

Who Are Tennesseans?

5 Insights About Tennessee's Population Over the Last Decade

August 2026

Key Takeaways

- Tennessee's population grew over the past decade to 7.3 million—largely driven by new residents from other states.
 - Although Tennessee is geographically rural, most people live in just a few urban areas.
 - Tennessee's population is aging—with the number of Tennesseans ages 65 and older increasing by 30% over the last decade.
 - Tennessee's population became more racially and ethnically diverse over the last decade, but these trends varied significantly by county.
 - Population growth and demographic shifts come with policy implications.
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The decisions made by Tennessee's next governor and General Assembly will shape the state's future for years to come. Throughout the remainder of 2026, The Sycamore Institute will release a series of concise, evidence-based insights drawn from our past research to provide context on the policies, trends, and challenges that could define Tennessee's next chapter. Each brief offers a quick, accessible overview of an important issue and links to deeper analysis for those who want to explore it further.

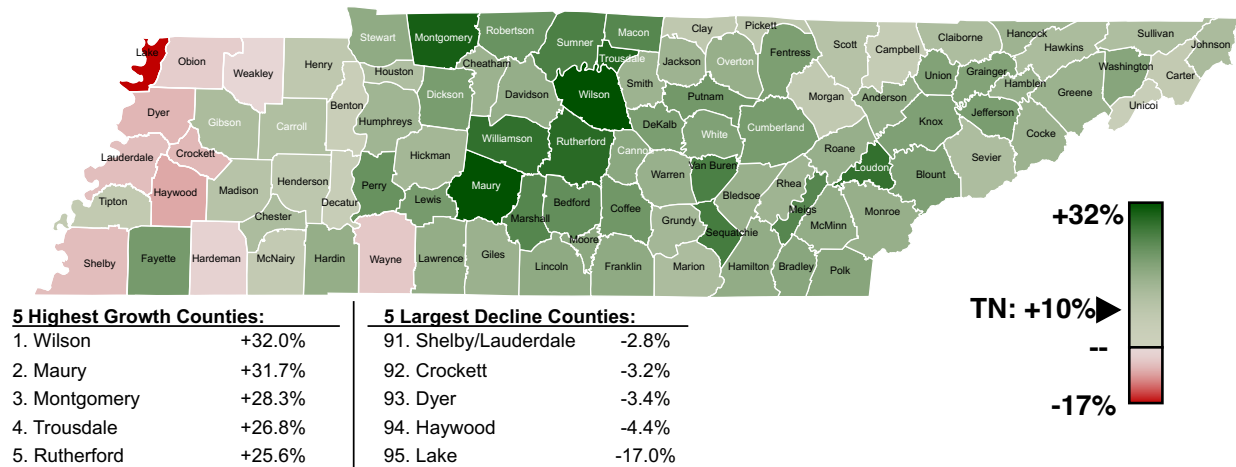
This brief focuses on who lives in Tennessee—including population size, composition, and demographic trends over the last decade.

1. Tennessee's population grew over the past decade to 7.3 million—largely driven by new residents from other states.

Between 2016 and 2025, Tennessee's population grew 10%—from 6.6 million to 7.2 million people. During this time, Tennessee's population grew by about 669,000 people—or 1.0% per year on average (**Figure 1**). This made Tennessee the 9th fastest-growing state in the country over this period (**Figure 2**).
(1) (2)

Figure 3. 85 of Tennessee's 95 Counties Saw Population Growth Over the Last Decade

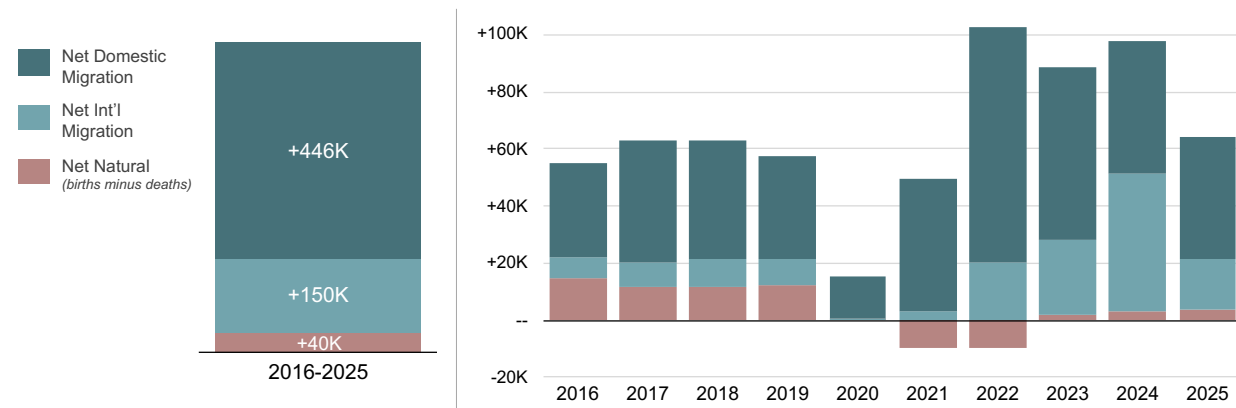
Percent Change in County Population from 2016 to 2025



Source: The Sycamore Institute's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's population estimates (3) (4)

Figure 4. Tennessee's Population Gains Over the Last Decade Were Largely the Result of New Residents from Other States

Change in Tennessee's Population by Cause (2016-2025)



Note: Due to estimation methodology, Census' individual components of population change do not always add up to total population change. (5)

Source: The Sycamore Institute's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's population estimates (1) (2)

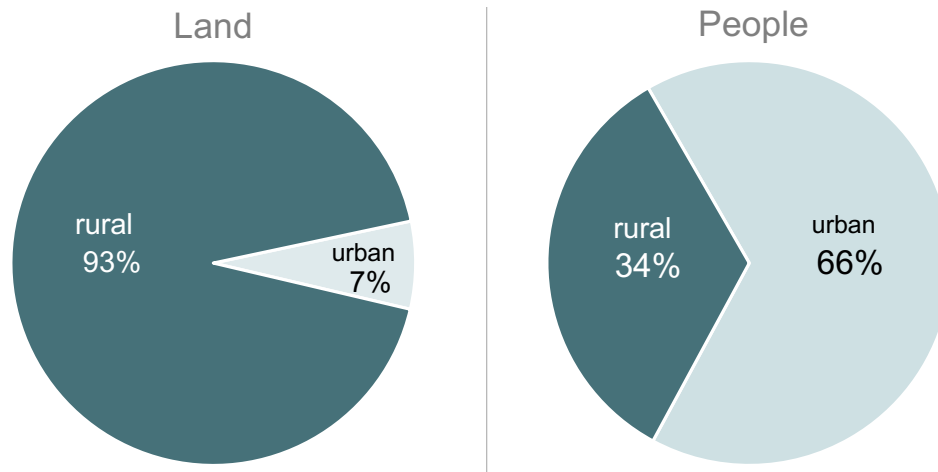
2. Although Tennessee is geographically rural, most people live in just a few urban areas.

As of 2020, about 93% of Tennessee's land area was classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as rural, but most residents—approximately 66%—lived in urban areas (Figure 5). (6) This means the state's population is concentrated in a relatively small number of places. In 2025, for example, about 55% of Tennesseans lived in the state's 10 most populous counties and one-third lived in its 10 largest cities

(Figures 6 and 7). (7) (4) Outside these population centers, many counties are predominately or entirely rural. In fact, there were 32 counties in Tennessee in 2020 where all residents lived in rural areas, and 23 counties where fewer than half of residents did (Figure 8). (6)

Figure 5. Most Tennessee Land is Rural, But 66% of Tennesseans Live in Urban Areas

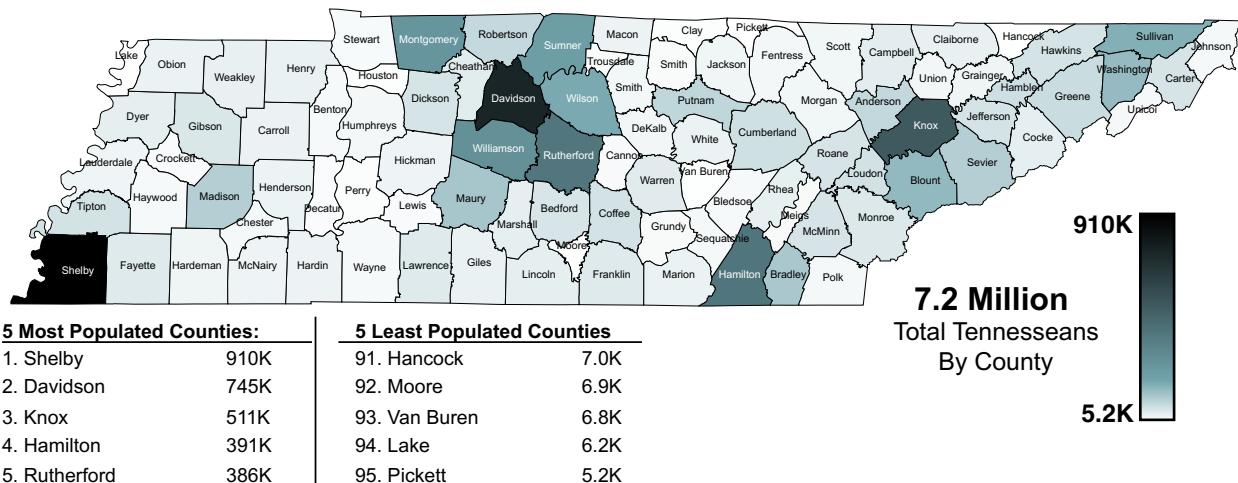
Percentage of Rural and Urban Land vs. Percentage of People Living in Rural and Urban Areas (2020*)



*Urban/rural classifications and population counts are based on the 2020 decennial census.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 state level urban-rural classification (6)

Figure 6. Most of Tennessee's Population Live in Just a Few Urban Counties

Tennessee's Population by County (2025)



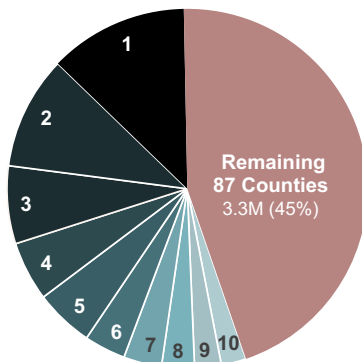
Source: U.S. Census Bureau's July 1, 2025 population estimates (4)

Figure 7. Much of Tennessee's Population is Concentrated in Its Largest Counties and Cities

Tennessee's Population by Location (2025)

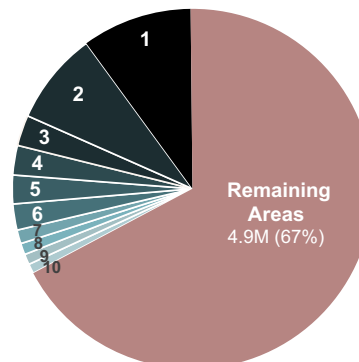
10 Largest Counties

1. Shelby	910K
2. Davidson	746K
3. Knox	511K
4. Hamilton	391K
5. Rutherford	386K
6. Williamson	272K
7. Montgomery	250K
8. Sumner	216K
9. Wilson	175K
10. Sullivan	164K



10 Largest Cities

1. Nashville	721K
2. Memphis	610K
3. Knoxville	202K
4. Chattanooga	194K
5. Clarksville	189K
6. Murfreesboro	171K
7. Franklin	90K
8. Johnson City	75K
9. Jackson	69K
10. Hendersonville	64K

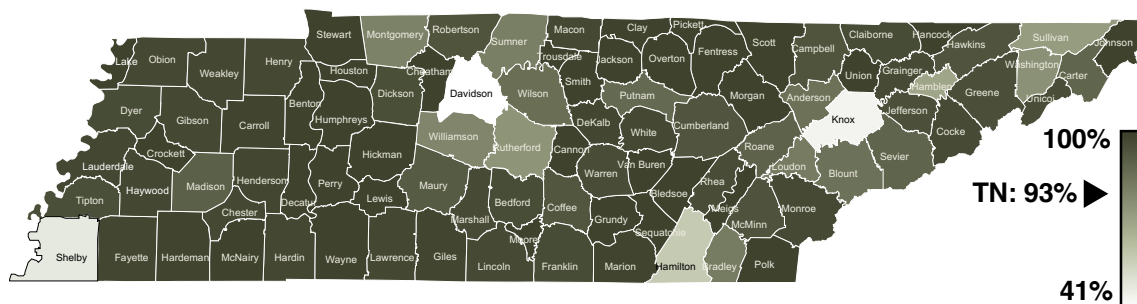


Source: The Sycamore Institute's analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's July 1, 2025 Population Estimates (4) (7)

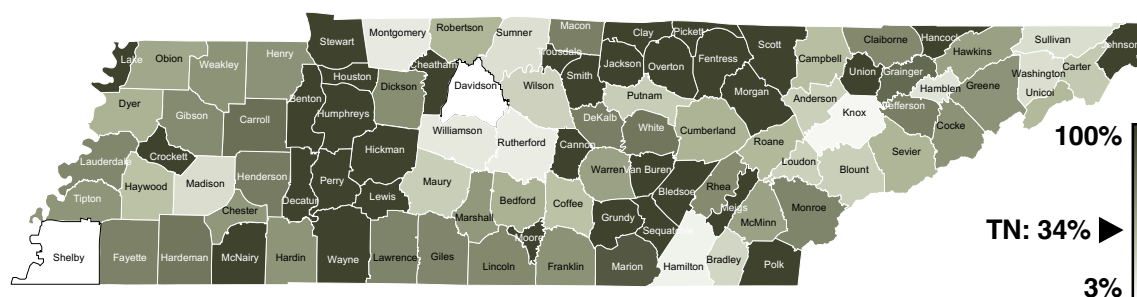
Figure 8. The Share of People Living in Rural Areas Varies Widely Across Counties

Rural Land and Population by County (2020*)

Percentage of County Land Designated as Rural (2020)



Percentage of County Population in a Rural Area (2020)



*Urban/rural classifications and population counts are based on the 2020 decennial census.

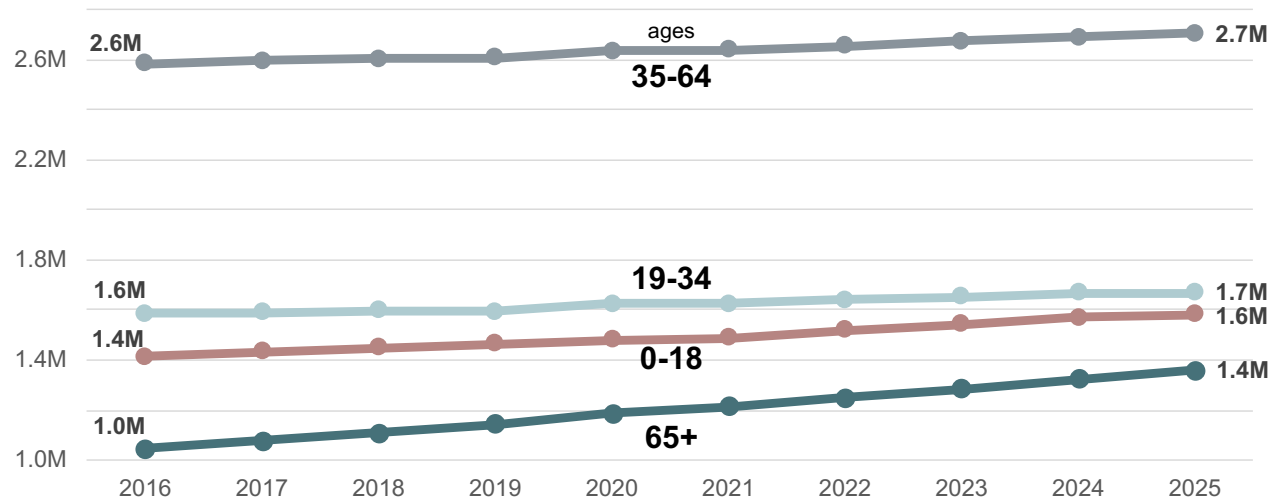
Source: U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 county-level urban and rural classification (6)

3. Tennessee's population is aging.

Over the past decade, the number of Tennesseans ages 65 and older has increased by 30%—faster than any other age group in the state (Figure 9). Between 2016 and 2025, this age group grew from 15.7% of the state's population to 18.6%. (8) (9)

Figure 9. Older Adults are the Fastest Growing Age Group in Tennessee

Tennessee's Population by Age Group (2016-2025)



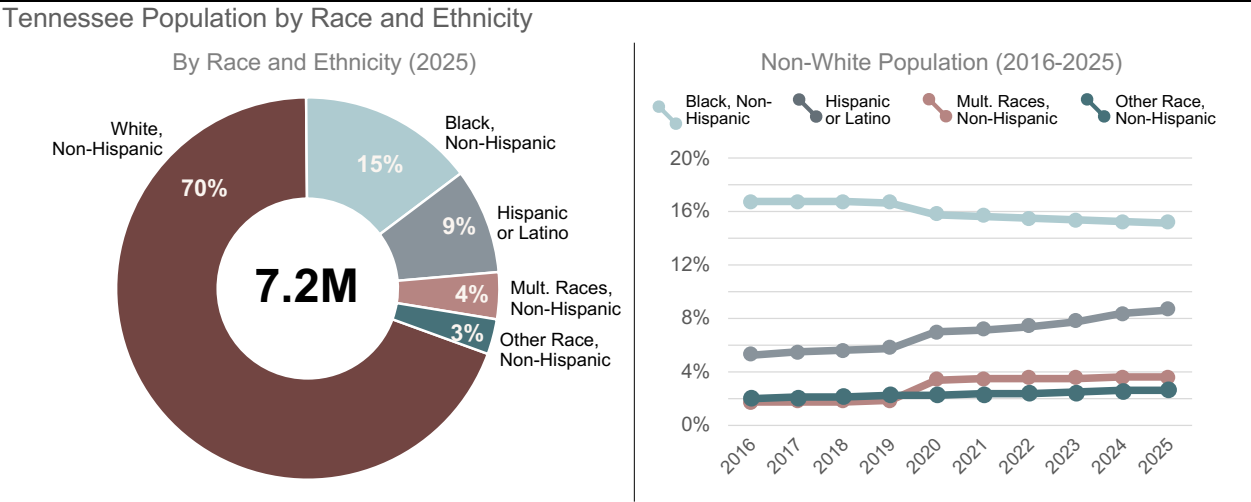
Source: The Sycamore Institute's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's population estimates (8) (9)

4. Tennessee's population became more racially and ethnically diverse over the last decade, but these trends varied by location.

In 2025, about 70% of Tennessee's population was white, non-Hispanic—a share that varied from 32.2% of Shelby County's population to 95.4% of Scott County's (Figure 10 and 11). About 15.2% of the state's population was black, non-Hispanic—followed by Hispanic (8.6%), multi-racial, non-Hispanic (3.6%), and all other non-Hispanic races (2.6%). (9)

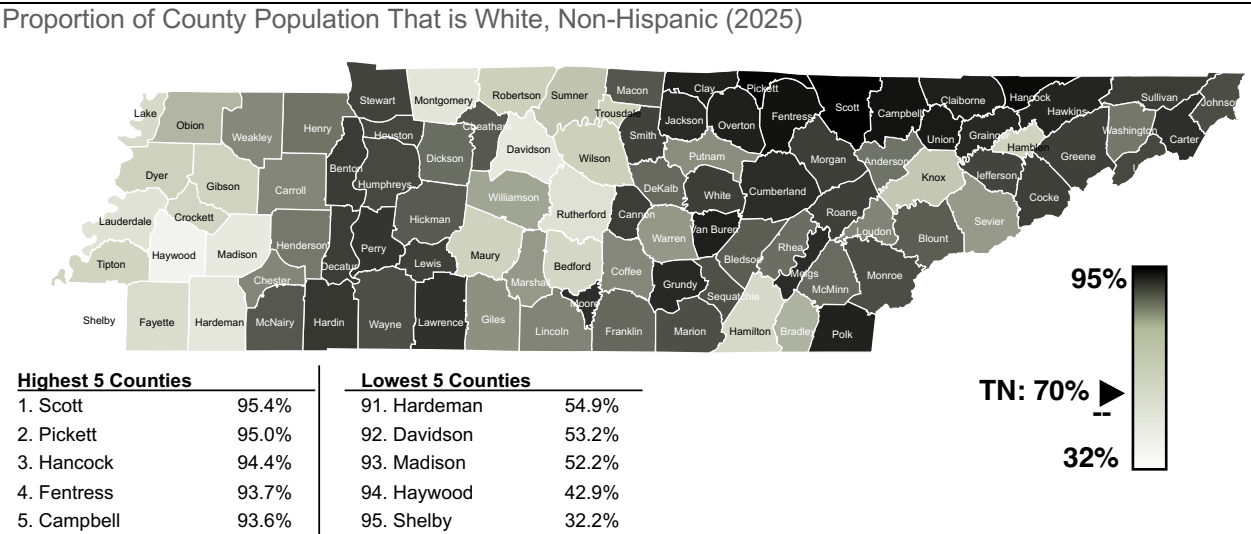
Over the past decade, the proportion of non-white individuals in Tennessee grew from 25.7% to 30%—a 4.3 percentage point increase. This trend is largely driven by growth in the number of individuals who are Hispanic and/or multiracial. Between 2016-2025, the largest percentage point increases in the proportion of the population that was non-white occurred just outside several of Tennessee's most urban counties. For example, 27.9% of Rutherford Countians were a race or ethnicity other than white, non-Hispanic in 2025—compared to 39.3% in 2016—an 11.4 percentage point increase (Figure 12). (3) (4)

Figure 10. Tennessee Remains Majority White, But Its Population Became More Diverse Over the Last Decade



Source: The Sycamore Institute’s analysis of U.S. Census Bureau’s population estimates (8) (9)

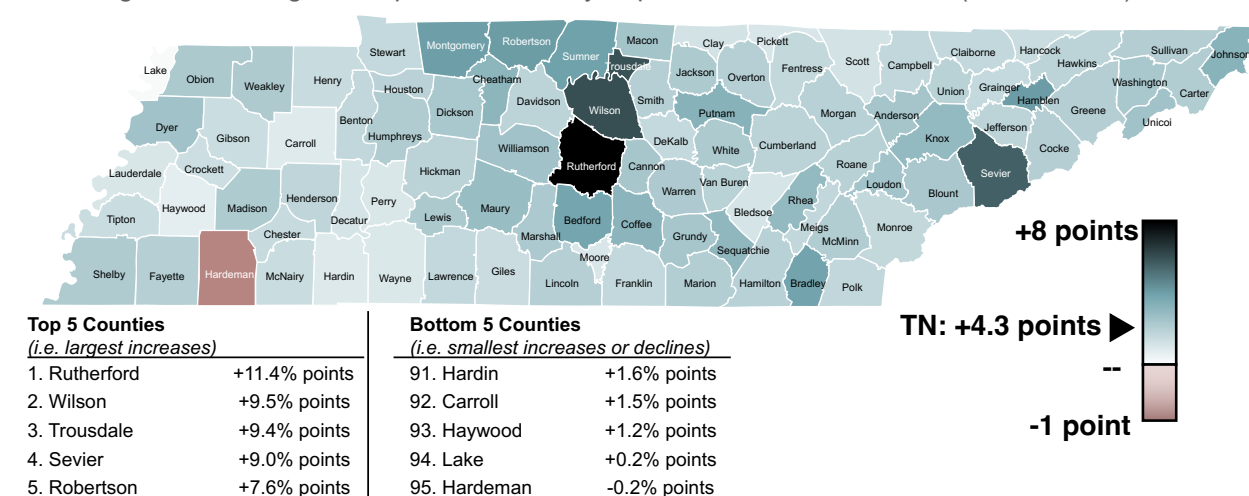
Figure 11. In 2025, about 70% of Tennesseans Were Non-Hispanic White—A Proportion That Varied Significantly Across Counties



Source: The Sycamore Institute’s analysis of U.S. Census Bureau’s July 1, 2025 population estimates (3) (4)

Figure 12. Non-White Populations Grew Fastest Right Outside Some of Tennessee's Most Urban Counties Over the Last Decade

Percentage Point Change in Proportion of County Population That is Non-White (2016 to 2025)



Note: Includes individuals who identified as Hispanic or a race other than "white alone."

Source: The Sycamore Institute's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau population estimates (3) (4)

5. Population growth and demographic shifts come with policy implications.

Tennessee's population growth and demographic shifts have policy implications for the state's future. The state's composition has changed over the past decade—marked by population growth, immigration, an aging population, and increased racial and ethnic diversity. These trends shape demand for housing, infrastructure, workforce, and public services, with effects that vary based on local patterns and demographic characteristics. It will be important for policymakers to understand these population changes as they consider how to allocate resources, plan for future demand, and support communities with different needs across the state.

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