



# Cornhusker Economics

## Nebraska’s Rural Population: Historical Facts and Future Projections

Drive down any rural highway in our state and you will quickly conclude that we are a collection of small towns and villages, with a few larger cities thrown in. Some of them are thriving while others are not. You might ask yourself, why the difference? To fully appreciate this current situation, you need to think back to how our state developed.

Our state has 530 incorporated places with 89% of these communities having fewer than 3,000 people. Nebraska is not alone in this fact, with our neighboring states of Kansas, Oklahoma, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iowa in the same situation. We are part of the Great Plains and are linked by our settlement history of the Great Plains.

### Historical Context

Nebraska’s population exploded as our country was being settled. But when 1900’s came, the pace of growth slowed dramatically. The Gold Rush, a lot of available land to farm, and the development of the railroad pushed our population numbers upward until that time.

| Year | Population | % Increase in 10 Years      |
|------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1860 | 28,841     |                             |
| 1870 | 122,993    | 326%                        |
| 1880 | 452,402    | 267%                        |
| 1890 | 1,062,656  | 132%                        |
| 1900 | 1,066,300  | .3%                         |
| 2020 | 1,961,504  | 120 years to almost double! |

Then from 1900 to 2020, over 120 years, we grew at a much slower rate. We still have not doubled in population since the turn of the 1900 century but when our state was first formed, we more than tripled in population in one 10-year period. What a change of pace in the history of our state!

But that is not the only aspect of change. Just think about all the other changes that have taken place in the last 120 years. Our family structure and behaviors are not the same and neither are our businesses, technology, global trade, transportation, healthcare, and educational systems. It would be impossible for a community in 1900 to look and feel like the same community in 2022. Population numbers ebb and flow with these economic and societal changes. That is exactly what we have seen in Nebraska – some communities have stabilized; some are growing, and others are decreasing.

As Nebraskans, we love our open spaces, majestic vistas, and room to breathe but it comes with a cost. We have several counties with very low populations. In fact, 12 of our 93 counties, as of 2020, are under 1,000 in population. Sometimes these counties are called “Frontier” counties and many of them are in the far western regions of our state or in

the north central Sandhills area. We even have two of those 12 counties with a population under 500. It can't be easy to provide key services, like roads, healthcare, and K-12 education, when counties get that small, but Nebraskans seem to find creative ways of managing. When community improvements happen in these Frontier counties, it is because volunteers step up and do it. People are involved because they must be – no one is there to do it for them.

Our state's low population density also shows up in our state's number of small towns and villages. Seventy-two percent of Nebraska communities have a population between 100-800. Again, almost 3/4ths of our Nebraska communities are in the 100 to 800 population range. Just like our Frontier counties, it is volunteers that typically lead the charge toward community improvements in our smaller communities. There is a "can do" attitude in our thriving communities that makes a difference.

### The Elephant in the Room – Decreasing Rural Population

Seventy-three percent of Nebraska counties lost population between 2010-2020. There is no denying that our state's rural population is changing, and it has been changing for many years. So, what will it look like in the future? Will the decrease in rural population continue?

The Center for Public Affairs Research at the University at Omaha recently developed county population projections to 2050, as requested by the Legislature. As projections, they are based on assumptions that may or may not happen. But these projections do give policymakers across the state some good indication of possible future trends. Check out the site to see projections for your county at; <https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-public-affairs-and-community-service/center-for-public-affairs-research/documents/population-projections-for-nebraska-counties-2020-2050.pdf>

### The Future Population of Rural Nebraska?

So why do some communities thrive while others struggle? There is no simple answer. Communities are linked to a physical location, especially as it relates to transportation routes and natural resources, community assets, local leadership and local investment in both time and money. Some of these aspects are not easily changed while others can be altered. Those small rural communities that adapt and find ways to positively leverage their assets will undoubtedly have a different future than those that do not. How the population projections play out depends, in part, with how current community members create a great place to live, work and play.

#### References:

Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha 2015. Nebraska County Population Projections: 2010 to 2050. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cparpublications/258>

[Nebraska Population 2022 \(Demographics, Maps, Graphs\) \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](https://worldpopulationreview.com/nebraska-population-2022-demographics-maps-graphs/)

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