

POLICY NOTES

New Census Numbers Suggest Gains for Rural Georgia

by Douglas C. Bachtel

Between 1990 and 2000, Georgia's population increased by 1,708,304 (4th among the states nationally) or 26.4 percent (6th nationally). The largest state east of the Mississippi River, with total land area comprising 59,441 square miles, Georgia is now the 10th most populous state. Despite the significant population growth of the 1990s, however, 39 of its counties, most of them rural, had more people living in them in the 1930s than they do today.

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Population growth in Georgia has been uneven geographically, with population change varying considerably among its 159 counties. Most of the counties growing by more than the state average are located in north Georgia. Forsyth County was the fastest-growing county in the state, its population more than doubling (123.2 percent) in the 1990s. Sixteen counties, many of which are located in and around the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area, grew by more than 50 percent, due primarily to the dynamic, vibrant economy of that region. In addition to Forsyth County, Henry (103.2 percent) and Paulding (96.3 percent) Counties were among the top 10 fastest-growing counties in the nation.

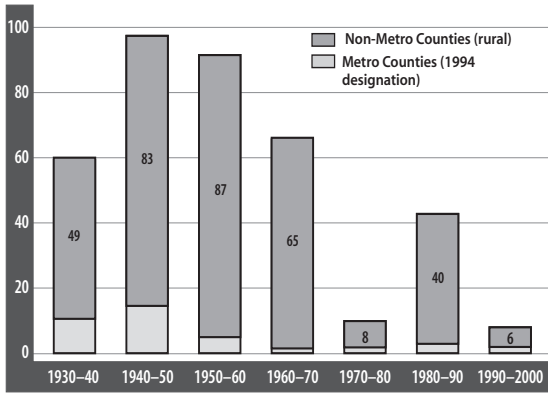
Historically, perhaps the most significant overall population pattern has been one of statewide growth, with many primarily rural counties losing population (see figure, next page). In five of the seven decades since 1930, more than one-fourth of the state's 159 counties lost population; and in the 1940s and 1950s, nearly two-thirds of the state's counties experienced decline. This pattern was interrupted in the 1970s, during which time only 10 counties lost population. The recently released census data indicate that just 8 counties experienced population losses in the 1990s—the smallest number during this 70-year period.

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In the 1970s, rural areas nationwide saw population growth. In Georgia, with most rural counties experiencing population increases, the state enjoyed a "rural turnaround." Georgians who wanted to live in small, rural towns were able to find employment in these areas, and rural young people could find work opportunities in their hometowns instead of having to migrate to larger cities in search of jobs. While numerous factors contributed to this rural growth in the 1970s, the following stand out:

- With the completion of the interstate highway system, transportation of goods and travel in and out of rural areas became significantly easier than they had been in previous years.
- Many companies expanded into rural areas, looking for relatively cheap labor and lower site-acquisition costs.
- Agriculture experienced record-high prices and low interest rates and operated under a governmental policy that encouraged farmers to plant "fence row to fence row."
- The influx of significant numbers of retirees who chose to live in small, rural towns created jobs and investments.
- Rural counties with colleges and universities grew as children of the "baby boom" generation sought higher educational opportunities.
- With urban centers experiencing high levels of crime, pollution, and racial unrest, rural areas became increasingly attractive.
- Finally, rural areas experienced a gradual improvement in quality of life, such as improvements in communication, transportation, medical services, and educational facilities.

COUNTIES LOSING POPULATION IN GEORGIA (1930–2000)



In the 1980s, the state slipped back into the pattern of rural population decline. Forty-three counties lost population as businesses that had located in rural Georgia in the 1970s moved to the Pacific Rim. With the emergence of “yuppies” and the increased popularity of urban homesteading, urban areas across the country and in Georgia became more attractive as places to live and work. In addition, agriculture suffered serious setbacks during this decade: droughts, lower prices for agricultural commodities, and increased competition from abroad took their toll on rural areas.

With only eight counties losing population in the 1990s, it appears that the state has experienced a rural resurgence similar to the turnaround of the 1970s. What might account for the gains experienced in the rural areas of the state during the last decade is hard to say at this point, but the following factors are worth noting:

- The agricultural sector of the state’s economy grew throughout the decade. Crop prices reached record levels. The poultry industry expanded in south Georgia, and canola, a financially lucrative oil seed crop, was planted in place of winter wheat. In 1996, cotton surpassed the 1953 all-time production level, although prices have declined recently due to overproduction.
- Through increased use of the computer, worldwide Web, modems, and faxes, people living and working in rural areas can electronically access markets and businesses across the nation and overseas.
- The developmental highway system in Georgia makes many rural areas more accessible by car and truck.
- Finally, strong local leadership and increased collaboration among local governments and private industry appears to be paying off. Rural decision makers and citizens have worked hard to attract businesses and improve their communities. The South Georgia Chamber of Commerce, for example, is a viable, 61-member, multicounty organization that typifies the strong leadership that exists in south Georgia.

As has been noted, Georgia’s turnaround of the 1970s was followed by rural decline in the 1980s. Will the population increases in rural counties in the 1990s continue in the first decade of the new millennium? It is hard to say. However, maintaining a viable economic base is important for the continued growth and prosperity of rural Georgia and the entire state. Planning in Georgia’s rapidly changing environment will require incorporating information about how demographic factors and conditions influence local and statewide economic development issues. The rapid growth that occurred in many areas across Georgia during the last decade will require that state and local policy makers be sensitive to cost and funding issues related to local government service delivery. Perhaps most important, the growing complexity of the national and world economies will put a greater burden on local educational systems to meet the need for an increasingly well-educated and sophisticated workforce.

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Selected Resources

- Boatright, Susan R., and Douglas C. Bachtel. 2001 (forthcoming). *The Georgia County Guide*. Athens: College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences and College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2001. <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>.

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