

Are We There Yet?

Changing Migration Patterns in Rural Maine and Implications for Long-Term Population Growth

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, rural Maine has found itself at an unexpected demographic crossroads. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state's rural counties experienced minimal or negative population growth, reflecting broader national trends of rural decline. Maine's demographic composition compounds these challenges, with many residents aging out of the workforce. However, the pandemic disrupted previous migration patterns, as an influx of new residents led to a notable increase in rural population growth. While this shift marked a sharp departure from pre-pandemic trends, questions remain about its long-term impact. This study uses population projections under three migration scenarios to consider the potential outcomes for rural areas. The findings have implications for policymakers, planners, and community leaders. If recent growth persists, it could help counteract workforce shortages and revitalize communities long challenged by demographic and economic decline. However, if it proves temporary, rural Maine may continue to grapple with an aging population and labor force contraction, exacerbating socioeconomic pressures.

Population projections offer a structured way to examine how population trends and patterns may influence future demographic composition. They are planning tools that help local leaders and residents think about what the future might hold under certain assumptions.

To examine the role migration trends may play in the future of rural Maine, we present original cohort-component population projections. These projections were conducted under three migration scenarios (a baseline, a high in-migration, and a low in-migration scenario), where we posit the potential implications of higher and lower in-migration relative to a baseline projection on our rural communities. Our

results highlight how sensitive rural futures are to even slight demographic shifts.

INTRODUCTION

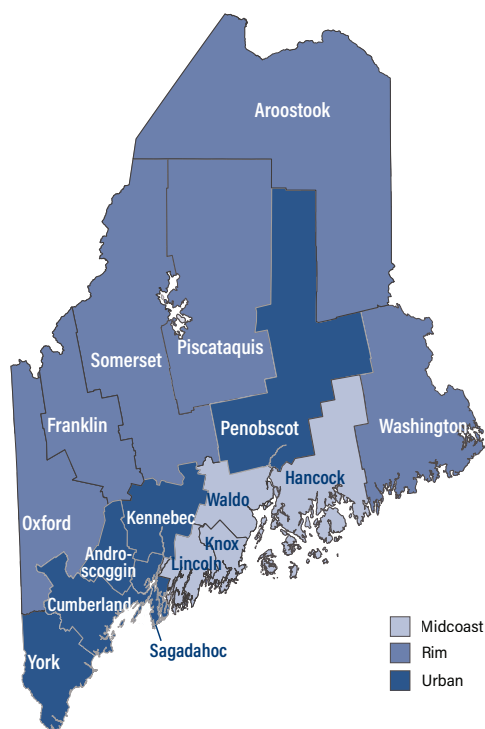
Change is measured slowly in rural Maine. When population decline, aging, and economic uncertainty have shaped daily life for decades, progress is marked by one new year-round family or business at a time. Each new component suggests the possibility of community renewal or revitalization. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted previous migration patterns, and rural areas experienced a notable increase in population growth. As a result, communities across Maine were quietly asking: what's changing, what might come next, and (when thinking about progress down the road to revitalization) are we there yet?

To understand where a region or its economy is headed, you need to understand its people. Demographic trends shape the labor force, drive consumer demand, and influence everything from housing markets to public services. Population patterns are the engine of local economies and community life.

BACKGROUND

The first task is to define what we mean by *rural*. There are many ways to define rural areas. In this article, we begin with the four urban statistical areas (three metropolitan and one micropolitan) that the US Office of Management and Budget identified for Maine. When referring to *urban* counties, we are referring to the six counties that fall into one of those four statistical areas (Cumberland, York, Sagadahoc, Androscoggin, Penobscot, and Kennebec). All other Maine counties are considered rural and are further segmented into the midcoast counties (Lincoln, Knox, Waldo, and Hancock) and the rim counties (Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Piscataquis, Aroostook, and Washington) (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Map of Maine Counties



We also recognize that Maine is a large state with large counties, so there are degrees of urban and degrees of rural within each county. Penobscot County is perhaps the clearest example of this: the southern portion of the county includes Bangor, the third largest city in Maine, while the northern portion of the county is comprised of unorganized territories. However, for this analysis, we are limiting our discussion to the county level. Given the challenges associated with both gathering the necessary data and defining rural areas in an alternative manner, a sub-county analysis of migration trends and demographic projections was beyond the scope of this piece. Throughout this paper, all population data are drawn from the US Census Bureau's decennial census and Population Estimates Program unless otherwise noted.

Historical Trends

When looking at Maine as a whole, the state's population growth rate has nearly always lagged the rest of the country's. At the time of statehood in 1820, Maine was the 12th most populous state, with a population of 298,335—this was about 3 percent of the total US population. In its first 100 years, Maine's population grew over 150 percent, while over the same period US population

grew by 1,000 percent. Between 1920 and 2020, Maine's growth rate slowed to 77 percent, while the US grew by over 200 percent. As of 2020, Maine constituted less than 0.5 percent of the total US population.

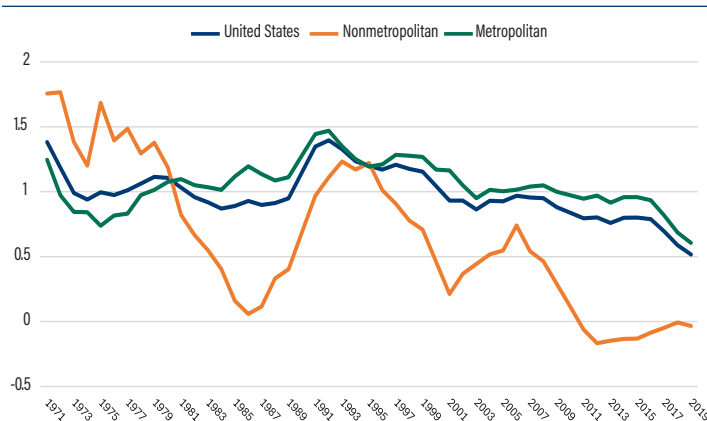
In 1900, when the county boundaries in Maine settled into what they largely are today, just over half (54 percent) of the state's population lived in what are now considered urban counties. One hundred and twenty years later, that share had risen to 69 percent. Maine's urban counties experienced 150 percent population growth from 1900 to 2020, while rural counties grew by just 33 percent. These patterns mirror the broader rural-urban divide observed across the United States, with rural regions generally growing more slowly, or shrinking, compared to urban areas (Johnson and Lichter 2019). One of the exceptions to this pattern was the *back-to-the-land* movement in the 1960s and 1970s, when baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) around the country moved out of urban areas and into more rural areas like much of Maine (Beale 1975), as evidenced by the spike in non-metropolitan growth rates in the 1970s (Figure 2). Following this peak, nonmetropolitan growth rates exhibited considerable volatility, oscillating between near-zero and more positive growth through the 1990s and 2000s before turning negative in 2011 (representing population decline). Places with smaller populations tend to see greater volatility in terms of percentage changes partly because it takes a smaller number of people (in absolute terms) to create a large percentage change and, as noted by Johnson and Lichter (2019), partly because economic ups and downs can cause large migration shifts in rural areas. But not all rural counties are alike, and even within Maine, important distinctions have emerged between the rim and midcoast counties.

Sixty-five percent of rural Mainers lived in the rim counties in 1900. By 2020, that share had declined slightly to 60 percent. This decline reflects a divergence in growth rates between the rural rim and rural midcoast counties. The rim counties grew just 22 percent over the 120-year period, while the midcoast grew by 53 percent (Figure 3).

Aging Maine

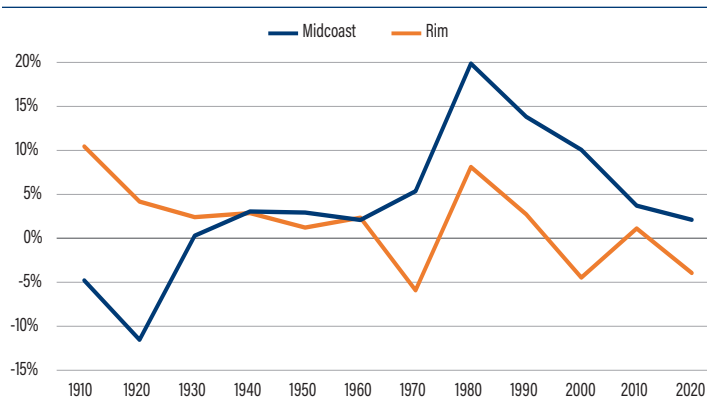
While Maine's population growth has diverged from the that of the United States over time, so too has the age of Maine's population. In 1820, Maine was of a similar age structure to that of the rest of the country (with 13 percent of the population age 45 and older, compared to around 12 percent of the US population). A century later, the share of Maine's population aged 45 and older had

FIGURE 2: US Population Change in Aggregate and by Metropolitan/Nonmetropolitan Status, 1971–2019



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the US Bureau of Census, Population Estimates Program
Notes: Metropolitan classification definitions vary. For 1971–1980, the 1974 metropolitan definition was used; for 1981–1990, 1983 metropolitan definition was used; for 1991–2000, 1993 definition was used; for 2001–2010, 2003 definition was used; for 2011–2019, the 2023 definition was used. Note that points below 0 percent signify an actual decline in population. Points above 0 percent on a downward trend reflect reduced growth rates but still indicate overall population increase.

FIGURE 3: Rural Maine’s Ten-Year Population Growth Rates by Decade



Source: Decennial Census and Population Estimates Program, US Census.
Notes: Maine’s midcoast counties are defined here as Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Waldo, and the rim counties are Aroostook, Franklin, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, and Washington. Note that points below 0 percent signify an actual decline in population. Points above 0 percent on a downward trend reflect reduced growth rates but still indicate overall population increase.

risen to 28 percent, while the national share was about 21 percent. And by 2020, nearly half of Maine’s residents were 45 and older, compared to around 41 percent of the US population.

The rural-urban demographic divide is seen here as well. Nationally, most people live in urban areas, but

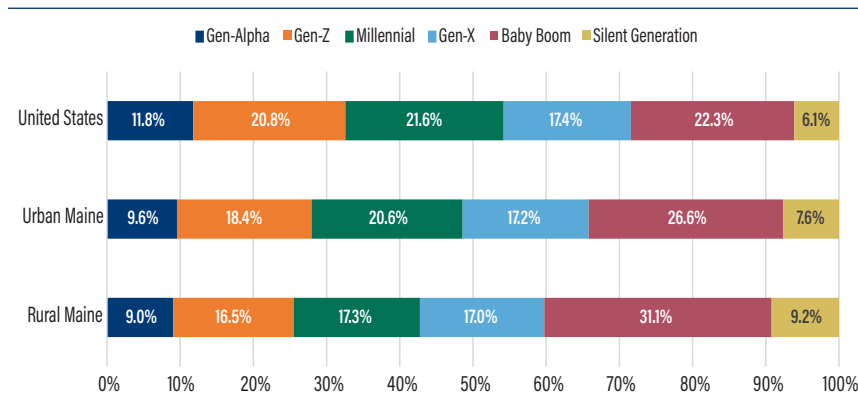
older adults tend to be more heavily concentrated in rural communities. This is due to a combination of trends: people are having fewer children and living longer, and younger adults often leave rural regions for jobs or education, while many older adults are drawn to rural areas that offer attractive natural or lifestyle amenities (Glasgow and Brown 2012). A similar pattern is evident in Maine. Although both its rural and urban areas are older than the country overall, Maine’s urban counties are younger than its rural counties, with 48 percent and 54 percent of their population aged 45 or older, respectively.

An examination of Maine’s generational population distribution (Figure 4) shows that the baby boom generation is the driver behind current demographic shifts. While baby boomers account for about 22 percent of the US population, in Maine, they account for a little more than a quarter of the population in urban areas and nearly one-third in rural areas. The dominance of this generation—which was ages 58 to 76 in 2022—has significant implications for Maine. As more baby boomers reach traditional retirement age and younger generations make up a smaller share of the population, Maine is facing a shrinking labor force.

Components of Population Change

There are three components to population change: births, deaths, and net migration (domestic and international). Maine, like the United States overall, has seen a steady decline in birth rates for the last few decades. While the trend of declining birth rates holds across both urban and rural areas of the state, in recent years rates have been declining faster in rural areas than in urban ones. These declining birth rates have contributed significantly to what’s known as natural population decline—when deaths outnumber births. Maine began experiencing natural population decline in 2011, and that trend has persisted for over a decade. Historically, natural population increase (when births outnumber deaths) buffered rural areas from the volatility of net migration. However, as this natural buffer has eroded due to falling birth rates and an aging population, migration patterns have become the primary determinant of whether rural areas grow or decline (Johnson and Lichter 2019). Additionally, when younger people migrate away from rural areas,

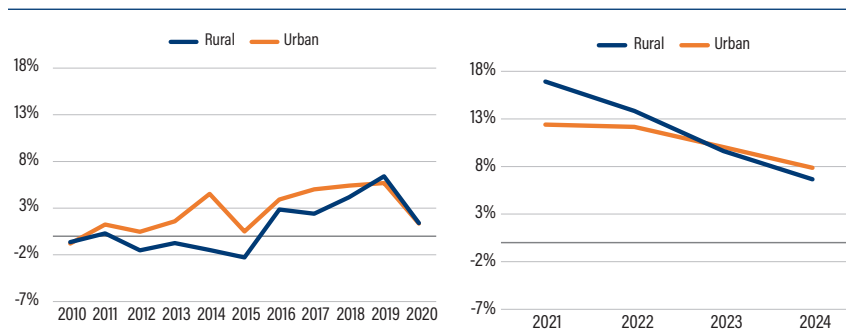
FIGURE 4: Population by Generation, 2022



Source: Population Estimates Program, US Census.

Note: Rural Maine is defined here as Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Waldo, Aroostook, Franklin, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, and Washington Counties. All other counties are considered urban.

FIGURE 5: Maine's Net Migration Rate



Source: Population Estimates Program, US Census; Data for years 2010–2020 are from the 2020 Vintage, 2021–2024 data are from the 2024 Vintage.

Note: Maine's rural counties are defined here as Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Waldo, Aroostook, Franklin, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, and Washington. All other counties are considered urban.

they take with them any children they may already have as well as any future potential for children, exacerbating the declining birth rates. Without the buffer of a stable natural population Maine must have not only more people moving in than moving out (positive net migration), but enough of a positive migration gain to offset the natural decline. This trend has been growing across the country in recent years. While Maine was among the first states to experience a natural population decline, 17 states saw more deaths than births in 2024.

Recent Shifts in Migration

Since 2016, Maine has experienced sustained positive net migration, with a dramatic spike in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 5). The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily

reshaped demographic patterns across the state, especially in rural counties. In the two years following 2020, the state saw a notable surge in in-migration to rural counties where, in some cases, in-migration rates exceeded those of urban counties for the first time in decades (Figure 6). This trend was especially pronounced in the rim counties, where population inflows reversed long-term declines.

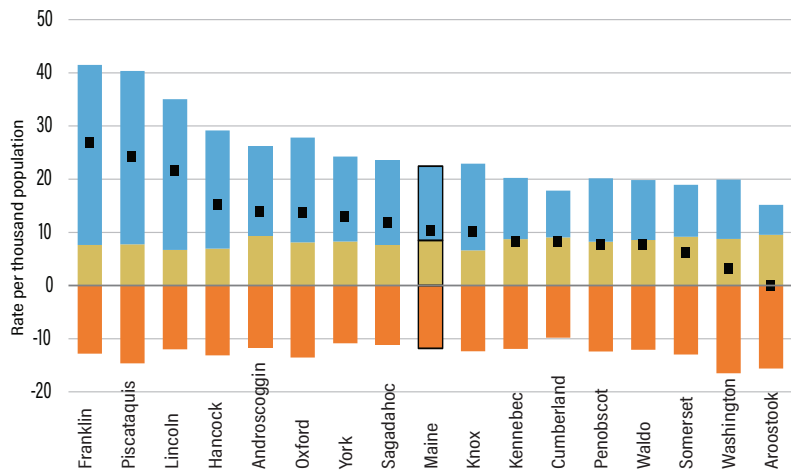
This trend aligned with national patterns: rural counties that had been losing population before the pandemic generally saw smaller declines or population increases during the pandemic (Petersen et al. 2024). With workplaces and schools operating remotely, proximity to job centers or campuses mattered less, and millions of workers could relocate as long as they had sufficient internet access (Florida and Kotkin 2021). And so, for many, less densely populated areas became appealing alternatives (Haslag and Weagley 2024).

This shift was seen clearly in New England. Across all six states, urban areas lost households while rural communities generally added them—with Massachusetts being the only state where rural areas lost households (Chiumenti 2021).

Maine's own migrants cited outdoor recreation, proximity to family and friends, and cost of living as primary motivations, with many noting that remote work allowed them to prioritize their lifestyle rather than job location (WEA 2025).

The people who moved into Maine during the pandemic tended to be younger than the existing population of the state as well, resulting in what looked more like the aforementioned back-to-the-land movement. As a result of this, Maine was the only state whose median age was no higher in 2024 than it was in 2020 (US Census Bureau 2024). Although these migrants initially boosted populations in rural areas, it remained unclear whether this shift would persist or whether migration patterns would revert to pre-pandemic trends. By 2024, the signs pointed to

FIGURE 6: Components of Population Change in Maine, 2020–2021



Source: Vintage 2024 Population Estimates Program, US Census Bureau

something like a partial reset. Maine was still drawing more newcomers than it did before 2020, but the pattern of where those newcomers landed had started to look familiar. Some rural counties were once more struggling to offset natural population decline, while the state’s urban centers again saw the highest rates of in-migration. In other words, the old centripetal pull of cities (Colby, 1933) was reasserting itself. That pull is fueled by a mix of forces, including the practical limits of remote work (Florida et al. 2021), broadband gaps in rural regions (Whitacre 2021), and the gradual return to in-person or hybrid work and education (Tahlyan et al. 2024), among others.

Nonetheless, the pandemic highlighted the potential for migration to reshape rural trajectories. It demonstrated that, under the right conditions, even Maine’s most remote communities can attract new residents. The question now is whether those conditions—remote work, affordability, quality of life—can be sustained and supported through policy to ensure longer-term demographic stability.

Population Projections

Population projections combine historical birth, death, and migration trends in a way that offers a look at a possible future state. While not precise predictions, they are valuable tools for planning under uncertainty—whether for infrastructure, policy, or business reasons (Smith et al., 2002). They offer a structured way to explore possible demographic changes, making them

necessary for long-term planning and decision-making. Projections are typically produced at various geographic scales, enabling targeted planning from the national to the local level.

Maine’s Office of the State Economist has a responsibility to provide demographic and economic analysis to inform planning and policymaking across the state. As part of this mission, we produce updated population projections for Maine counties and towns every two years.

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis presented here builds on the most recent county-level projections released in April 2025 (MDAFS 2025). Because of the delay in when the data necessary for this analysis is released, we use information from 2022

as the starting point, or base, for these projections. We then project out to 2042 in five-year intervals, with the published report focusing on the projections through 2032. These population projections are conducted using a cohort-component method, a standard demographic technique used to estimate population change by advancing each age-sex group—or *cohort*—through time, accounting for births, deaths, and migration (Smith et al. 2002).

In this method, the population is divided into 36 age-sex cohorts: 18 age groups (in five-year increments, from ages 0–4 through 85+) and by sex. Every five years, each cohort ages into the next bracket, while new cohorts are created through births. Survival and migration rates are calculated and applied separately to each cohort, and births are projected based on age-specific fertility rates of women of childbearing age.

The baseline projections are built using vital statistics (births and deaths from 2018–2022), US Census Bureau population estimates, and detailed migration data from the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS provides the only publicly available data on in- and out-migration by age at a county level. However, even when using five-year estimates, the margins of error are large, and there can be significant swings in migration patterns from one time period to the next. To avoid skewing the baseline long-term projections with short-term volatility tied to the pandemic or noise in the

underlying migration data, some adjustments were made for a subset of counties. For most counties, we averaged ACS data from two nonoverlapping time periods: 2013–2017 and 2018–2022 to capture both pre- and post-pandemic migration trends. However, in a few counties where those averages produced unrealistic results (such as growth rates far exceeding any historical trends or change in the opposite direction from recent history), we used alternative timeframes: Androscoggin, Kennebec, Knox, Somerset, and Waldo Counties rely on 2015–2019 data, and Piscataquis County uses 2019–2023 data. As an example, had we used the averaged 2013–2017 and 2018–2022 ACS data for Piscataquis County, the projections would have shown a decline of -6.8 percent from 2022 to 2032, while the 2014 to 2024 change was growth of 2.7 percent. Much of the 2014–2024 growth came in 2021 and 2022, with growth of 3.5 percent from 2020 to 2022; in the decade prior (2010–2020), Piscataquis saw a decline of -4.2 percent. Using the 2018–2023 ACS data resulted in a more moderate projected decline of -0.4 percent from 2022 to 2032, with near-term growth shifting to later declines.

Additional adjustments were made for Franklin and Penobscot Counties to account for the effects of a large student population. An influx of 18- and 19-year-olds attending college can give the appearance of lasting growth, where the patterns may in fact be cyclical or short-lived. In these cases, student in-migration was modeled separately and removed from the broader trends. Final adjustments were made to survival rates, removing excess COVID-19 deaths from 2021 and 2022 and preventing these atypical years from skewing long-term mortality trends. All of these adjustments are especially important in rural contexts, where small numerical changes can have large proportional impacts—and where demographic volatility poses real planning challenges.

This study uses those official projections as the baseline scenario, representing a continuation of recent trends. To explore how shifts in migration could affect the trajectory of rural Maine, we modeled two alternative futures in a hypothetical *stress-test* situation:

- A high in-migration scenario, where in-migration to each county is increased by 10 percent relative to the baseline.
- A low in-migration scenario, where in-migration is decreased by 10 percent.

Because of the high variability in the underlying migration data, it was difficult to identify historical

growth rates that could be used as hypothetical high and low in-migration rates. Ten percent was selected as a hypothetical change that is both large enough to shift the population projections but small enough to be a plausible outcome. To put this into perspective, at a statewide level, the estimated number of domestic in-migrants (people who moved to Maine from a different state) was about 12 percent higher (± 8.5 percent) in the 2019–2023 ACS data than in the 2014–2018 ACS data. The high and low in-migration scenarios help illustrate the sensitivity of rural areas to changes in net migration, highlighting how seemingly modest shifts can alter the demographic trajectory of entire regions.

In both alternatives, birth and death rates are held constant, isolating the effect of migration. The 10 percent variation in in-migration represents a modest but plausible range of uncertainty, designed to reflect both optimism (if the post-pandemic influx persists) and caution (if it fades as remote work declines or urban areas regain appeal). By comparing outcomes across these three scenarios, we can assess the demographic sensitivity of rural counties, or in other words, assess how strongly their futures depend on migration. This comparative framework also helps local leaders prepare for a range of possibilities: a stable, growing population with greater economic potential, or a return to population decline and an increasingly older, shrinking workforce.

RESULTS

Baseline

The demographic divide between urban and rural Maine is projected to widen substantially (Table 1). In the baseline scenario, which assumes that recent migration, fertility, and mortality trends continue, urban counties are projected to grow steadily through 2037 and experience only a slight contraction in the final five-year period. By 2042, urban areas are projected to grow by 4.7 percent relative to their 2022 population.

In contrast, Maine's rural population growth is projected to slow around 2027 and turn negative shortly thereafter. By 2042, the projected population in Maine's rural areas is expected to decline by 2.2 percent relative to their 2022 population, indicating a continued shift in population concentration toward Maine's urban centers. The midcoast counties (those that are rural but closer to Maine's urban cores) are projected to show modest growth through 2032 but begin to decline thereafter. By 2042, these areas are projected to contract by 0.8 percent

relative to 2022. Rim counties, however, begin to decline earlier and more sharply, shrinking by 3.1 percent over the same period.

Low In-Migration

The population projections under the low in-migration scenario present an outlook where intensifying demographic pressures constrict population growth sooner. Here, urban areas see slight population growth over the first 10 years, before seeing population decline. Overall, the population of urban areas stagnates, growing just 0.4 percent between 2022 and 2042. The impact on Maine’s rural areas, on the other hand, is far more severe. Rural counties begin losing population by 2027, and by 2042, these areas lose 6.1 percent of their population. Rural midcoast counties decline by 4.9 percent, and rim counties shrink by 6.9 percent overall. These projections point to potentially compounding disadvantages in the most remote regions, where increasing death rates, declining birth rates, and limited replacement through in-migration could lead to a downward spiral of population loss.

High In-Migration

When looking at the high in-migration scenario, which assumes a stronger and sustained inflow of new residents to the state, Maine’s population outlook

becomes more dynamic. Urban counties flourish under this scenario, with projected growth reaching nearly 9 percent by 2042. Rural counties benefit as well, managing a 1.6 percent gain over the same period. Although this growth is modest, it marks a substantial reversal from the baseline scenario and demonstrates how even moderate increases in in-migration can stabilize rural populations.

The high in-migration scenario offers a glimpse of a more stable future. Midcoast counties grow by 3.2 percent, a pace that suggests some resilience. However, even under this scenario the rim counties manage to grow only slightly (0.6 percent) by 2042. This highlights the difficulty of achieving enough positive net migration to overcome the natural population decline in these counties.

Across each projection scenario, Maine’s rural counties are more vulnerable than urban areas (Figure 7). But even dividing the rural counties into midcoast and rim regions disguises some individual county trends that differ from the rest of their region. For example, Washington County, which is part of the rim counties but has an extensive coastline, is projected to grow more strongly than the other counties in the region. Even in the low in-migration scenario, Washington County is projected to grow from 2022–2032, while the other rim counties are all projected to decline. On the other hand, Knox and Lincoln Counties in the midcoast region are projected to show slower growth in the high in-migration scenario and declines in the baseline and low in-migration scenarios from 2022–2032, reflecting the high median ages and struggle against natural decline in those counties.

TABLE 1: **Projected Percentage Change in Population by Maine Region**

	2022–2027	2027–2032	10-year change (2022–2032)	2032–2037	2037–2042	20-year change (2022–2042)
Urban						
Low in-migration	1.5	0.8	2.3	-0.5	-1.3	0.4
Baseline	2.8	1.9	4.7	0.5	-0.5	4.7
High in-migration	4.0	2.9	7.1	1.4	0.3	8.9
Rim						
Low in-migration	-0.6	-1.3	-1.8	-2.2	-2.9	-6.9
Baseline	0.5	-0.3	0.3	-1.3	-2.1	-3.1
High in-migration	1.6	0.7	2.4	-0.5	-1.3	0.6
Midcoast						
Low in-migration	0.3	-0.7	-0.4	-1.9	-2.7	-4.9
Baseline	1.6	0.4	2.0	-0.9	-1.8	-0.8
High in-migration	2.8	1.5	4.3	0.0	-1.0	3.2

Note: Maine’s midcoast counties are defined here as Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Waldo and the rim counties as Aroostook, Franklin, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, and Washington. All other counties are considered urban.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

These projections show that Maine’s demographic future is not uniform. Rural counties (already older and less densely populated) are more sensitive to migration trends than their urban counterparts.

In the low in-migration scenario, rural Maine’s population contracts by over 6 percent by 2042, compared to a slight gain of 0.4 percent in urban counties. And even under the high in-migration assumptions, many rural areas begin

example, an influx of working-age adults has different implications from one driven by retirees. An influx of working-age adults can bolster the local labor force and stimulate demand for services such as childcare, education, single-family housing, and transportation. An influx of retirees can increase demand for healthcare services, age-friendly housing, and social support systems. While retirees may not add as much to the labor force by traditional metrics, they often engage in volunteer and civic pursuits that support the functioning of the local community and economy. These different age structures can therefore shape fiscal pressures, service needs, and long-term planning in distinct ways.

This analysis incorporates data up until 2022, as the necessary information is typically released several years after it is collected. The latest 2024 population estimates from the Census Bureau provide some insight into which direction the trends may turn. Both rural and urban regions have already seen population growth rates higher than what we project under the low in-migration scenario, and lower than what we project under the high in-migration scenario, between 2022 and 2027.

Other limitations include the broad spatial resolution of county-level analysis. Maine's counties encompass both urbanized centers and rural communities. Designating an entire county as urban or rural can obscure important within-county variation. Penobscot County illustrates this clearly. Although it contains Bangor (a regional urban center with more than 31,000 residents in 2022), most of its communities are small towns or rural places. Nearly half of all towns in Penobscot county had fewer than 1,000 residents in 2022, and several had populations well under 500. Classifying the county as urban simply because it contains Bangor obscures the very different demographic conditions and growth patterns of these much smaller communities. This internal variation means that county-level classification can hide trends such as declining populations in northern and eastern towns, stable or modest growth in mid-sized communities like Hermon or Glenburn, and student-driven fluctuations in places like Orono. In other words, county-level urban/rural projections cannot account for the uneven pattern of growth and decline within counties, potentially obscuring the fact that urbanized centers and surrounding rural communities often follow different population trajectories.

Additionally, the projections cannot anticipate unexpected shifts (economic disruptions, policy interventions, climate change, or evolving lifestyle preferences)

that may reshape migration flows and demographic behavior in the years ahead. Migration trends in particular can be affected by many different factors. Economic opportunity is often one of the primary reasons people move, especially younger people who are looking to start or advance a career. Those same young adults who moved away to start their career may move again when it comes time to start a family. Retirees may choose to relocate to be closer to family or to what they feel is a more suitable climate. Climate change itself is likely to be an increasing factor in migration patterns in the coming decades as people look to move away from areas with severe climate events. At the same time, there may be constraints on migration, such as housing availability or affordability in a desired location. The lack of other physical or social infrastructure—internet access, childcare, healthcare providers—may also prevent people from moving to an area. These factors can vary between rural and urban areas. Urban areas tend to have more economic opportunity and more infrastructure and services, but may be less affordable, especially in terms of housing. Rural areas may be more affordable and offer more opportunities for outdoor recreation and a different lifestyle but may also have fewer amenities and job options.

Maine has seen aspects of all these factors affect migration trends over the decades. Currently, and in the coming years, some factors are likely to play a larger role. Recent migrants to Maine reported facing challenges finding housing that almost prevented their relocation (WEA 2025). Without sufficient housing, Maine may struggle to attract new residents and to retain those who are already here. Retirees in the state may be inclined to move to warmer climates or to relocate to where their grandchildren are living. On the other hand, people living in other states may decide to move here as climate events like hotter summers, wildfires, or hurricanes drive them out of their current locations and make Maine more desirable in comparison.

The results presented here are not predictive endpoints but a set of directional tools. The growth observed during the pandemic provided a temporary demographic reprieve, especially in rural areas. But the road ahead depends on whether that influx becomes a sustained trend. Without elevated migration, most rural counties are likely to resume long-term patterns of population loss and aging.

Finally, it is important to note that community revitalization does not hinge solely on population growth, nor is growth inherently a desirable or appropriate goal

for every community. Many rural towns prioritize stability, quality of life, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, or fiscal resilience over expansion. A community can strengthen its economy, improve services, or enhance well-being even in the context of slow growth or decline. The projections offered here inform one dimension of future planning, they do not define what success should look like for Maine's diverse communities.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Changing population dynamics in rural areas have myriad implications for the people and businesses located there as well as for state and local policymakers. In general, population decline has more challenging implications, but population growth, especially when it is extremely rapid or an abrupt shift from previous trends, can bring its own difficulties. These challenges are really what policymakers need to consider and develop solutions for. So too do policymakers, particularly at the state level, need to consider the different needs for urban and rural areas that may be experiencing different growth patterns.

For rural areas specifically, it doesn't take much to move the needle. Because the populations and economies are small, large percentage changes can result from only a handful of people or businesses moving in or out. The kinds of changes that would not even be felt in a larger town or city are noticeable and significant in rural areas.

While population growth can bring new energy to a community, it also brings new demands for services and can create cultural frictions with the existing residents. As a population grows, the infrastructure—both physical and social—needs to expand to accommodate the larger population. If population growth is relatively steady, it is easier for infrastructure to keep up. But when population growth is unusually fast, it can exceed the abilities of infrastructure growth to keep up. It takes time to build houses, expand schools, and train and hire more child-care providers, police officers, teachers, and firefighters.

Even the influx of new working-age people to an area that was previously workforce constrained is a mixed bag. While those people might add to the available labor pool, they will also increase demand for services. And in the cases of remote workers or retirees, the demand for services may increase without the relief being felt by new additions to the workforce.

As demand for housing and local services like general contractors and childcare providers outstrips supply,

it can cause prices to increase. If the households moving in are coming with more financial resources than the existing population, it can cause friction as longstanding lower-income households are unable to keep up while newly arrived higher-income households can accommodate the higher prices. Lower-income households may feel priced out of their communities as a result.

The friction that communities can experience when the newly arrived households are of a different socioeconomic or cultural background from the existing population is particularly noticeable in small, rural communities, but is also a challenge for close-knit neighborhoods in urban areas. Population declines, however, can lead to the dreaded *death spiral* where residents and businesses follow each other out of the area in search of greater opportunities. Take, for example, a town where the largest employer closes its doors because of structural changes to the economy. If there aren't enough suitable job openings nearby, the laid-off workers may need to relocate to seek job opportunities elsewhere. With a more limited pool of workers and fewer people in the local economy demanding services, other businesses may shutter. This in turn may cause more people to leave. As the population and tax base dwindle, it also becomes harder to maintain essential services.

Local policymakers need to think about how to sustain their communities in the face of both types of changes. Often, thinking regionally will result in better outcomes than those found when each individual town in an area competes for its own interests. Regionalization might mean sharing or consolidating services, working together to attract businesses, and planning on a regional basis. Local planning should also be collaborative to address the competing needs of people, businesses, and the environment. Failure to consider all sides of development needs can result in failure of the larger goals to sustain and energize the community and region.

The demographics of a region have implications, too—as a population ages, there are fewer people available for the workforce and a shift in demand for goods and services. There are tax base changes as well, as older residents rely less on income from work and more on Social Security, which isn't taxed in Maine, and other sources of retirement income that are taxed differently from wage and salary income. Shifting to fixed incomes can also make it more challenging to pay property taxes, which are imposed at a local level. State and local policymakers alike should consider both the needs of the population and the ability to shoulder tax burden as the

demographics of a population change. Demographic projections can help provide information about what the population may be like in the future that can be used in discussions by policymakers.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic-driven shift in migration patterns offered a glimpse into a possible new trajectory for rural Maine, one marked by renewed population inflows and, for some areas, temporary growth. Yet these gains remain fragile and uneven. In fact, in-migration is already beginning to slow, raising questions about the durability of this trend. Our projections indicate that even if elevated migration rates are sustained, many rural counties (especially those along the rim) will return to a path of population decline.

Maine's future workforce, economy, and tax base will increasingly hinge on the state's ability to retain and attract residents across all regions. Policymakers and planners must prepare for multiple futures: investing in the infrastructure and services needed to support continued growth, while remaining clear-eyed about the risks of demographic contraction.

In this context, the population projections presented here function as a tool that can help communities understand where they are, where they're headed, and what course corrections may be needed. Rural Maine is still somewhere on the road between long-term decline and renewed vitality.

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