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Population Growth in Wyoming: 2010–2015

WYOMING OPEN SPACES INITIATIVE

AUTHORS

David T. Taylor

Nicole Korfanta

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

William D. Ruckelshaus Institute
of Environment and Natural
Resources

Department of Agricultural and
Applied Economics

Department of Geography

Wyoming Natural Diversity
Database

Wyoming Geographic
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University of Wyoming
Extension

For more information
(307) 766-5080
[www.uwyo.edu/haub/
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Population Growth in Wyoming: 2010–2015

David T. Taylor¹

Nicole Korfanta²

¹ *University of Wyoming Agricultural and Applied Economics*

² *University of Wyoming Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources*

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One of the keys to understanding growth issues is recognizing the changes in population growth patterns at the community, county, and state levels. While the 2015 U.S. Census Bureau population estimates continue to indicate an overall pattern of growth in the Rocky Mountain West, some areas of Wyoming are experiencing population growth, while others are in population decline.

Historically, Wyoming has experienced substantial fluctuations in its population. Wyoming's population growth increased by more than 50 percent during the "energy boom" from 1970 through 1983 and then declined by more than 10 percent during the "energy bust" of 1983 through 1990. Since then, population growth rate has continued to fluctuate, although at a more moderate rate (Figure 1). Wyoming's population increased by nearly 9 percent between 1990 and 2000, and by more than 14 percent between 2000 and 2010. Nationally, Wyoming ranked 11th in population growth rate between 2000 and 2010 (up from 32nd between 1990 and 2000). Between 2010 and 2020, Wyoming's population is projected to increase by less than 6 percent.

WYOMING'S POPULATION GROWTH RATE

From 2010 through 2015, Wyoming's population growth rate (3.9 percent) was slightly higher than the national average (3.7 percent), ranking 22nd nationally. Compared to neighboring states, Wyoming's population growth rate was substantially lower than North Dakota (12.2 percent), Colorado (7.9 percent), Utah (7.8 percent), Idaho (5.2 percent), and South Dakota (5.1 percent) (Figure 2). These states' population growth rates between 2010 and 2015 were nationally ranked 1st, 4th, 5th, 11th, and 12th, respectively. Wyoming's population growth rate between 2010 and 2015 was comparable to the rates for Montana (4.2 percent) and Nebraska (3.5 percent), which ranked 20th and 24th, respectively.

Although Wyoming experienced moderate population growth from 2010 through 2015, that growth was not uniformly distributed throughout the state (Figure 3). Population growth rates for Wyoming can be broken into three groups: 1) counties with population growth rates above the state average (Natrona,

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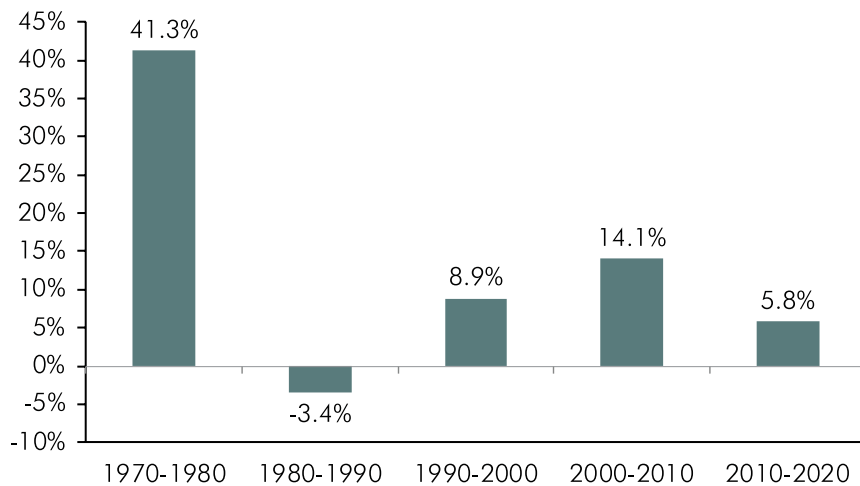


Figure 1. Wyoming population growth rate by decade (1970–2020). Since 1990, Wyoming has maintained moderate population growth.

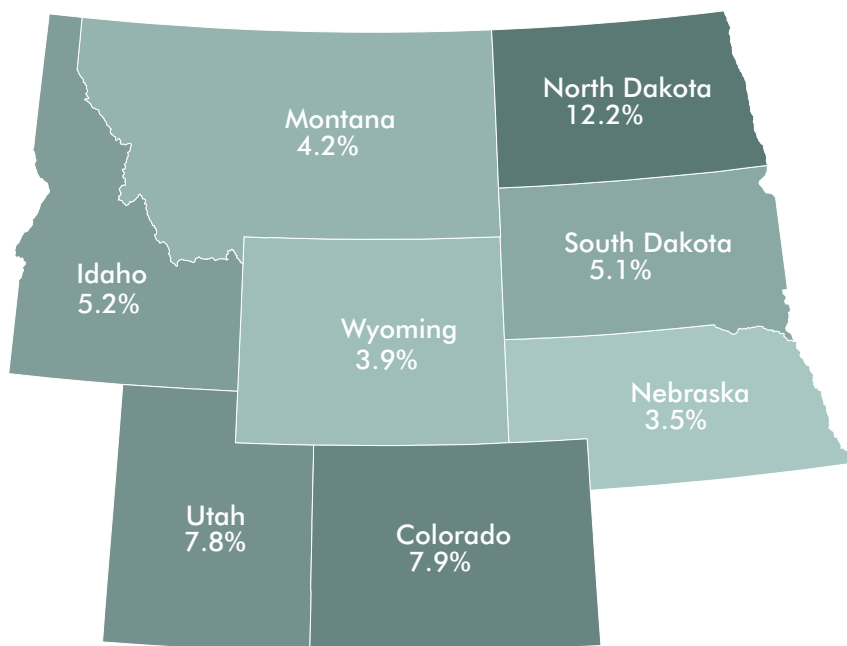


Figure 2. Population growth rates for Wyoming and neighboring states (2010–2015). Wyoming had the second-lowest population growth rate relative to neighboring states. The U.S. Average was 3.7%.

Teton, Campbell, Laramie, Albany, and Crook); 2) counties with positive population growth rates below the state average (Lincoln, Converse, Sheridan, Park, Big Horn, Sweetwater, Platte, Goshen, Weston, Fremont, Niobrara, and Johnson); and 3) counties with negative population growth rates (Uinta, Hot Springs, Carbon, Washakie, and Sublette). The fastest-growing counties included both energy-producing counties such as Natrona and Campbell, and mostly non-energy-producing counties such as Teton, Laramie, Albany, and Crook. At the other end of the spectrum, counties that experienced a net loss in population included those with older populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) such as Hot Springs and Washakie, as well as energy-producing counties such as Sublette, Carbon, and Uinta. Notably, Sublette County, which recorded the largest population growth rate in Wyoming between 2000 and 2010 (+73 percent), experienced the largest negative population growth rate between 2010 and 2015 (–4 percent). This drastic shift in population growth rates was due to a boom in natural gas production (2000 to 2008) followed by a decrease in development caused by a decline in natural gas prices (2008 to 2015).

SOURCES OF GROWTH

An important aspect to understanding population growth patterns is knowing the source of the population growth. Sources of population growth include 1) natural increase from births exceeding deaths, and 2) net in-migration in which more people move into an area than move out. The relative importance of these two factors provides insights into the economic and social dynamics occurring within a community or region. Both factors are a source of population growth in Wyoming (Figure 4). At the state level, approximately 70 percent of population growth between 2010 and 2015 came from natural increase (+15,282 residents), with the remaining 30 percent attributable to net in-migration (+6,760); however, the sources of population growth varied significantly by

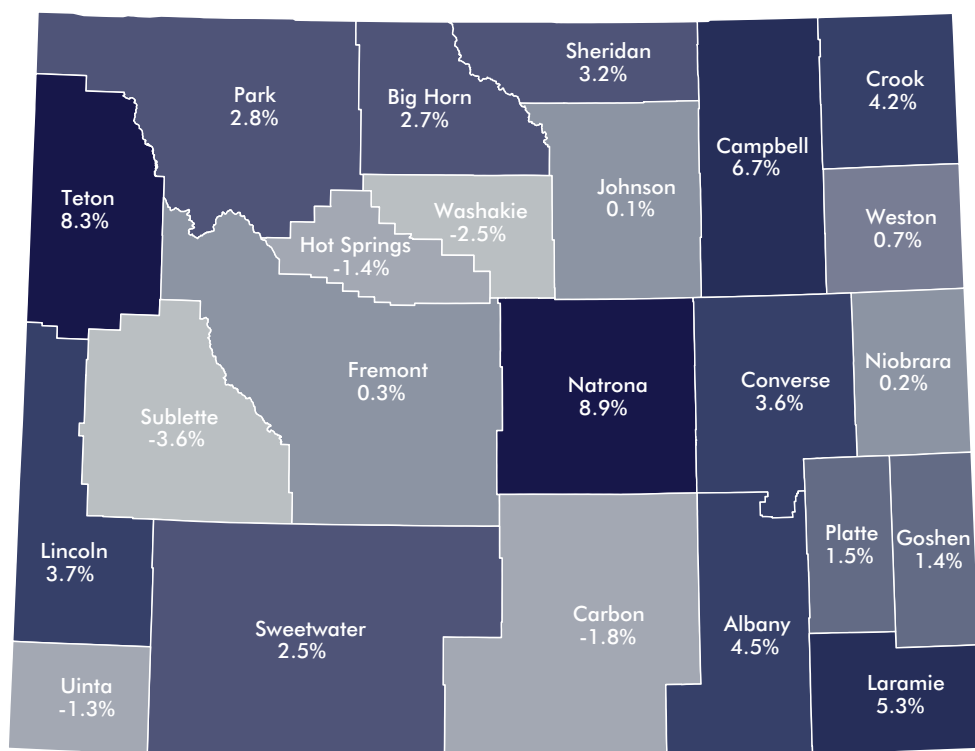


Figure 3. Wyoming population growth rate by county (2010–2015). Some energy-producing counties and those with older populations showed the greatest population declines. The average across Wyoming counties was 3.9%.

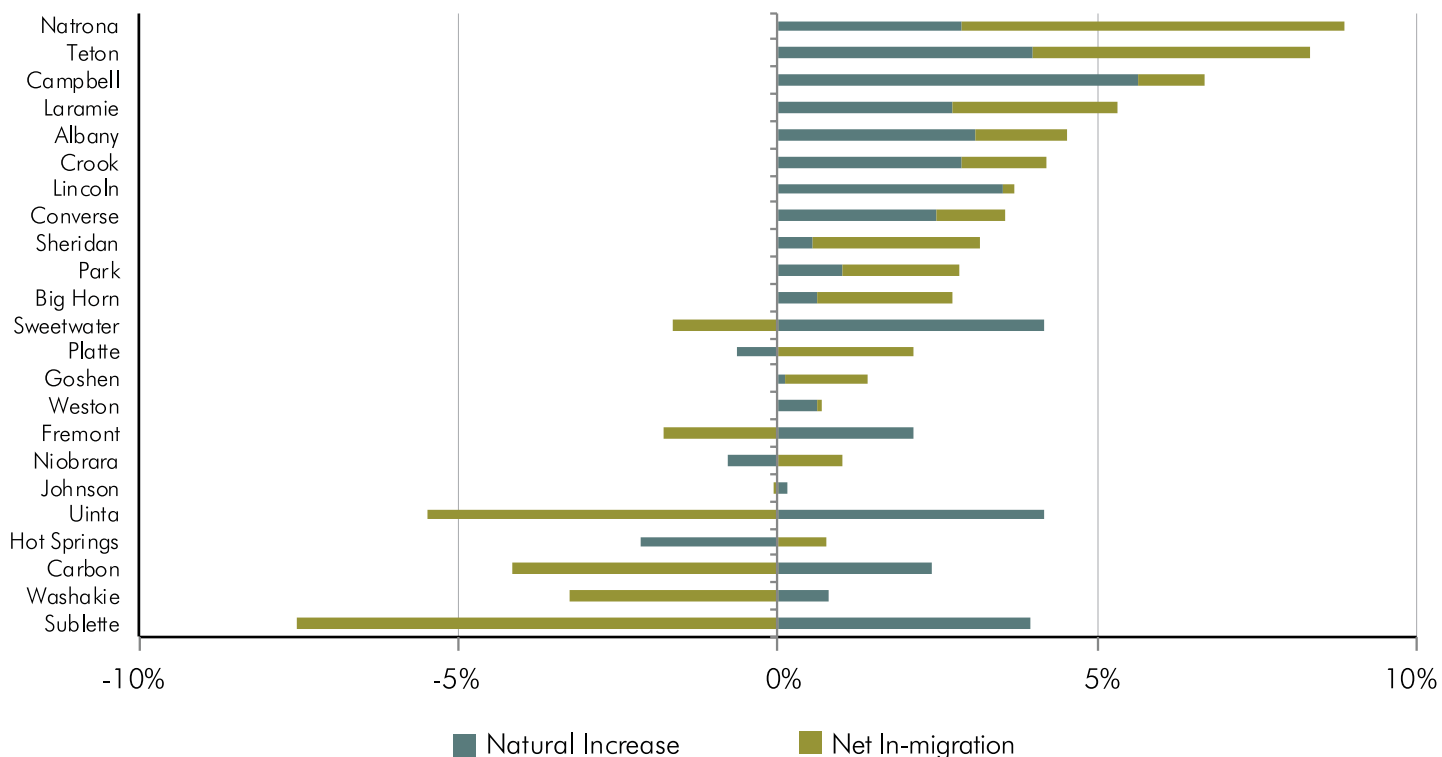


Figure 4. Wyoming county population growth rate by source (2010–2015). A combination of natural increase from births and net in-migration accounted for growth in the six higher-growth counties (population growth rates greater than the state rate).

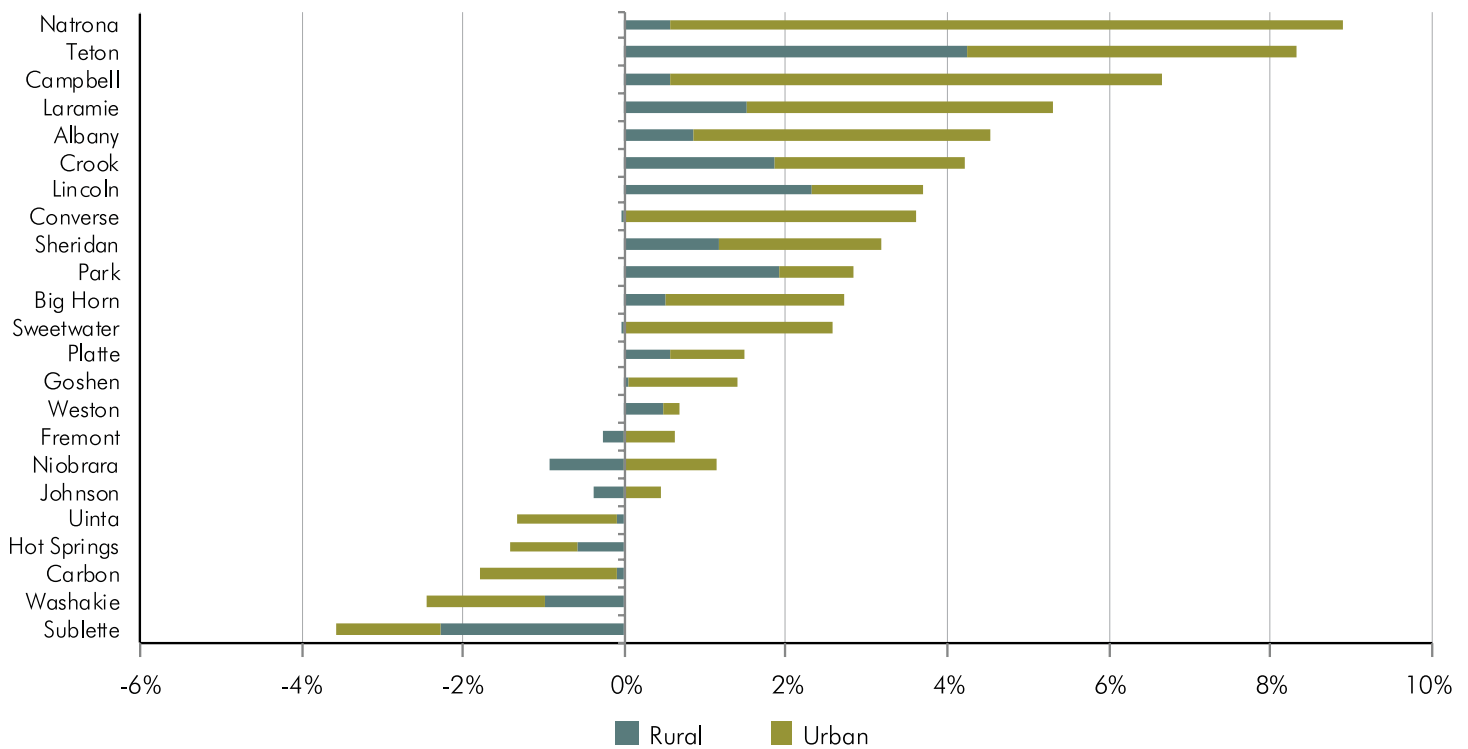


Figure 5. Wyoming percent rural population by county (2015).

county. Among the six higher-growth counties (population growth rates greater than the state rate), all had positive net in-migration. But the relative importance of net in-migration ranged from representing more than 68 percent of population growth in Natrona County to only 15 percent of population growth for Campbell County. Nearly 48 percent of population growth in Teton County and 51 percent of population growth in Laramie County was from net in-migration, while slightly more than 30 percent of population growth in Albany County and Crook County was from net in-migration. Each of the six higher-growth counties also had positive natural increases.

Among the 12 slower-growth counties (population growth rate positive but less than the state rate), six counties had both positive net in-migration and positive natural increases. However, the relative importance of net in-migration varied by county. Net in-migration

was responsible for the majority of population growth for Sheridan County, Park County, and Big Horn County, but played a minor role in population growth for Lincoln County, Converse County, and Weston County. Among the remaining six slower-growth counties, the importance of net in-migration was mixed, with some such as Sweetwater, Fremont, and Johnson Counties experiencing net out-migration that was more than offset by positive natural increases in population. Others such as Platte, Goshen, and Niobrara Counties experienced positive net in-migration, which more than offset negative natural increases in population.

Among counties that recorded negative population growth, Uinta, Carbon, Washakie, and Sublette Counties all had net out-migration that was not offset by positive natural increases in population. On the other hand, Hot Springs County had positive net in-migration, which more than offset its negative natural increase

due to an aging population. Sublette County experienced more than a 7 percent decline in population due to net out-migration, which was only partially offset by a 4 percent positive natural increase.

RURAL VERSUS URBAN GROWTH

Another important aspect of population growth patterns is where the population growth is occurring. The distribution of population growth between rural areas (those outside incorporated towns and cities) and urban areas (those inside incorporated towns and cities) has important implications for maintaining open space on private land and the cost of community services to local governments in Wyoming (Coupal et al, 2002). In 2015 slightly more than 30 percent (182,000 residents) of Wyoming residents lived in rural areas.

The percentage of the population living in rural areas in 2015 varied significantly among counties in Wyoming (Figure 5). At the upper end of the spectrum, 64 percent of the residents of Sublette County lived in rural areas of the county. Similarly, one-half or more of the residents of Crook, Teton, and Lincoln Counties lived in rural areas of the county. More than 40 percent

of residents of Fremont, Park, and Johnson Counties lived in rural areas of the county. Each of these counties has relatively high natural resource amenities such as scenic views and recreation access that may encourage residents to live in rural areas. At the lower end of the distribution, less than 20 percent of residents in Carbon, Natrona, Albany, and Sweetwater Counties lived in rural areas of the county.

Between 2010 and 2015, 80 percent of Wyoming's population growth occurred in urban areas of the state (+17,723 residents). Among Wyoming's urban areas, the five largest cities (Cheyenne, Casper, Gillette, Laramie, and Rock Springs) had the largest increase in population in absolute terms (Table 1). These five cities accounted for more than 60 percent of the total population growth in Wyoming between 2010 and 2015. Most of the communities with the largest population growth rates were relatively small towns with populations of fewer than 5,000 where a modest increase in the number of households represents a significant increase in population. Exceptions to this include Gillette, Jackson, and Casper, which are relatively large communities with populations greater than 10,000. Interestingly, fast-growing Bar Nunn,



Table 1. Wyoming's fastest-growing cities and towns by number of individuals and percent growth (2010–2015)

Place	Population Change	2015 Population	Place	Percent Growth	2015 Population
Casper	+5,025	60,303	Bar Nunn	+27.8%	2,819
Cheyenne	+3,483	63,404	Burlington	+16.8%	340
Gillette	+2,766	32,727	Evansville	+11.9%	2,928
Laramie	+1,348	32,271	Cowley	+11.4%	733
Rock Springs	+1,006	24,002	Wamsutter	+9.8%	494
Jackson	+874	10,478	Ranchester	+9.4%	941
Bar Nunn	+613	2,819	Mills	+9.3%	3,786
Douglas	+450	6,570	Gillette	+9.2%	32,727
Sheridan	+447	17,915	Jackson	+9.1%	10,478
Mills	+322	3,786	Casper	+9.1%	60,303



Table 2. Wyoming’s slowest-growing cities and towns by number of individuals and percent growth (2010–2015)

Place	Population Change	2015 Population	Place	Percent Growth	2015 Population
Evanston	-237	12,131	Big Piney	-5.5%	530
Rawlins	-182	9,046	Pinedale	-5.3%	1,918
Worland	-118	5,376	Medicine Bow	-4.6%	270
Pinedale	-107	1,918	Sinclair	-4.4%	413
Thermopolis	-33	2,977	Hanna	-3.2%	81
Big Piney	-31	530	Ten Sleep	-3.1%	254
Lyman	-28	2,073	Encampment	-2.4%	43
Hanna	-27	812	Superior	-2.4%	323
Sinclair	-19	413	East Thermopolis	-2.4%	248
Medicine Bow	-13	270	Worland	-2.1%	5,376

Evansville, and Mills are all part of the Casper metropolitan area, indicating that urban growth in the area was not limited to the Casper city limits.

All of the communities experiencing the largest negative population growth between 2010 and 2015 were medium- to small-sized towns, with the communities of Evanston, Rawlins, and Worland being the most populous among the group (Table 2). Towns with the largest percentage decrease in population were also relatively small, with the exception of Worland. Two of the towns with the largest percent decreases in population were located in Sublette County (Big Piney and Pinedale), four of the towns were located in Carbon County (Medicine Bow, Sinclair, Hanna, and Encampment), and two of the towns were located in Washakie County (Ten Sleep and Worland).

Between 2010 and 2015, 20 percent of Wyoming’s population growth occurred in rural areas of the state (+4,319 residents), a decrease from 2000–2010 when one third of growth occurred in rural areas (Taylor and Lanning, 2012). Laramie County and Teton County experienced the largest absolute increases in

their rural populations (+1,401 and +902, respectively), while Park, Natrona, and Lincoln Counties all recorded increases of more than 400 rural residents (Table 3). Among the high-growth counties, more than 50 percent of Teton County’s population growth and more than 44 percent of Crook County’s population growth occurred in rural areas (Figure 6). Meanwhile, only 6 percent of Natrona County’s population growth and 8 percent of Campbell County’s population growth occurred in rural areas. In Laramie County, 28 percent of its population growth occurred in rural areas of the county, and in Albany County, 18 percent of its population growth occurred in rural areas of the county. Among all Wyoming counties, Weston, Park, Lincoln, and Teton Counties, all experienced more than one-half of their population growth in rural areas of the county. Between 2010 and 2015, Sublette, Washakie, Niobrara, Hot Springs, Johnson, Fremont, Carbon, and Uinta Counties, all saw declines in their rural populations. In Sublette County, 64 percent of its population loss occurred in rural areas of the county.

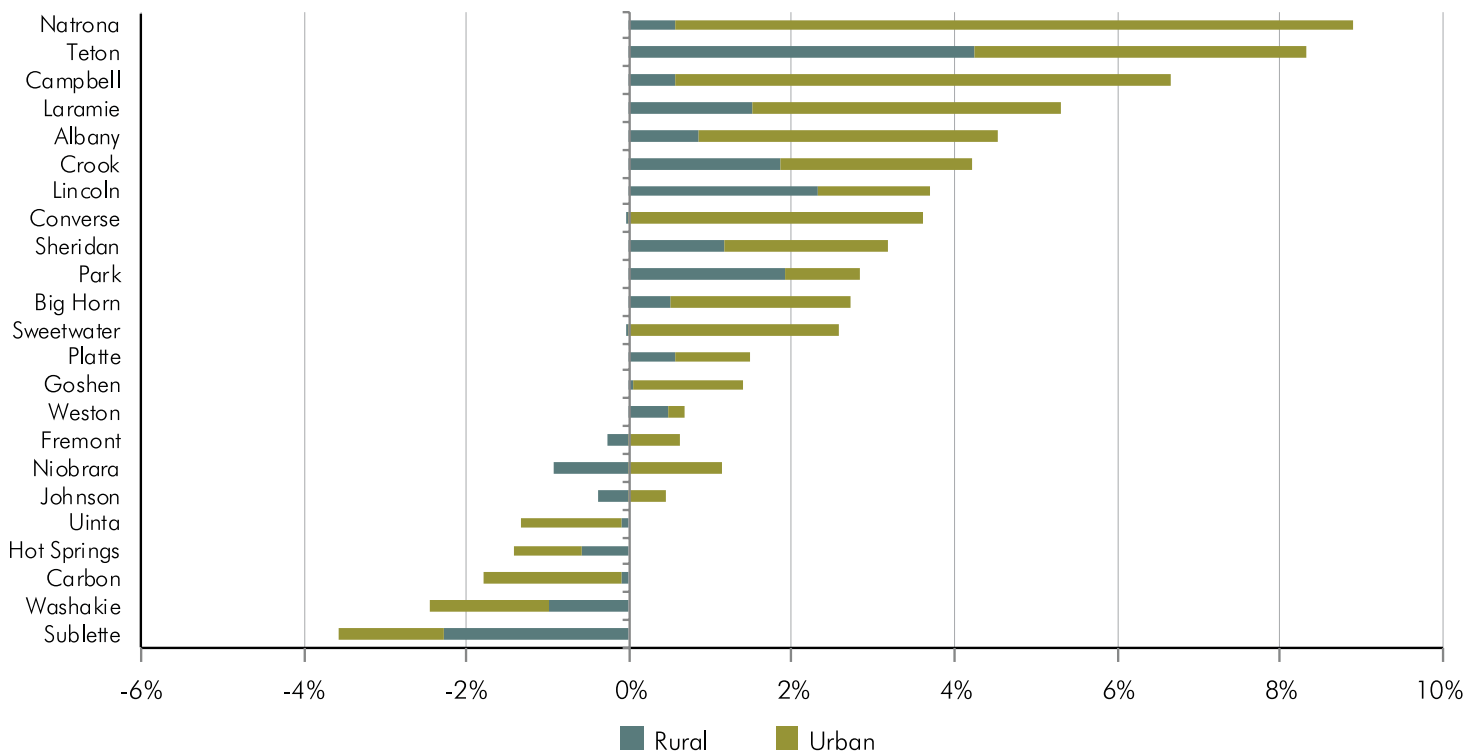


Figure 6. Wyoming county population growth rate by location (2010–2015). About 20 percent of Wyoming’s population growth occurred in rural areas of the state.

Table 3. Wyoming’s fastest-growing rural areas by number of individuals and percent growth (2010–2015)

County	Population Change	2015 Rural Population	County	Percent Growth	2015 Rural Population
Laramie	+1,401	32,137	Teton	+7.7%	12,595
Teton	+902	12,595	Albany	+5.8%	5,564
Park	+542	12,590	Lincoln	+4.7%	9,335
Natrona	+433	11,744	Laramie	+4.6%	32,137
Lincoln	+420	9,335	Park	+4.5%	12,590
Sheridan	+342	10,260	Natrona	+3.8%	11,744
Albany	+305	5,564	Sheridan	+3.4%	10,260
Campbell	+262	14,740	Crook	+3.3%	4,165
Crook	+132	4,165	Campbell	+1.8%	14,740
Big Horn	+59	4,266	Platte (tie)	+1.4%	3,469
			Big Horn (tie)	+1.4%	4,266

Wyoming reported the nation's steepest population decline in 2017.

Table 4. Wyoming's slowest-growing rural areas by number of individuals and percent growth (2010–2015)

County	Population Change	2015 Rural Population	Place	Percent Growth	2015 Rural Population
Sublette	-235	6,342	Sublette	-3.6%	6,342
Fremont	-113	19,340	Washakie	-3.0%	2,740
Washakie	-84	2,704	Niobrara	-2.8%	787
Johnson	-32	3,693	Hot Springs	-2.0%	1,428
Hot Springs	-29	1,428	Johnson	-0.9%	3,693
Niobrara	-23	787	Carbon	-0.7%	2,127
Uinta	-19	4,803	Fremont	-0.6%	19,340
Carbon	-16	2,127	Uinta	-0.4%	4,803
Sweetwater	-13	7,149	Sweetwater	-0.2%	7,149
Converse	-4	4,686	Converse	-0.1%	4,686

In terms of the percent growth in rural population, Teton County led the way with nearly 8 percent growth, followed by Albany County, which experienced nearly 6 percent growth (Table 3). Lincoln County, Laramie County, and Park County all had greater than 4 percent growth in their rural populations. Among Wyoming's rural areas, the largest absolute decreases in rural populations were seen in Sublette, Fremont, and Washakie Counties, with Sublette County being the largest with a decrease of 235 residents (Table 4). Sublette County, Washakie County, and Niobrara County each had three percent or greater declines in their rural populations.

RECENT POPULATION TRENDS

After peaking in 2015, Wyoming's total population has declined by nearly 6,800 individuals, or 1.2 percent of the population, from 2015 through 2017. The annual decrease in 2017 (-5,595) was the largest decline for the state since 1989 (Economic Analysis Division,

2017). The source of this population decline was out-migration, with a net of 12,205 individuals leaving the state since 2015 (Economic Analysis Division, 2017). This decline was only partially offset by a natural increase of 5,418 in the state's population during the same time period. Energy-producing counties, including Campbell (-3,051), Natrona (-2,587), and Sweetwater (-1,198), experienced the largest population declines since 2015. The state's population in urban areas declined by 1,134 residents in 2016, while rural areas increased by 80 residents.

Nationally, the U.S. population increased by 0.7 percent between 2016 and 2017. Idaho led the nation with a 2.2 percent population growth rate, followed by Nevada (+2.0 percent), Utah (+1.9 percent), and Washington (+1.7 percent). Conversely, Wyoming reported the nation's steepest population decline in 2017 (-1.0 percent), followed by West Virginia (-0.7 percent), Illinois (-0.3 percent), Alaska (-0.2 percent), and Hawaii (-0.1 percent).

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN POPULATION GROWTH

Wyoming has experienced significant variability in the rate and distribution of population growth since 1990. Between 1990 and 2000, Wyoming ranked 32nd among all states in population growth, with 74 percent of growth attributable to natural increase and 26 percent attributable to net in-migration (Taylor and Lieske, 2002). During this time period 55 percent of the population growth occurred in rural areas of the state, and the fastest growing counties were natural-resource-amenity counties in the northwestern part of the state.

During the next decade (2000–2010), Wyoming population growth accelerated and the state ranked 11th in population growth among all states, associated with an increase in net in-migration to 53 percent of growth (Taylor and Lanning, 2012). During this time period, growth in rural areas of the state dropped to 32 percent of population growth rate, and the fastest growing counties were energy-producing counties.

Since 2010, Wyoming has experienced more moderate population growth rate, comparable to the neighboring states of Montana and Nebraska. Meanwhile other states in the region, including Colorado, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Utah, have experienced strong population growth. Population growth in Wyoming has not been evenly distributed across the state, ranging from nearly 9 percent increase for Natrona County to nearly 4 percent decrease for Sublette County between 2010 and 2015. About 70 percent of the population growth in Wyoming came from natural increases in population, with the other 30 percent attributable to net in-migration. Eighty percent of Wyoming's population growth between 2010 and 2015 occurred in urban areas of the state, with the other 20 percent occurring in rural areas. However, four counties, including Weston, Park, Lincoln, and Teton Counties, experienced more than one-half of their population growth in rural areas of the county.

Since 2015, Wyoming has seen a contraction in its overall population, with much of that decline centered in energy-producing counties including Natrona, Campbell, and Sweetwater Counties. Population growth and the location of that growth (urban vs. rural) has significant implications for wildlife habitat, scenic views, and local government budgets. Understanding changing population patterns is a key step in understanding growth issues in Wyoming.

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Wyoming Open Spaces Initiative
Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources
804 E. Fremont Street
Laramie, WY 82072

