Migration had dramatic impacts on Montana during the last two decades, affecting the total population, its distribution between rural and urban areas, and composition by age, including school-age populations. Montana as a whole saw more people move in than out, except among those in their twenties who continue to leave the state. In fact, net migration accounted for just over one-half of Montana’s total population gain of 87,000 during the decade. The rest of the gain came from natural increase: births minus deaths.

Migration patterns differed dramatically by region of the state. The western and southern parts of the state experienced inflows of most age groups, including 18- to 22-year-olds attending the two largest universities. But like the rest of the state, 26- to 31-year-olds generally left in larger numbers than they arrived. In contrast, the eastern and northern regions of Montana experienced very little in-migration of any age group. Yellowstone County – the largest metropolitan area in the state – had the most robust pattern of in-migration by all age groups except 18- to 20-year-olds.
This report uses population data from the 2000 and 2010 Censuses and death data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to estimate net migration to Montana. Net migration may be positive or negative, i.e. more people may move in than move out, or vice versa.

Figure 1 displays net migration to Montana during the decade 2000 to 2010. Migrants are classified by their age in 2010. Two features are noticeable. First, overall net migration was positive: 46,000 more people moved into Montana than moved out during the 2000s. Second, migration varied dramatically by age. A significant number of young people left the state during the 2000s. Specifically, about 8,700 more people ages 22 to 31 left the state than moved in, amounting to about 8 percent of this group’s population in 2000. Net migration was positive for every other age group. Writing in the Montana Business Quarterly in 1997, Christiane Von Reichert and James Sylvester noted that about sixty percent of the people moving to Montana have some sort of tie to the state – either they lived here previously or have relatives in the state. Apparently, they brought their children with them as well – migration increased the number of 10- to 17- year-olds by almost 10,000 during the decade.

Dramatic differences in migration occurred across regions. Figure 2 shows that about 60,000 more people moved into the western/southern part of Montana than moved out. Net migration was positive for every age group except 26-31 year olds, and included substantial numbers of children.

Movement to the Western/Southern region (counties west of the Rocky Mountain crest and the southern tier east to Carbon and Stillwater counties) was the result of several forces. First, most of Montana’s major trade centers (except for Billings and Great Falls) are located in this region. Wholesale and retail trade, business, health, and other services have been among the fastest growing sectors of the economy, and they are concentrated in the western trade centers. Second, some businesses in nontraditional industries were created or expanded, including high-tech firms such as RightNow Technologies in Bozeman and Applied Materials in Kalispell. Third, Stillwater and Sweet Grass counties in the south experienced substantial growth related to mining development. Fourth, some people moved to Western/ Southern Montana as a retirement destination, as evidenced by the increase in the over- 60 age group. Lastly, Montana’s largest universities are located in Gallatin and Missoula counties in this region. Thus, Western/Southern Montana experienced net in-migration of 18- to 23-year-olds. Net migration becomes negative for people in their late twenties, such as college graduates who leave the region.

Migration to Yellowstone County was similar to Western/ Southern Montana, with the exception of the ages 18 to 30 (Figure 3). Yellowstone County is the most populous in the state with nearly 150,000 people in 2010, about 15 percent of the statewide total. It is affected by many of the same factors as some of the counties in Western Montana. Yellowstone County is by far the largest and most important trade center in the state, a major center for health care, and headquarters for the oil, gas and coal industries. In contrast to Western/Southern Montana, net migration is negative for 18- to 20-year-olds as they head to college in the western part of the state.

As Montana’s largest city, Billings offers more opportunities for young professionals, causing net in-migration for people in their late twenties. Migration had a much different impact on Eastern/Northern Montana. Figure 4 shows that almost 12,000 more people moved out than moved in. Almost all of the population loss was in the 18- to 29-year-old age group. Net out-migration amounted to 26 percent of this group’s 2000 population. One reason for young people to move is to attend college, and most of Montana’s students are enrolled in the Western/Southern part of the state. Although some of these people return home after school, many others stay on in the growing areas of the state or leave Montana entirely. The trend toward lower population in rural areas has been going on for many years, driven in large part by the increasing scale of agricultural production, fewer employment opportunities, reductions in transportation costs that encourage people to shop further from home, and the concentration of advanced health care facilities in the major urban areas.

Figure 2
Net Migration to Western/Southern Montana, 2000 to 2010

Figure 3
Net Migration to Yellowstone County, 2000 to 2010

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

“Sixty percent of the people moving to Montana have some sort of tie to the state – either they lived here previously or have relatives in the state.”

“Out-migration of people in their twenties strengthens this aging trend, with Montana forecast to become the fifth oldest state in the nation by 2030.”
region, is Granite County with an average age of 51. The exception, from the Western/Southern Montana. Four out of five of the oldest counties in Montana are building new schools to accommodate record enrollment, communities in the more rural parts of the state are closing schools and/or merging with nearby districts. School closures weaken other businesses as parents shop, dine and get personal services elsewhere.

Out-migration of younger people has accelerated the trend toward an older population, especially in the rural areas of Montana. Four out of five of the oldest counties in Montana are in the Eastern/Northern region; Prairie County with a median age of 56 years, Judith Basin and Daniels 51, and Carter County 50. The exception, from the Western/Southern region, is Granite County with an average age of 51. The average age of farm operators in Montana is 58.

Despite decades of net migration out of Eastern/Northern Montana, however, the total population is not substantially different than it was after the great homesteading boom of the first two decades of the twentieth century: 264,711 in 1920 versus 257,986 in 2010. Basically, out-migration has offset natural increase. But population growth in the rest of the state has left the rural counties behind, at least in a relative sense: the Eastern/Northern region accounted for almost half of the state’s population in 1920 but only about one-quarter today.

Many Montanans are of two minds about their children leaving the state. On the one hand, they want their kids to have the best available opportunities, but on the other hand, they wish their kids didn’t need to leave the state to find those opportunities. Perhaps the good news is that many of those kids feel strongly enough about their roots that they find a way to return, eventually, although perhaps not to the rural areas where they grew up.

Discussion

Montana is aging rapidly as the baby boom generation reaches traditional retirement age. Out-migration of people in their twenties strengthens this aging trend, with Montana forecast to become the fifth oldest state in the nation by 2030. However, net in-migration of families in their thirties and forties has increased the number of school-age children. Despite the inflow of students, public school enrollment in Montana peaked in 1996 and has declined since, according to state Office of Public Instruction data. In the absence of in-migration over the last two decades, the peak in enrollment would have been lower and the decline more marked.

More important, net migration to Montana as a whole has not stemmed the outflow from much of Eastern and Northern Montana. While some communities in Western Montana are building new schools to accommodate record enrollment, communities in the more rural parts of the state are closing schools and/or merging with nearby districts. Out-migration of other businesses as parents shop, dine and get personal services elsewhere.

Figure 4

Net Migration to Eastern/Northern Montana, 2000 to 2010

Social Security payments to retired Boomers have been a key component of the state’s population growth over the last several decades. Natural increase has not stemmed the outflow from much of Eastern and Northern Montana, which has left the rural counties behind, at least in a relative sense. The Eastern/Northern region accounted for almost half of the state’s population in 1920 but only about one-quarter today.

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