will begin in September and wrap up in January 2022.*

*The series is being cohosted by the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, Pennsylvania Rural Development Council, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Pennsylvania Downtown Center, and Philadelphia Federal Reserve Bank's Community Development and Regional Outreach Department.*

Scan QR code for the presentation, and session recording.



### Population Trends

In 2019, data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) showed that there were 3.4 million people living in rural Pennsylvania, or 26 percent of the state's total population. From 2010 to 2019, rural areas saw a 3 percent population decline. During this same period, urban Pennsylvania's population increased 2 percent.

The decline in Pennsylvania's rural population is not new. In 1920, 17 of Pennsylvania's 42 rural counties had more residents than in they did in 2019.

More recently, Pennsylvania's population appears to be bifurcating, as populations in the southeast and the Lehigh Valley regions have increased while those in the north and west have, with some exception, declined. This trend in the 1980s and has accelerated in recent years.

However, rural Pennsylvania is not alone. According to Census data, 60 percent of rural counties in the U.S. have experienced population decline from 2010 to 2019.

### Causes of Population Change

**Births and Deaths:** Population change is caused by a combination of four factors: births, deaths, in-migration, and out-migration. In rural Pennsylvania, the main driver of population decline has been declining birth rates and increasing death rates. Starting in 2000, rural counties had more deaths than births. In 2019, for example, there were nearly 7,600 more deaths than births in rural Pennsylvania. This trend is unlikely to change in the near future because, in part, the decline in the number of women in their child bearing years. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of rural women in their child bearing years (15 to 44) declined 9 percent. In urban areas there was a 1 percent decline.

**Migration:** According to Census data, in 2018, rural areas had a positive net migration of 4,182 people, meaning more people moved to rural areas than out of rural areas. This good news, however, is tempered by fact that a significant percentage (31 percent to 33 percent) of the population moving to and out of rural Pennsylvania are college students. Once these individuals are removed from the totals, rural areas end up with a net loss of 860 people. Despite this pattern, 64 percent of those who move out of rural Pennsylvania go to a county that is fewer than 100 miles away.

### Characteristics of Rural Pennsylvanians

**Aging Population:** On January 1, 2011, the first Baby Boomer (born 1946-1964) turned 65 years old. From 2011 to 2019, the number of rural Pennsylvanians age 65 years and older has gone from 17 percent of the population to 20 percent of the population.

During that same period the number of people under 20 years old went from 24 percent to 22 percent of the population. In 2019, 14 Pennsylvania counties had more people age 65 years and older than people under 20 years old. According to projections from the Pennsylvania State Data Center, by 2030, 47 counties in Pennsylvania will have more seniors than youth.

**Increase in the Number of People of Color:** In 2019, there were 306,000 people of color (anyone who is not non-Hispanic white) living in rural Pennsylvania, which was 9 percent of the population. From 2010 to 2019, number of people of color increased 19 percent. During this same period, the number of non-Hispanic whites decreased 4 percent. In 2019, the three largest percentages of people of color were Hispanic or Latino (36 percent), Black/African American (34 percent), and people of two or more races (17 percent).

### Impact of Demographic Change

**Education:** From the 2009-10 to 2019-20 school years, the number of students in Pennsylvania rural public school districts decreased 11 percent. Projections from the Pennsylvania Department of Education indicated that this trend will continue. From 2019-20 to 2029-30, the number of rural students is projected to decrease 7 percent. Similarly, the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions is projected to decrease 9 percent from 2010 to 2019.

**Economic Development:** In 2010, about 22 percent of the rural workforces was 55 years old and older; by 2020, 28 percent of the workforce were 55 years old and older. During this period, workers between the ages of 35 and 54 decreased 6 percentage points. The percentage of workers who are under 35 years old remained unchanged.

**Local Government:** In Pennsylvania there are 2,560 municipalities. In 2019, most of these municipalities (59 percent) had fewer than 2,500 residents. From 2010 to 2019, there was a 3 percent population decline in small municipalities and a 1 percent population increase in larger municipalities (2,500 or more residents).

**Health Care:** Among rural counties that lost population from 2010 to 2019, there was a 16 percent decrease in the number of hospital beds and a 16 percent decrease in the number of physician offices. From 2012 to 2019, there was a 14 percent increase in the number of rural residents enrolled in Medicare.

**Agriculture:** In 2017, Pennsylvania farmers were 54.8 years old, on average, or nearly 1 year younger than they were in 2007. In addition, the 2017 Census of Agriculture noted a sizable number of female producers (35 percent) and new and beginning farmers (26 percent). Overall, however, the

number of farms and the number of acres in farmland decreased in Pennsylvania between 2012 and 2017 (10 percent and 6 percent, respectively).

### Conclusions

- These are not new trends. Population decline started in the 1980s, and in recent years, has accelerated.
- Rural Pennsylvania is not alone. Most of rural America is experiencing the same trends in population as rural Pennsylvania.
- There are no quick fixes or silver bullets to address these trends.
- Don't despair. Rural Pennsylvania has a large population and many assets, including the quality of life, lower costs of living, and scenic beauty and heritage areas.

*Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial Censuses and the American Community Survey, 5-year Averages (various years) and the Public Use Microdata Sample (various years). Pennsylvania Departments of Health, Labor and Industry and Community and Economic Development.*

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