

Kansas' population growth not all positive, sociologist says

March 9 2011, By Trevor Davis

Kansas will continue to see an increasingly aging population, rural-area population loss and diversity in highly concentrated areas, according to a Kansas State University population expert.

Laszlo Kulcsar, director of the Kansas [Population](#) Center and an associate professor of sociology, recently analyzed data released by the U.S. [Census Bureau](#).

Kansas' overall population grew by 6 percent during the last decade, up about 165,000 from 2.69 million in 2000. Most of that increase occurred in Johnson County, counties in the Wichita area and counties around Fort Riley and Kansas State University.

"Despite this growth, I would be cautious to say that there's no reason to worry," Kulcsar said. "The population continues to age drastically, and this will fundamentally change Kansas."

The state's median age will continue to rise, he said, and the [aging population](#) will rely on more public services and contribute fewer tax dollars.

"Kansas population trends are fairly stable to predict because the state doesn't have many uncertainties as do fast-growing states such as Arizona," he said. "Unlike other states, we have the opportunity to work on issues today to ensure we have a plan 10 years down the road."

More residents will likely move away from the state's rural areas if current trends continue, Kulcsar said.

More than 70 percent of the state's counties had fewer residents in 2010 than in 2000, and the population fell by more than 10 percent in 23 of the state's 105 counties, according to census figures.

"If we leave everything to market forces, small-town Kansas will not be able to rebound," he said. "History has shown this already as these trends are not new. The question is whether the state should step in under the notion that America must save rural areas for cultural identity."

The population in most rural Kansas counties peaked at or before 1930 and has been declining since the Great Depression, Kulcsar said.

Young families often leave rural areas in search of more job opportunities and cultural amenities in urban areas, he said.

"Usually young families about to establish households are extremely important to communities because they're about to reach their prime consumption age," Kulcsar said. "They make purchases in the community and pay taxes that support businesses, schools and community services."

Modernization of farming, which requires fewer workers, and farm consolidation to achieve economies of scale are also factors in the decline of rural Kansas, he said.

"Oftentimes large corporate conglomerates with absentee owners do not invest in the local community and will not circulate profits in the same community like local businesses," he said. "Local control allows citizens, businesses and government to better address any negative demographic trends."

The latest census figures also revealed a more diverse Kansas. The number of Hispanics in Kansas rose by 59 percent since 2000.

However, the diverse population is concentrated in southwest [Kansas](#), Kulcsar said.

"In many of those places diversity already existed, so we really need to think about the community capacity for those areas to handle those changes," he said.

Counties with significant Hispanic population increases like Ford County are home to meatpacking plants, Kulcsar said.

"We're seeing that this population is often not well integrated into the community," he said. "Once you move that industry, people will not stick around. The job goes away, and they go away. It's a transient population."

Finney County, for example, lost 9.2 percent of its population since 2000 after a meatpacking caught fire and closed in 2000.

Provided by Kansas State University

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