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Key Trends in Population and Land Use in the West

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Citation Information

Riebsame, William E., "Key Trends in Population and Land Use in the West" (2000). *Water and Growth in the West (Summer Conference, June 7-9)*.

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William E. Riebsame, *Key Trends in Population and Land Use in the West*, in *WATER AND GROWTH IN THE WEST* (Natural Res. Law Ctr., Univ. of Colo. Sch. of Law 2000).

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KEY TRENDS IN POPULATION AND LAND USE IN THE WEST

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Water and Growth in the West

June 6 – 9, 2000

NATURAL RESOURCES LAW CENTER
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I. Introduction.

For a geographer studying land use and development in the West, these are heady times. By almost any measure, the American West, especially the Interior, is experiencing rapid demographic, economic, and cultural change at the end of the 20th century and start of the 21st. The region's population is growing faster than the rest of the country, and it is creating more jobs, starting more new businesses, and building more new homes and office parks than most other American regions---especially on a per capita basis. The growth is geographically pervasive, from central cities to rural areas, and reflects not only national economic growth, but a regional dynamism and attractiveness that portends, at least in my crystal ball, a lot more growth.

II. Regional Growth

The West grew faster than any other American region in the 1990s. Seven western states, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Utah and Arizona, were among the top ten fastest growing in the U.S. (along with Texas, Georgia and Florida) during the 1990s (Figure 1). California saw significant out-migration, much of it to the interior West, during the early-1990s slow-down in its economy, but that reversed in the late-1990s, and California's cities have grown at rates above the national average during the 1990s, and Montana and New Mexico grew faster than the national average. Only Wyoming grew little, and even lost a few people in some years of the 1990s. What stands out in a map of 1990s growth rates are the few counties not growing fast in the West (Figure 2). And though I won't say much about water in this paper (not in front of all the water experts assembled here!), I will point out, simply, the inverse relationship that now exists in U.S. development: the drier the region, the faster the growth (the two driest states in the union, Nevada and Arizona, as the fastest growing). Two of the driest cities in the U.S., Phoenix and Las Vegas, vied in the 1990s to rank as the fastest-growing American city. Phoenix won, growing 21% (200,000 residents) during 1990-98. But Western growth is also widespread: new home sale and price records were set in Denver in 1999 (prices climbed 17% from 1998); most small towns are booming; thousands of new residential units sold even before they were built in the booming ski resorts; and ranchland pretty

much everywhere in the West fetched twice to ten-times its agricultural value.

III. Settlement Patterns

Although regional observers are fond of pointing out that most westerners are “urbanites” (some 80% live in urban areas), the truth is that most Westerners are “suburbanites,” and the suburbs, not the central cities, saw most of the region’s growth since World War II, as well as gained most of the new jobs and businesses. During 1990-98, the Phoenix suburb Chandler grew 78% (70,000 residents), and Henderson, outside Las Vegas, more than doubled while Mesquite, Nev., grew by 441%, from 1,821 folks, into a fair-sized suburban town of 10,125. Still, while such suburbs will absorb the majority of the 25 million more people expected to live in the eleven Western states by 2025, there is some action in the old core cities. Several “down towns” have reversed the drain to the suburbs. Denver proper—a geographically small city-county surrounded by suburban towns—lost 25,000 residents in the 1980s, but gained 29,000 during 1990-98. Core-city residences of all sorts, from cottages to lofts, now sell at a premium.

Beyond the cities lies an emerging ex-urban landscape, a newer land use pattern in which the rural and suburban mix it up, where areas well-removed from the city feel the influence of a dispersed suburban-like development tied to growing mobility of businesses and incomes. John Cromartie (1999), a geographer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has shown that non-metropolitan counties adjacent to metro areas—what I am here calling the exurbs—are the fastest growing places in the United States (think Park County, Colorado, or Summit County, Utah, both relatively short rural commutes from large cities). The exurbs also gained jobs faster (44.5%) than metro (26.6%) or more rural counties (32.5%) during 1985-95 in the West, according to geographer William Byers (1999). In a sense, these adjacent, non-metro places are now really all part of the “urban” geography of the West—their populations rely on the nearby cities if not for daily jobs, then at least for their urban services: hub airports, entertainment, venture capital, banking, etc.

While net migration into the non-metropolitan West was high in rural counties adjacent to metro-areas, it was equally high in rural counties distant from rural areas. Cromartie found that non-metro counties in the West grew 15.5% during 1990-97, while metro counties grew an average of 12%. According to Cromartie, a record number of people (about a million) moved to the non-metro West during 1990-97. In some ways, the basic notion of "rural" needs revising: rural no longer denotes places mostly tied to agriculture. This "gentrifying range" is tough to figure out. We really don't know how much ranchland is now in non-ranching ownership, much less can we readily distinguish between working and hobby ranches. Some of the new houses that dot the range are homes to the ranchers, some bespeak a local from town who has made it good enough to buy an acreage. Others are second, third and fourth homes for the itinerant wealthy, some are retirement spots, and many are the office/residences of a newly mobile professional class that appreciates the West's open landscapes. Even these truly rural places gained jobs faster (32.5%) than metro areas (26.6%) in 1985-95, according to geographer Byers, outpacing the national average job growth of 23.4%. In some ways, the basic notion of "rural" needs revising: rural may no longer denote places mostly tied to agriculture.

Finally, the West's federal lands are perforated by booming resorts, the mountain and desert towns that act as gateways to the public lands as well as recreational centers in their own right. Some of the population growth in rural areas that Cromartie sees in migration data is associated with this settlement pattern, if the word "settlement" can be used to describe places where typically more than 50% of the housing units are "second homes." Indeed, because of non-residential ownership, and of course the non-owning visitors, population data understates resort development and impacts. Expanded skiing, snowmaking, and golf, as well as new base developments, sprawling towns, worker housing and "down-valley" worker communities all add up to a complex "resort zone" growing fast next to some of the most natural open spaces in the West.

IV. What's Coming

There's little reason to expect western growth to slow. Yes, a major global or national

economic downturn will slow it, as it will slow growth everywhere, but I submit that the current boom cannot be looked upon as another cycle in the region's long boom-bust pattern. No single commodity, or even suite of commodities, drives this boom, rather it appears to be based on a dynamic mixture of residential and business locational preferences, returns in investment, regional boosterism, and the real attractiveness of western landscapes and living. Work by economists (Vias, 1999; Power, 1996) shows that in-migration to the West now causes job growth rather than vice versa—people don't follow jobs to the West, the jobs follow people. Furthermore, the West has the highest fertility rates in the country, so its population is growing fast due to large immigration and what demographers call "natural" growth: new babies. The region is relatively young compared to its neighbor to the east, the Great Plains (the region with the oldest, on average, population in the country), and compared to the nation as a whole. Although demographers tend to simply extrapolate current trends, there is no reason not to expect the continued growth shown in Figure 3, and I think it could quicken.

Finally, much of the amenity-migration to the West has a retirement component---perhaps a quarter or more of 1990s in-migration into the Interior West is retirement-based according to some analysts---and demographic destiny points to a large retirement boom starting over the next two decades. A big bulge of Baby Boomer retirement is on the way (Figure 4). Nothing will stand in its way, certainly not the economy's inevitable ups and downs. Retirement may not be fully recession-proof (though it is counter-cyclical in that many firms use early retirement to cut workforces in tough times), but analysts see it as an enduring boon to Western places: retirees bring permanent incomes with them, incomes independent of resource extraction, industrial production, or even the services economy of tourism and recreation. Economist Thomas Power (1991), taking a close look at the Greater Yellowstone economy, points out that retirement brings more money to the region than commodity exports; and, a retirement dollar has the same multiplier effect as one made cutting trees or drilling for oil. Furthermore, he argues, retirees bring different cultural facets, new ideas, and community service to their chosen places.

With high rates of international and domestic in-migration to the West, continued high

natural population increase, and the coming retirement bulge, much more growth is inevitable. Most of it will be suburban, so cities will continue to sprawl, but growing interest in semi-rural lifestyles would also seem assured to put more people than ever before out in the West's open spaces.

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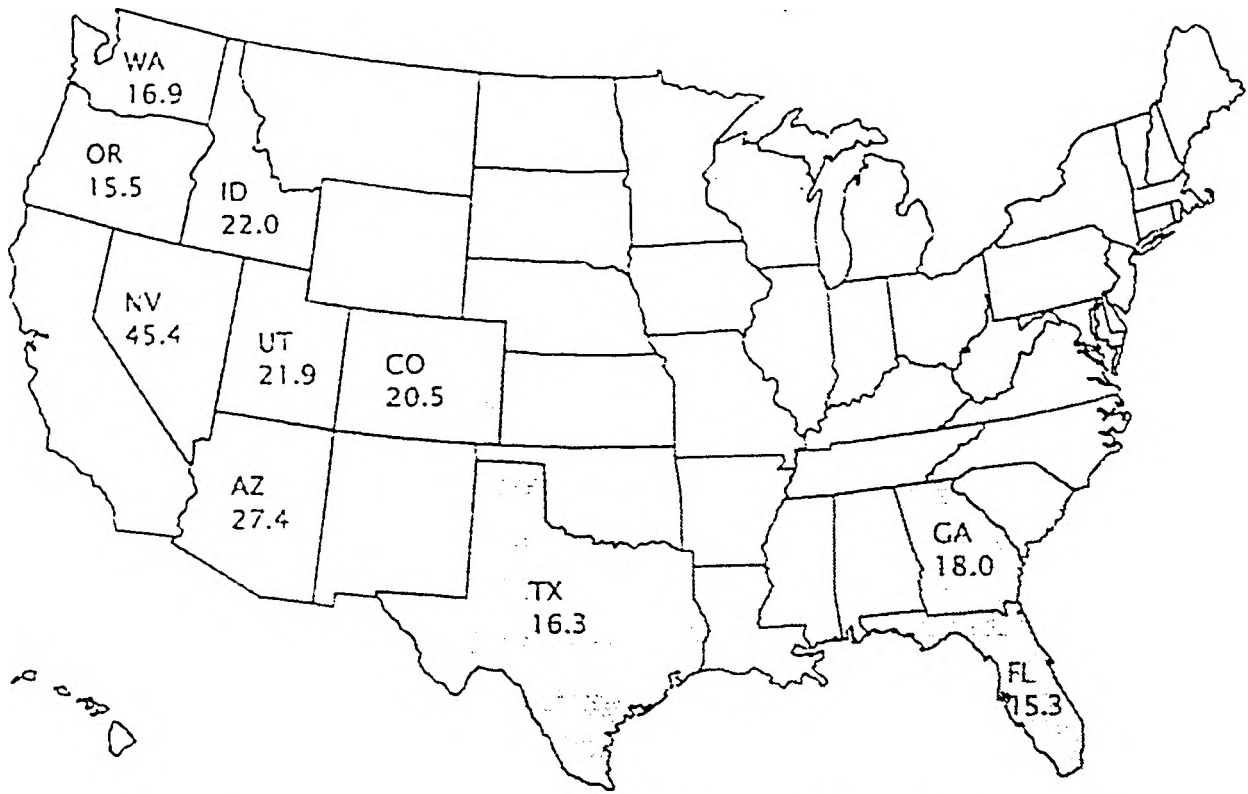


Figure 1. State growth rankings, 1990-98 (U.S. Census Bureau).

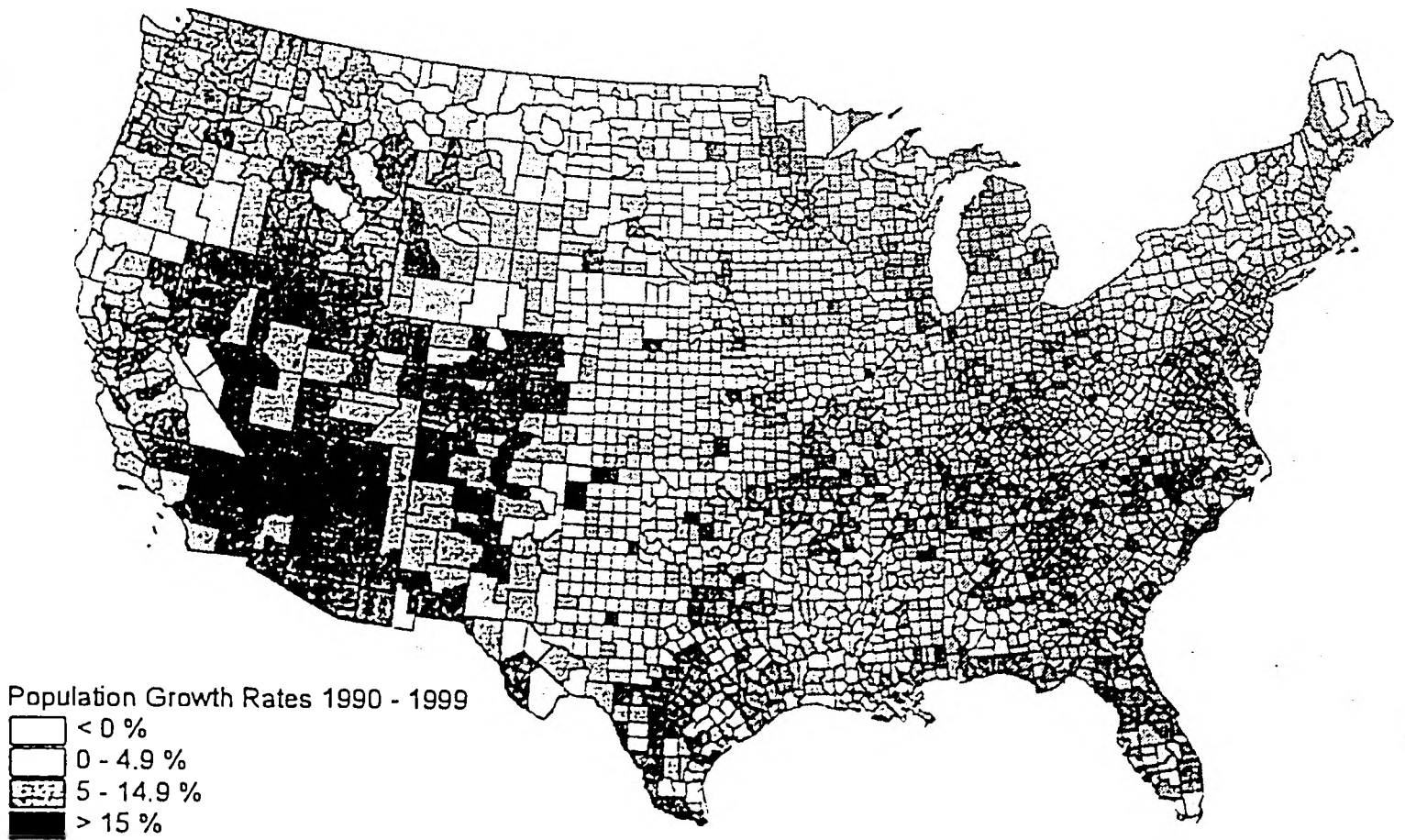
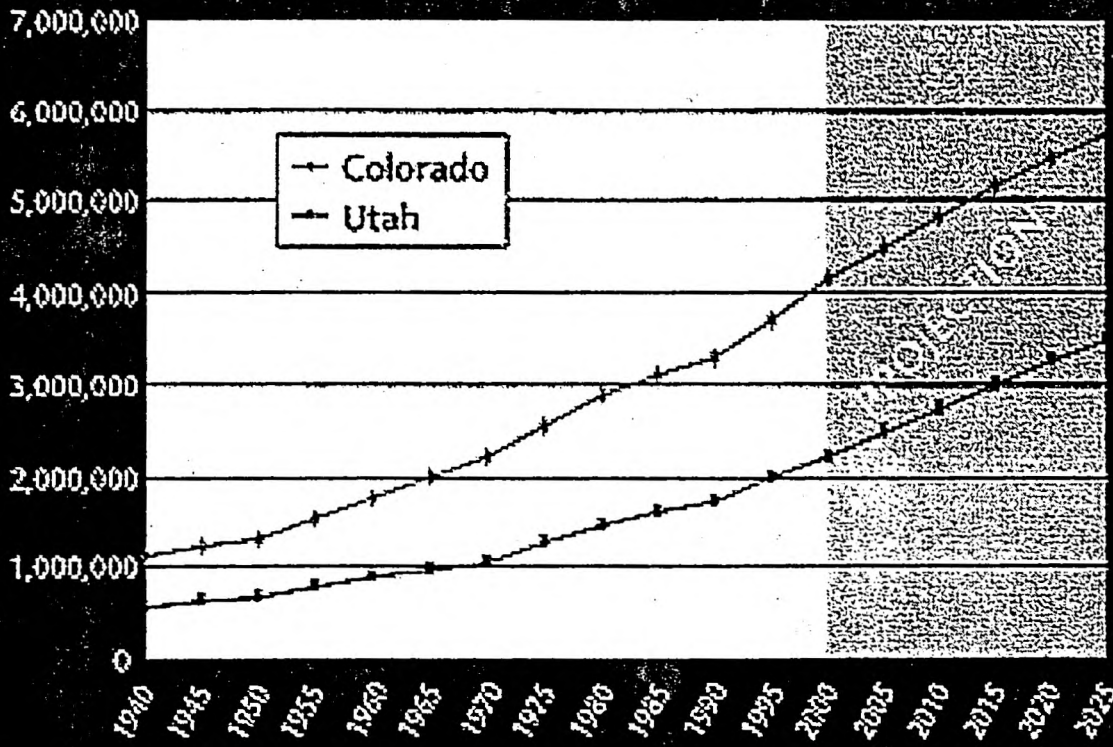


Figure 2: Population growth rates, counties, 1990-99 (U.S. Census Bureau)

COLORADO, UTAH

Population Growth, 1940 to 2025



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 3: Population for Utah and Colorado. U.S. Census Bureau

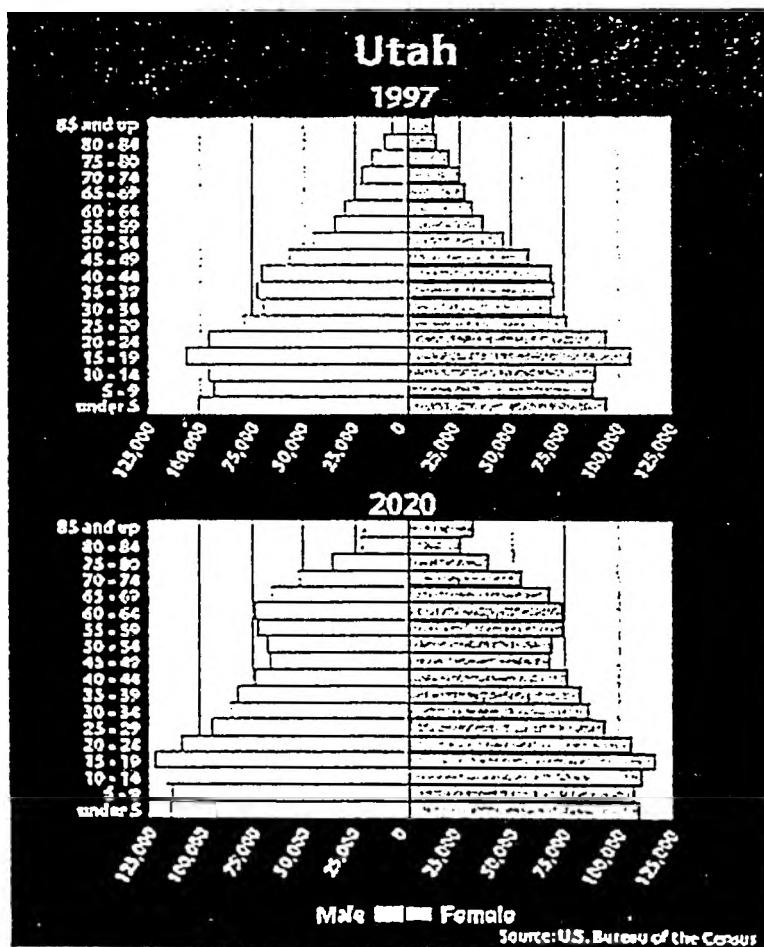
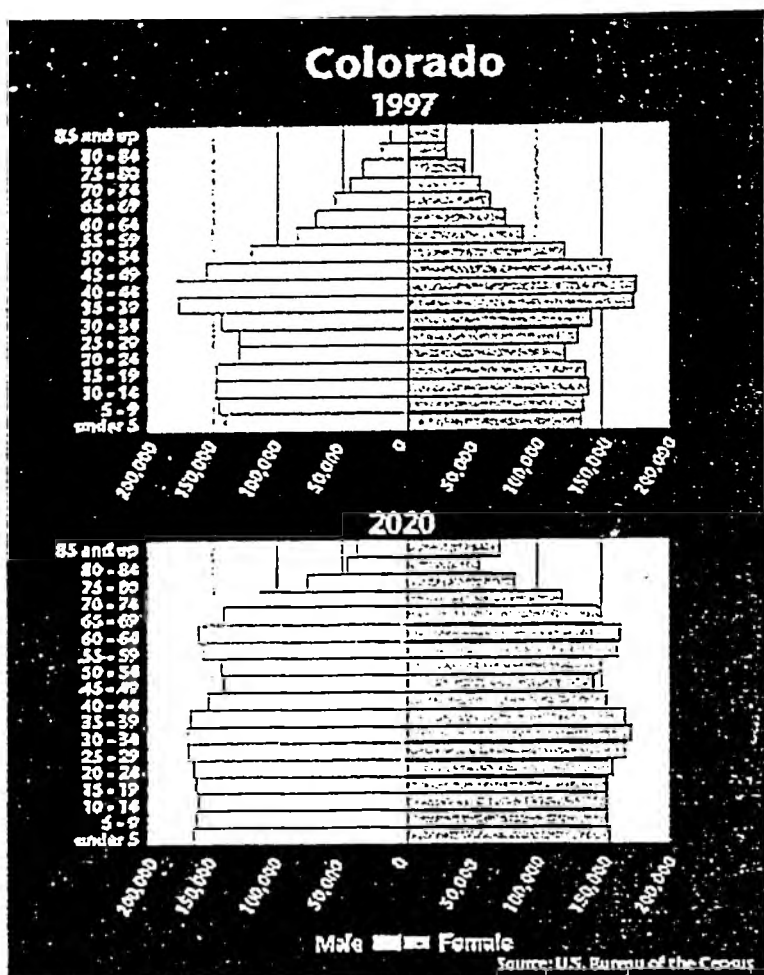


Figure 4 Population age distributions showing baby boomer bulge and continued high fertility; (a) Colorado and (b) Utah.