

POPULATION

Coloradans making fewer babies, and migration likely can't fill gap

Retiring state demographer predicts deaths will outpace births by 2050

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Elizabeth Garner has been Colorado's demographer for two decades, and her deputy, Cindy DeGroen, has been on the job for closer to three decades. They uncovered what story the population numbers were telling and then told that story to anyone who would listen.

"Our goal is to be as close to right as possible. The beauty of this office is that it's not influenced by politics or policy. We're just doing what we think is right," Garner said.

Both are retiring as Colorado's demographic story has shifted to one of fewer children, reduced net migration * and an unprecedented surge in residents over age 65, who soon will be the fastest-growing age group in the state.

Colorado's population, which averaged annual gains of about 76,000 a year last decade, has grown less than half as fast this decade. Demographically speaking, the state looks like it has peaked and what is ahead will be much different than what is behind.

Companies rely on demographic forecasts to understand if they will find enough workers as they expand or relocate. Developers use the numbers to determine where homes, stores and hospitals should be built. Local officials track the numbers to decide where to open and close schools, add or widen roads and allocate limited tax dollars, among many other things.

"Elizabeth's accurate population projections and analysis have been vital for planning in infrastructure, education, health care and economic development," said Kate Watkins, who replaced Garner as the state demographer, during the annual Colorado Demography Summit on Nov. 1.

DeGroen worked on improving statistical models and making forecasts as precise as possible. Garner provided more than 800 presentations across the state during her tenure, making the data relatable to government officials, community planners and business leaders, Watkins said. She quietly guided some of the most far-reaching decisions made statewide and in communities large and small. "I think she has a unique gift of really explaining data and making it actionable and relevant for communities," said Brian Lewandowski, executive director of the Business Research Division at the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business.

"She has that gift of describing why we should care and why we should be paying attention. She can do it with humor, too."

Colorado's growth has not come without pushback from those already here unhappy with congested roads, higher home prices and rents or the general sense that things are getting crowded.

"If you like jobs, you have to like the people who fill those jobs," Lewandowski said, recalling Garner's rebuttal.

Before taking over as state demographer from Jim Wescott in October 2004, Garner ran a data center for County Information Services at Colorado State University. As she took a break from cleaning out her office to do an interview, Garner commented on finding floppy disks and Zip drives, noting how far technology has come from the days when data books were printed out and information was transmitted by screeching phone modems.

The demography office's staff has stayed constant at about half a dozen people, but it has doubled its productivity, with the office's website getting 12,000 to 15,000 hits a month, eliminating a lot of phone calls, Garner said.

Freeware and other affordable online tools have allowed her team to greatly boost its outreach despite tight state budgets.

Demographic trends tend to be like an ocean liner holding its course as economic storms rage and then calm. Not much has surprised Garner in 20 years, except for one thing: Colorado's fertility rate dropped sharply after the Great Recession, and it has yet to recover. *

At the peak in 2007, there were 70,700 births in the state. Last year, there were 62,165, despite the state having nearly 1 million more residents over that period. The shock of a housing crash and severe recession might have explained some of the initial declines, but births never fully recovered. And the reverberations will carry forward for years to come.

Garner said a sharp decline in fertility among teenagers and young women offers the best explanation for the decline. More widespread contraception and more engaged parenting have helped lower the number of teen births. Women are having children at an older age and having fewer of them, reflecting a trend seen nationally.

The pandemic was also a surprise, pushing up the death rate temporarily. Deaths have moved back toward the long-term trendline and will continue to rise, given the huge wave of aging baby boomers who moved to the state in the 1970s.

A majority of the state's 64 counties already or will soon face "natural" decline, meaning deaths exceed births. By 2050, deaths will exceed births in Colorado, about 12 years after the country as a whole crosses that threshold. Only a handful of counties in the years ahead, places such as Weld and Adams, won't be completely dependent on migration to head off population declines.

One answer to natural decline would be to "import" more people to fill the gap, something Colorado historically has done a good job of since prospectors rushed into the state in search of gold and silver. Last year, however, Colorado ranked near the bottom for domestic net migration or people relocating from other U.S. states. *

"The thing that has changed is not the ins, it's the outs," Garner said. Young adults are still moving to the state at close to the same volume, but more older adults are moving out.

The why isn't entirely clear, although the big run-up in home prices might be allowing more retirees to cash out and move to a more affordable state. Others might be chasing their kids and grandkids or moving to a warmer climate. That same run-up in home prices is making it tougher for young adults to put down roots, but for now, they appear to be snapping up apartments, which are coming online at the highest rate since the 1970s.

The net migration Colorado has seen since the pandemic is a fraction of what it was last decade and largely has come from international sources. Political sentiment has swung strongly in the direction of limiting who can enter the country, with deportations expected next year. But DeGroen noted during the summit that after 2040, only 15 years away, international migration will be the only source of population growth in the U.S., given current trends. *

As the number of children born declines, there initially will be fewer students in schools then fewer workers to fill jobs and then fewer couples having babies.



About 40,000 Coloradans will retire each year over the next five years, and millennials, now the state's largest generation, will drive that number up even more when they head into retirement.

Colorado, which could take it for granted that people wanted to move here, will face intense competition to attract the dwindling number of young workers it has relied on so heavily across the decades.



