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Notes from the U.S. Census Bureau's March 24, 2016, release of County and Metro Area Population Estimates as of July 1, 2015

The following are key aspects of these new population estimates, summarized in bullet-style form. Figures for Nebraska locations are the focus of this summary; they are listed in no particular order. Associated excel tables contain the data. Figure 1 show the percentage change in population from 2010 to 2015 for Nebraska counties.

1. Halfway through the 2010s decade, a relatively larger number of Nebraska counties are experiencing population growth. Data released by the U.S. Census Bureau show that 29 of Nebraska's 93 counties are estimated to have gained population between July 1, 2010, and July 1, 2015. This compares to 25 having growth in the latter half of the 2000s decade (2005 to 2010) and only 18 in the first half of the 2000s decade (2000 to 2005).
2. Nebraska's recent improvements in the number of counties experiencing growth stands in contrast to what its best comparison states of Iowa and Kansas have experienced. Only 28 Iowa counties have had population growth in the most recent five-year period, down from 33 in the early 2000s and 34 in the late 2000s. Kansas has had 27 counties gain population from July 1, 2010, to July 1, 2015, up slightly from 20 from 2000 to 2005, but down significantly from the 42 counties that gained population during 2005 to 2010.
3. Annual county population estimates are available from the U.S. Census Bureau since 1969. Thus, for historical perspective, Table 1 provides the number and percentage of counties with population growth in these states for each early and late five-year period in each decade since 1970. During the 1970s about half of the counties in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska experienced population growth. In the 1980s only around 20% of the counties gained population, as each state endured a recession and farm crisis. Growth rebounded in the 1990s, with again around half of the counties in each state experiencing population growth. The number and percentage of growing counties declined again in the 2000s, as only more-populated metro counties tended to gain population. In the 2010s Nebraska's percentage of growing counties is the largest, but still has less than one in three counties gaining population (31.2%).

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Table 1. Comparison of Counties with Population Growth During Various Five-year Periods for Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska: 1970-2015

	Number of Counties			Percent of Counties		
	Iowa	Kansas	Nebraska	Iowa	Kansas	Nebraska
Total counties	99	105	93	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Growth 1970-1975	51	57	47	51.5%	54.3%	50.5%
Growth 1975-1980	50	58	46	50.5%	55.2%	49.5%
Growth 1980-1985	5	38	19	5.1%	36.2%	20.4%
Growth 1985-1990	11	25	9	11.1%	23.8%	9.7%
Growth 1990-1995	64	60	53	64.6%	57.1%	57.0%
Growth 1995-2000	49	43	31	49.5%	41.0%	33.3%
Growth 2000-2005	33	20	18	33.3%	19.0%	19.4%
Growth 2005-2010	34	42	25	34.3%	40.0%	26.9%
Growth 2010-2015	28	27	29	28.3%	25.7%	31.2%

Source: 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

4. Evaluating a slightly different timeframe from the April 1, 2010, Census to the July 1, 2015, population estimates, the components of population change are also slightly more positive in Nebraska than in Iowa or Kansas. Table 2 shows that population growth mainly stems from births exceeding deaths between 2010 and 2015, with 59% of Nebraska and Kansas counties experiencing natural increase, along with 55% in Iowa. **Net immigration occurred in more than 25% of Nebraska counties, compared to only 21% in Iowa and 16% in Kansas.** Each of these values trails the U.S. average, where 40% of counties had net immigration and 64% had births exceeding deaths.

The figures for Nebraska so far during the 2010s decade are an improvement upon what occurred in the state during the 2000s, when 24 counties had population increase, 49 had natural increase, and only 14 had net immigration.

Table 2. Population Change and Counties Experiencing Natural Increase (Birth exceeding Deaths) and Net Immigration: United States, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska: 2010-2015

	Number of counties	2010-2015 Number of Counties with:		
		Population Increase	Natural Increase	Net Immigration
United States	3,142	1,486	1,999	1,254
Iowa	99	28	55	21
Kansas	105	28	62	17
Nebraska	93	31	55	24

	Percent of counties	2010-2015 Percentage of Counties with:		
		Population Increase	Natural Increase	Net Immigration
United States	100.0%	47.3%	63.6%	39.9%
Iowa	100.0%	28.3%	55.6%	21.2%
Kansas	100.0%	26.7%	59.0%	16.2%
Nebraska	100.0%	33.3%	59.1%	25.8%

Source: 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

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5. Nebraska’s most populated counties continue to lead regarding population growth. Among counties with more than 1,000 people, the five with the most population also had the highest population increases from 2010 to 2015 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Nebraska Counties with the Highest Population Increases: 2010-2015

2015 Population Estimate		2010 Census to 2015 Population Estimate Change		2010 Census to 2015 Population Estimate Change Rate	
1. Douglas	550,064	1. Douglas	32,954	1. Sarpy	10.6%
2. Lancaster	306,468	2. Lancaster	21,061	2. Lancaster	7.4%
3. Sarpy	175,692	3. Sarpy	16,852	3. Douglas	6.4%
4. Hall	61,680	4. Hall	3,073	4. Buffalo	6.0%
5. Buffalo	48,863	5. Buffalo	2,761	5. Hall	5.2%

Source: 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

6. Douglas County hit a new all-time high population, surpassing the 550,000 person milestone in 2015 and Sarpy County exceeded the 175,000 person level for the first time. **Seven other Nebraska counties joined Douglas and Sarpy counties (and the state) in hitting all-time population highs in 2015.** Those counties and their respective estimated 2015 populations were: Adams (31,587); Buffalo (48,863); Cass (25,512); Hall (61,680); Lancaster (306,468); Platte (32,847); and Seward (17,110) with Nebraska at 1,896,190. Additionally, Saunders County had an estimated 21,016 people in 2015, its highest number in more than 100 years, since having 21,179 in the 1910 Census.

7. With Nebraska’s “Big 3” counties of Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy leading in both the rate of population increase as well as the number of persons added, these counties continue to gain in the proportion or share of Nebraska’s overall population. More than 1 million people (1,032,224) or 54.4% of Nebraska’s residents live in these three counties. The big 3 have gained in their share of the Nebraska population each year since 1980, when they contained 43.1% of Nebraska’s population.

The big 3 counties have been gaining around 0.35 percentage points in the share of Nebraska’s population each year. Extrapolating this to 2020, when the next Census occurs, they would be expected to contain about 56% of Nebraska’s population. Since seats in the Unicameral Legislature are apportioned by population, this would suggest these counties will control 27 seats fully contained within their borders plus parts of districts not fully contained. For the current Unicameral, the big 3 counties have 25 seats fully contained within their borders (or 51% of the 49 total seats) plus parts of three other districts, as the big 3 counties contained 52.6% of the state’s population in 2010.

8. Some Nebraska counties are estimated to have experienced sizeable population losses since 2010. Nebraska has 12 counties with less than 1,000 residents and 20 counties with less than 2,500 residents in 2015. The population estimates tend to be more accurate for larger counties and thus looking at total population change rather than percent change tends to be a better (more accurate) measure on this topic. Table 4 shows the areas with the most population loss since 2010 and in the latest year from 2014-2015.

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Table 4. Nebraska Counties with Most Population Loss since 2010 and from 2014-2015

2010 to 2015 County Population Loss		2014 to 2015 County Population Loss	
1. Scotts Bluff	-709 (-1.9%)	1. Scotts Bluff	-202
2. Lincoln	-632 (-1.7%)	2. Stanton	-144
3. Dawson	-440 (-1.8%)	3. Dawson	-138
4. Gage	-411 (-1.8%)	4. Madison	-130
5. Keith	-305 (-3.6%)	5. Butler	-123

Source: 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

9. Based upon population change rates from 2010 to 2015, extrapolating those rates to 2020 would show that eight Nebraska counties would lose more than 10% of their population during the 2010s decade. During the 2000s, 23 counties or one-fourth of all Nebraska counties lost 10% or more of their population, which was one of the highest proportions of a state's counties losing this level of population among all U.S. states. Thus, the lower number of Nebraska counties potentially having this high level of population loss is a positive development, and another indicator that population change so far during the 2010s has improved versus what occurred in Nebraska in the 2000s.

10. With the 2010 to 2015 data we can also extrapolate decade rates for how the population changes, births versus deaths called natural change, and net migration. The rates are expressed as a percentage of the 2010 Census population and show the areas having the most positive and negative population change factors. The top and bottom 10 counties on these measures are shown on Table 5.

Those highest in natural change tend to be counties highest in total population (Sarpy, Douglas, Buffalo, and Lancaster), or those that have a relatively large Hispanic presence in the county (Colfax, Hall, and Dawson). Thurston County, with its large Native American presence also ranks highly, as it has traditionally in earlier decades. Those counties lowest in natural change tend to be located along the Kansas border (Dundy, Webster, Furnas, and Jefferson), an area that tends to have a relatively old population compared to other parts of Nebraska.

Those counties with the highest net migration rates tend to be larger areas with the highest levels of total population growth (Sarpy, Lancaster, Douglas, Buffalo, and Hall). Areas with the lowest net migration rates tend to be rural, but also tend to have a Hispanic presence (Dakota and Dawson). While not in the bottom 10, other counties with large Hispanic populations (Colfax, Scotts Bluff, Madison, Saline, and Dodge) all have had outmigration thus far this decade.

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Table 5. Top and Bottom 10 Nebraska County Decade Rates for Components of Population Changes based on Changes between 2010 and 2015

Natural Change (Decade Rate)			Net Migration (Decade rate)		
Area		Rank	Area		Rank
Nebraska	5.9	–	Nebraska	1.5	–
Sarpy	10.9	1	Banner	13.5	1
Dakota	10.3	2	Sarpy	9.3	2
Thurston	9.6	3	Lancaster	6.4	3
Colfax	9.4	4	Garfield	4.9	4
Douglas	8.9	5	Hooker	3.9	5
Buffalo	7.8	6	Douglas	3.6	6
Logan	7.7	7	Buffalo	3.5	7
Lancaster	7.4	8	Cherry	2.6	8
Hall	7.3	9	Otoe	2.6	9
Dawson	7.1	10	Hall	2.6	10
Burt	-3.9	84	Frontier	-10.1	84
Jefferson	-3.9	85	Dawson	-10.4	85
Garden	-4.2	86	Dundy	-11.9	86
Rock	-4.2	87	Stanton	-12.2	87
Furnas	-4.3	88	Dakota	-12.7	88
Boyd	-5.0	89	Loup	-12.7	89
Webster	-5.2	90	Wheeler	-14.0	90
Fillmore	-5.8	91	Hayes	-14.8	91
Garfield	-7.3	92	Rock	-16.1	92
Dundy	-7.4	93	McPherson	-21.9	93

Source: 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

11. The eight-county Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area (Harrison, Mills, and Pottawattamie in Iowa and Cass, Douglas, Sarpy, Saunders, and Washington in Nebraska) had another solid year of population growth, increasing by more than 10,000 to reach 915,312, an all-time high. The Omaha-Council Bluffs metro now ranks as the 59th largest metro area in 2015, after having passed Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Albany, New York, since 2010 (when Omaha ranked as the 61st largest metro area). If recent growth trends continue, the Omaha metro is expected to hit the 1 million population mark in 2024.

12. Nebraska’s other metro areas have also increased in population since the 2010 Census. The Lincoln metro (Lancaster and Seward counties) ranked 158th largest in 2010 but with 323,578 people in 2015 now ranks 154th largest. The Sioux City metro (consisting of Woodbury and Plymouth counties in Iowa, Dakota and Dixon counties in Nebraska, and Union County in South Dakota) now has 169,069 residents calling it home, an increase of more than 500 people since 2010, although its ranking has slipped from the 237th largest in 2010 to 245th largest currently. Finally, Nebraska’s newest metro area of Grand Island (Hall, Hamilton, Howard, and Merrick counties) now has more than 85,000 residents (85,066), rising from the 373rd largest metro in 2010 to now be 369th largest. The U.S. currently has 381 separately defined metro areas. **All four Nebraska metro areas hit all-time population highs in 2015.**

13. Comparing among metro areas of similar size by grouping the nation’s 381 metro areas into the top 100, second 100, third 100 and last 81 based upon their population in the 2010

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Census shows the ranking of population growth has improved for each of Nebraska’s four metro areas. The Omaha-Council Bluffs metro has grown by 1.1% per year since 2010, the 42nd highest growth rate among the 100 most populated metros in 2010. This is better than the 48th highest growth rate among the same metro areas during the 2000s (even though the annual growth was higher in the 2000s—at 1.3% per year—current population growth is lower than during the 2000s for many metro areas). See Table 6.

The Lincoln metro’s annual growth rate thus far during the 2010s ranks in the top 20 (17th best) among the second 100 most populated metro areas in 2010; its population change only ranked 36th best among this peer group during the 2000s. The Sioux City metro, while continuing to have meager population growth, has improved its growth ranking from 91st best to 77th best among its 100 peers. The new Grand Island metro area’s growth rate between 2010 and 2015 of 0.75% per year is higher than its rate during the 2000s decade of 0.53% per year. The current growth rate ranks 20th highest among its peer group of the 81 smallest metro areas in the United States. It only ranked 46th highest compared to its peers during the 2000s.

Table 6. Population Statistics for Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the United States (February 2013 Delineations): 2000, 2010, and 2015

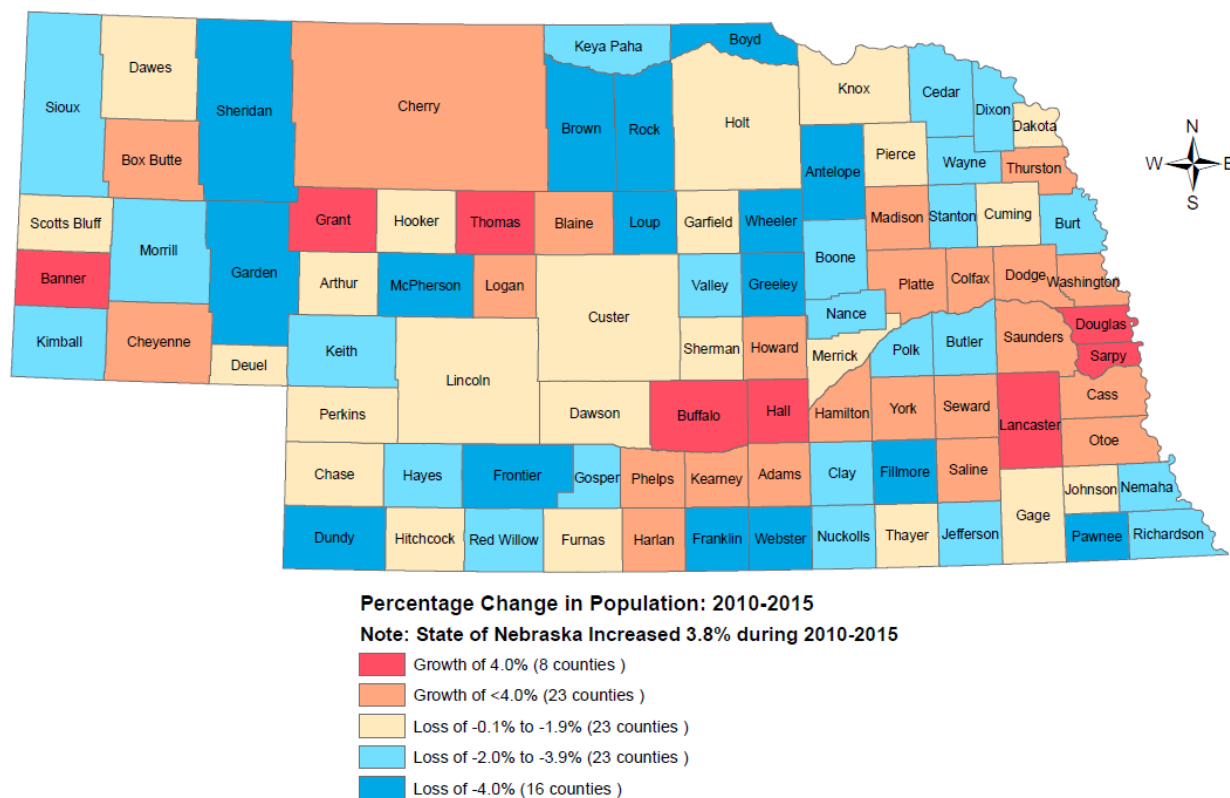
Metropolitan Statistical Area	Population			Ranking of Population		
	April 1, 2000	April 1, 2010	July 1, 2015	April 1, 2000	April 1, 2010	July 1, 2015
Omaha-Council Bluffs, NE-IA	767,041	865,350	915,312	62	61	59
Lincoln, NE	266,787	302,157	323,578	161	158	154
Sioux City, IA-NE-SD	167,902	168,563	169,069	219	237	245
Grand Island, NE	77,708	81,805	85,066	372	373	369

Metropolitan Statistical Area	Percent Change per Year		Ranking of Percent Change per Year	
	2000 to 2010	2010 to 2014	2000 to 2010	2010 to 2014
Omaha-Council Bluffs, NE-IA	1.28	1.10	48	42
Lincoln, NE	1.33	1.35	36	17
Sioux City, IA-NE-SD	0.04	0.06	91	77
Grand Island, NE	0.53	0.75	46	20

Sources: 2000 Census and 2010 Census (Table CPH-T-5 released March 2013); and 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

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Figure 1. Percentage Change in Population in Nebraska Counties: 2010 to 2015



Source: 2015 Population Estimates (released 3-24-2016), U.S. Census Bureau

The Census Bureau will release population estimates for counties and states by age, gender, and race/ethnicity at a later time, typically in May. Total population estimates for cities and towns will follow in June. To learn more about Nebraska population change, make plans to attend the 27th Annual Nebraska Data Users Conference, to be held Wednesday August 17, 2016, in Omaha on the UNO Dodge Campus. A full comparison of middle of the decade population changes will be discussed. Watch cpar.unomaha.edu for details.

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