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Population Growth Trends in the Mountain States

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Population growth can be a driver of economic activity by increasing demand for goods and services and fostering employment opportunities in the process. Strong regional economic growth can also attract populations by drawing new residents with greater career opportunities. This issue of the *Rocky Mountain Economist* explores population trends since the 1990s across the nation and within the Mountain States. While some national trends were reflected in the states of Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming, each state also exhibited unique regional patterns of growth over the past two decades.

COMPONENTS OF POPULATION CHANGE IN THE MOUNTAIN STATES

Despite the severity of the recent recession, the population of the United States has grown at a fairly stable pace (Chart 1). The U.S. population has grown by more than 64 million people since 1990, or by about 26 percent. Population changes can be broken down into two primary components: natural changes and net migration. Natural increase occurs as births add to the population and

deaths subtract from it. Over the past year, births added approximately 1.26 percent to the national population, while deaths subtracted 0.8 percent. Therefore, on net, natural increase added just 0.46 percent to the U.S. population over the past year. Net international migration added an additional 0.28 percent leading to a total increase of 0.74 percent between July 1, 2011 and July 1, 2012.¹

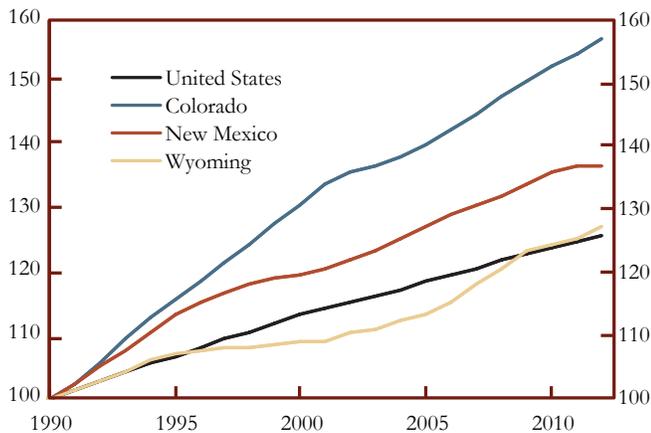
Colorado's and Wyoming's population growth rates have outpaced national gains over the past year, while New Mexico's population has grown more slowly than the nation on average. The populations of Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming grew 1.38 percent, 0.33 percent



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CHART I
Population Growth
Index 100 = 1990



Source: Census Bureau/Haver Analytics.

and 1.58 percent, respectively, over the past year. In all three states, natural increase provided a larger boost to population growth over the past year than in the United States, adding 0.65 percent in Colorado, 0.58 percent in New Mexico and 0.52 percent in Wyoming. However, the biggest difference between Mountain State and national population growth has come from differences in net migration. In Colorado, net migration increased the population by 0.73 percent, with 0.18 percent from net international migration and 0.54 percent from net domestic migration. A similar pattern emerges in Wyoming, where total net migration added 1.04 percent to the population and net domestic migration accounted for nearly all of that growth. In New Mexico, however, net migration subtracted 0.25 percent from the population. Net domestic out-migration more than offset an increase in net international in-migration to the state.

POPULATION GROWTH TRENDS SINCE 1990

Population growth at the national level has slowed since 1990. Between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. population grew 1.2 percent per year on average. This rate slowed to

0.9 percent per year on average between 2000 and 2007 and to 0.8 percent per year during the five years from the start of the recession in 2007 to 2012 (Table 1). The primary cause of slower growth has been a decline in the U.S. birth rate, which slowed from more than 1.6 percent per year in the early 1990s to less than 1.3 percent per year in recent years.²

TABLE 1
Average Annual Growth and 50-State Growth Ranking*

	1990 to 2000		2000 to 2007		2007 to 2012	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
United States	1.2%		0.9%		0.8%	
Colorado	2.7%	3	1.5%	9	1.5%	4
New Mexico	1.8%	12	1.3%	13	0.9%	23
Wyoming	0.9%	32	1.1%	19	1.5%	5

Source: Census Bureau/Haver Analytics.

* includes Washington D.C.

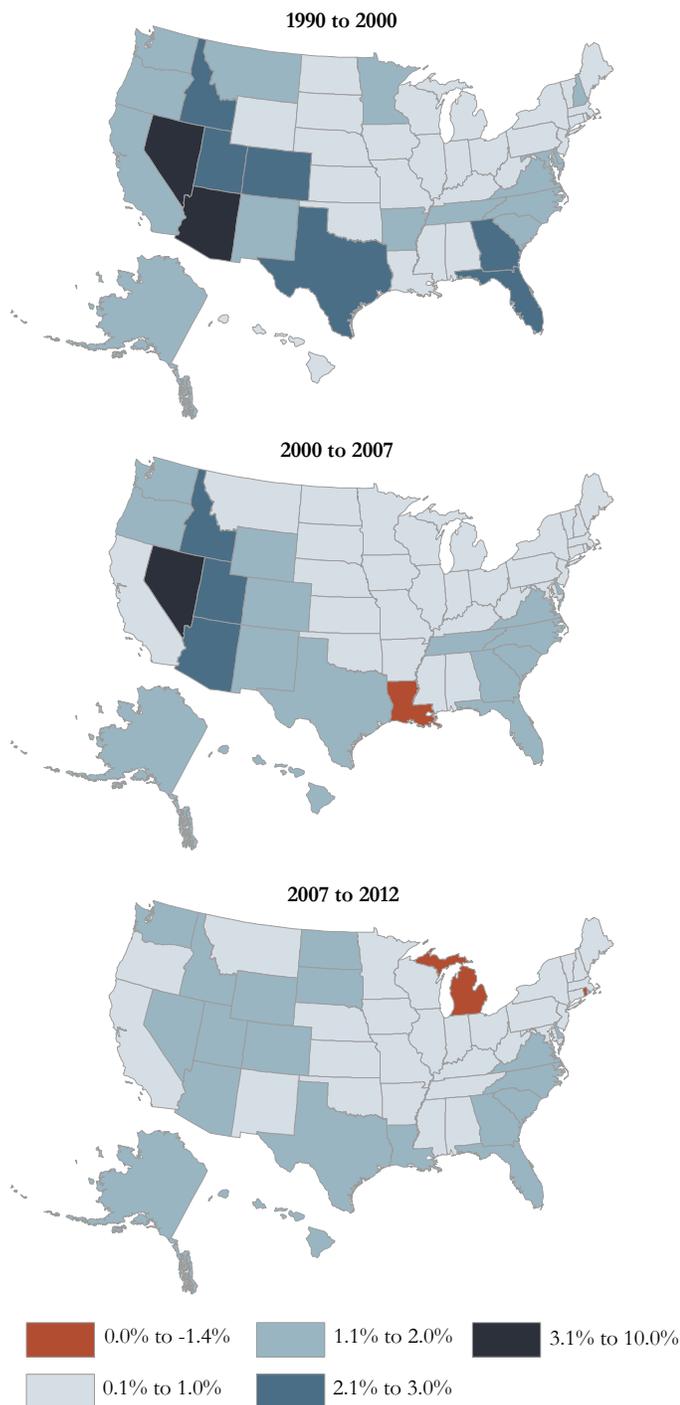
Colorado's population growth has ranked among the top ten fastest-growing states for the last two decades. Like the nation, Colorado saw its population growth slow from the 1990s to the 2000s, but growth remained well above the national pace. New Mexico also outpaced the nation in population growth over the past two decades, though growth has slowed considerably since the start of the recession. Wyoming followed a different trend over the past 22 years. The state's population grew at a slower pace than the nation's in the 1990s, followed by a period of accelerating growth between 2000 and 2007. Since the start of the recession, Wyoming has risen to the fifth fastest-growing state in the country, due primarily to its strong energy sector.

Across the United States, three major population trends emerged between 1990 and 2012 (Map 1). First, in most states, population growth slowed over time as a result of lower birth rates. In the 1990s, eight states grew



MAP I

Average Annual Population Growth by State



Source: Census Bureau/Haver Analytics.

faster than 2 percent per year on average. This was true of only two states in the seven years that followed, and since the start of the recession, no state has grown at an average annual rate greater than 2 percent.

A large inflow of net domestic migration also affected regional growth in the 1990s. Florida, Georgia, Arizona, Texas, and North Carolina experienced the largest number of domestic migrants during this decade. These states tended to be among the fastest growing in the nation.

Economic conditions have played a role in population growth across the United States since the recession started at the end of 2007. Five of the top seven fastest-growing states over this period have a large energy sector presence, including Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, Alaska, and North Dakota. Washington, D.C. has grown faster than all 50 states, in part because the federal government sector outperformed the private sector in the initial stages of the recession and recovery.

GROWTH ACROSS THE MOUNTAIN STATE COUNTIES

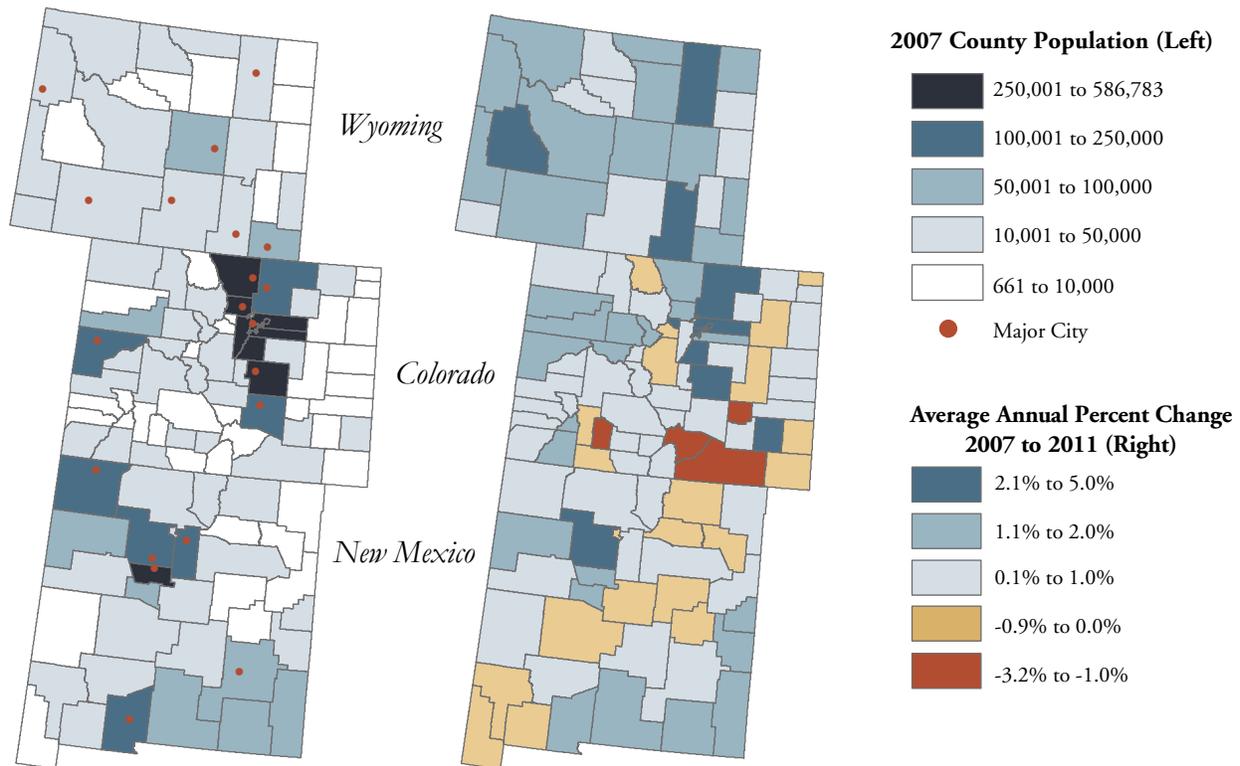
Consistent with national trends, growth has generally slowed across Mountain State counties since the 1990s.³ Population increases generally moderated over the past 20 years in the strongest-growth areas. Meanwhile, more recently, population declines have slowed and stabilized in many rural counties. Each of the three Mountain States exhibited unique variations across their counties, yet one consistent trend emerged across the states. Since 1990, Mountain State metropolitan areas continued to attract the largest number of new residents and experienced the strongest growth rates in percentage terms (Map 2).

In **Colorado**, metropolitan areas dominated population growth, while declines generally stabilized in the more rural areas of the state. Population growth



MAP 2

Mountain State County Population Trends



remained strongest in percentage terms and in terms of the number of new residents along Colorado’s Front Range after the start of the recession. In this increasingly metropolitan corridor, growth was strongest in Adams, Douglas, El Paso and Weld counties. These were the only counties to grow faster than 2 percent following the start of the recession aside from Bent and Gilpin counties.

Since the start of the recession, population losses stabilized along Colorado’s eastern plains counties, following nearly a decade of declines in these rural areas. Along the western slope, growth slowed in the years following the start of the recession with the cool-down of the natural gas industry. Population growth in the mountain counties also slowed with less regional tourism, construction and real

estate activity relative to the years prior to the recession.

Within the San Luis Valley region in the south central portion of Colorado, Huerfano and Las Animas counties experienced some of the largest population losses in recent years. These counties lost population at an average annual rate of -1.9 percent and -1.1 percent, respectively. Declines coincided with some of the highest double-digit unemployment rates across the counties in the state following the start of recession. Similar to many eastern plains counties, Huerfano County has seen its population decline since 2000. By contrast, in Las Animas County, declines began with the start of the recession.

Population growth has moderated across **New Mexico’s** counties since the start of the recession. Growth



slowed in the more populated and metropolitan counties of Doña Ana, Sandoval, San Juan, and Santa Fe. Many of the state's rural counties continued to lose residents, though at a slower pace than in the years leading up to the recession. Declines moderated along the diagonal patch of less densely populated counties extending from Hildalgo County in the southwest portion of the state to Union County in the northeastern portion of the state.

Sandoval County, home to the growing city of Rio Rancho, continued to experience the strongest growth after the recession. In the southeast corner of the state, population growth also picked up in Eddy County with regional oil and gas activity. Meanwhile, population growth slowed with the recent fall in natural gas prices in the natural gas-rich county of San Juan in the northwest corner of the state.

Most **Wyoming** counties have been adding residents over the past several decades, slowly growing the least-populated state in the nation. Since the start of the recession, all Wyoming counties grew at a positive average annual rate. Sublette and Campbell counties remained the fastest growing over this period, averaging 3.6 percent and 2.9 percent, respectively. Sublette County's population doubled between 1990 and 2011, growing from about 5,000 to more than 10,000 residents over the past two

decades. Campbell and Sublette counties' population growth has been influenced heavily by energy activity over the past several years. Natural gas-rich Natrona, Sweetwater, and Uinta counties grew at a slightly slower pace in the years leading up to the recession.

Growth in Albany County, home to the city of Laramie, accelerated in the years following the start of the recession. This county grew 2.2 percent on average since the start of the recession.

ENDNOTES

¹Census Bureau. Annual Population Estimates. Vintage 2012.

²Census Bureau. Annual Population Estimates. Vintage 2011 and 2012. and Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States; 2001.

³Census Bureau. Annual Population Estimates. Vintage 2011; and Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001. County-level population estimates are only available through 2011.



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