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Population gains concentrated in just five counties Over half of counties, led by Arapahoe and Denver, lost residents dated 2026-4-8

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Officials in Jackson County on Colorado's Western Slope are facing a leak that they cannot plug — a steady and seemingly irreversible decline in the county's population. Storefronts along Walden's Main Street have emptied, including the 10th Frame, a bowling alley that closed its doors when it failed to find a buyer after more than a year of trying, said Samantha Martin, the county's administrator and a longtime resident. "We have talked about it multiple times, and there is no perfect answer," Martin said of strategies to stem the declines. "Right now we don't have an action plan." Long accustomed to drawing people without even trying, Colorado last year experienced its slowest population gains since the late 1980s. Winners and losers are coming into sharper focus as the battle intensifies to retain and attract people. Defying predictions that the state's population gains would be back on track by now after the height of the pandemic, a majority of Colorado counties have lost their demographic momentum. Vivian Elementary, where Mollie Crampton's two sons were enrolled, was among the schools shuttered in 2022. HYOUNG CHANG — THE DENVER POST Since 2020, Jackson County has lost a larger share of its population, 12.2%, than any county in the state, leaving it with 1,211 people as of June 30, 2025, according to the Census Bureau. Young people continue to depart for better jobs in larger cities. A loyal remnant is aging in place, even when moving to a lower altitude might benefit their health, Martin said. But they can defy time for only so long. When homes come on the market, some heirs convert the properties to family vacation homes in Colorado's "moose viewing capital." If they do get listed, investors looking for short-term rentals snap them up, leaving limited options for anyone looking to relocate. Much of Colorado's growth is now concentrated in a belt of counties stretching from Weld down to Elbert and El Paso counties, temporarily bypassing Arapahoe, which had the state's biggest population loss in raw numbers. Of Colorado's 64 counties, more than half, 33, lost population last year, including four of the state's largest: Arapahoe, Denver, Boulder and Pueblo counties. Resort areas, with some of the highest home prices in the U.S., are starting to shrink, joining the aging agricultural counties on the Eastern Plains that have suffered a steady drip of population losses for years. More than a third of Colorado counties have fewer residents than they did in 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That group includes Jefferson County, the state's fourth-most-populous county. After Jackson, Sedgwick, Otero, Hinsdale and Pitkin counties have the largest five-year percentage declines in population. Colorado added 225,688 people in the first half of this decade, including 24,059 last year. A majority of the state's gains this decade have come from immigration, which contributed 130,218 people. But that source, already down under the Trump administration, may dry up this year. "Certainly in 2026, we can expect very weak or negative net international immigration to Colorado," said State Demographer Kate Watkins. The

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White House highlighted immigration declines in every major metro area in a news release after the county and metro-area Census numbers came out. Metro Denver earned a mention for having one of the biggest declines after Laredo, Texas, where immigration flows dropped 95%. "In Denver and its suburbs, the net immigration rate fell by almost three-quarters. In the Chicago area, it was slashed by nearly two-thirds," the release said. Immigration had been masking big declines in people moving from other states. Domestic net migration was why Colorado averaged population gains of 100,000 people a year in the 1990s, and more than 72,000 a year in the '00s and '10s. Since 2020, it has only contributed 17,729 people total. Until housing costs become more competitive, it is hard to see how it rebounds. That leaves natural change, or births minus deaths, as the main driver of population growth going forward. In Colorado, that currently contributes slightly more than 20,000 people a year. But as more baby boomers die, expect that to shrink too. Nationally, natural decline, or more deaths than births, is expected to set in by 2030. Colorado isn't expected to hit that grim milestone until 2047. "We are a young state relative to the nation as a whole," Watkins said. Population declines elsewhere will result in fewer adults available to move to Colorado in the years ahead. Growth is now concentrated mostly in Weld, Douglas, Adams, El Paso, and Larimer counties, which gained a combined 26,678 people last year, more than the statewide population gain. A lower birth rate, higher living costs that deter domestic migration, and slower immigration are contributing to more modest population gains. And that slowing has set off a battle to capture whatever population growth is available. Where the population is shrinking Arapahoe County led the state with a net gain of 4,621 immigrants last year, but it also saw the most residents move out to other parts of Colorado or other states, 9,859. That contributed to a net loss of 1,940 residents in the 2025 count. Since 2020, Arapahoe has lost nearly 32,000 residents domestically, which was offset by a gain of nearly 35,000 immigrants. When immigrants leave Colorado for other states, they count as outbound domestic migrants, Watkins said. That could explain, in part, why counties like Arapahoe and Denver are seeing such large domestic outflows. So why didn't more immigrants, as well as other residents, stay put? "Like every county in Colorado, we're experiencing a crisis of affordability in the housing market," said Jill McGranahan, a spokeswoman for Arapahoe County. To what degree high housing costs pushed immigrants to move to more affordable places is hard to parse out. Some immigrants never intended to land in Colorado in the first place. In 2023, Denver spent more than \$35 million to handle an unexpected surge of immigrants, mostly from Venezuela, including purchasing 14,800 tickets to send them to other cities. Denver had the state's second-largest population loss last year at 978, reflecting net domestic outflows of 8,023, less a natural increase of 4,197, and continued immigration of 2,871. Denver and Arapahoe counties rank high for births, and they should remain gateways for young adults relocating from other states. Denver has a big surplus of new apartments that is pushing down rents. And home construction is set to take off in Arapahoe County, especially south of the airport. A harder demographic hurdle to overcome will be a

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shrinking gap between births and deaths, which Jefferson, Boulder, Pueblo and Mesa counties are staring down. When there aren't enough homes available for young families at prices they can afford, they either delay moving forward with children or move elsewhere. Not only is inbound migration limited, but so are future births. "We wanted to help people age in place and stay in their homes, but what that means is these homes don't turn over?" asks Phyllis Resnick, executive director of the Colorado Futures Center. If homes don't turn over or not enough are built, families wanting to have children are forced to move elsewhere. They might end up in Weld County. Or Idaho or South Carolina. "Our birth rate and our death rate are getting closer and closer together," acknowledged Chris O'Keefe, the planning and zoning director for Jefferson County. "People enjoy it here and they age here. People don't leave their houses." Over the past five years, the county has recorded 28,791 births and 26,745 deaths, according to the Census Bureau. Home to nearly 10% of the state's population, Jefferson County has contributed only 2.3% of the state's natural increase since 2020. Denver, by contrast, accounts for 12.3% of the state's population, but has contributed 22.3% of the natural increase. Fewer children means fewer enrollments. Jefferson County Public Schools, the state's second-largest school district, has seen a wave of closures, especially on its eastern side, which has older neighborhoods. Developments such as Candelas and Leyden Rock further west, by contrast, have brought in young families. But it isn't enough to offset losses in Lakewood and Wheat Ridge. Vivian Elementary, where Mollie Crampton had her two young sons enrolled, was among the schools shuttered in 2022. Declining enrollments are linked to the county's stagnating population, which in turn, Crampton argues, is linked to the county's high home prices. "I think a really big part of it is affordable housing," she said. "Prices just don't go down." Lakewood enacted rezoning ordinances to permit higher density in an effort to increase supply and lower home prices and rents. But longtime residents of the state's fifth largest city, skeptical that the zoning changes would work and worried about crowding and congestion, rallied to call a special election to repeal the measures. Crampton said she voted early in Tuesday's election — against repealing the recently enacted rezoning ordinance. "If it passes, I think a lot of people will leave because they can (only) afford to buy a home in another state, or another county," Crampton said. "There's never going to be more inventory." According to early results posted by elections officials Tuesday night, voters in Lakewood overwhelmingly approved four measures that restore the zoning code the city had before elected leaders changed it last year to prod more home building. Pueblo and Mesa counties have had the largest natural decreases this decade — with Pueblo down 2,787 and Mesa down 1,738. Mesa County has offset that with relatively strong domestic migration this decade, allowing its population to grow by 7,135 people vs. 1,110 for Pueblo. Fremont County has also managed to pull a rabbit out of a hat, increasing its population by 1,102 this decade, despite a natural decrease of 1,629 people. Both are retirement havens that have attracted residents from the Front Range with lower living costs, and in the case of Grand Junction, a more temperate climate. Colorado's aging population is

working in their favor. By contrast, resort areas, where housing costs are so high that even doctors and corporate managers struggle to find affordable accommodations, are seeing residents leave. Pitkin County, home to Aspen, has seen its population shrink by 4.3% this decade, while San Miguel, home to Telluride, is down by 3.7%, and Eagle County, home to Vail and Beaver Creek, has lost 2.5% of its population. On the whole, the forecast calls for continued growth, although at a slower pace than in prior decades, Watkins said. Colorado reached 5 million people in 2010 and hit 6 million last year. It should cross 7 million by 2045. New homes, faces Weld County Commissioner Scott James, 63, grew up in LaSalle and has had a front row seat in the county's transformation from farm and oil fields into Colorado's fastest growing county. With 46,992 people added over the past five years, including 7,146 last year, Weld County surpassed Boulder County in population before the pandemic, and last year it surpassed Larimer County. In 1998, James moved to Johnstown, which had 3,200 people at the time, and he paid \$136,400 for a home in what he said represented an "iconic Americana slice of life." The town now counts around 21,000 people, who live largely on former farms and ranches, said James, who witnessed the transformation when he was mayor. "These guys would sit in the back of the room and almost hang their heads — but what choice did they have? The farmer has a chance to cash in on all his hard work," he said. One thing that Weld County shares in common with the state's other growing counties is an openness to home construction. And those new homes open the door to babies. Weld County has welcomed more than 25,000 babies in the past five years, while Adams County has added 33,349 and Douglas County has added more than 20,000. "People who want a bigger home and more land, it's available to them," said Jeff Keener, president and CEO of the South Metro Denver Chamber, which is based in Lone Tree. Parker and Castle Rock also have been actively adding homes at lower price points. "The home-rule cities have done a really good job of planning for that," Keener said. "They have worked really hard to put in a wide variation of housing prices." With greater housing availability, the fastest-growing counties are also winning when it comes to net domestic migration. Weld County added 31,411 people that way since 2020, while Douglas County added 27,490 and Larimer County added 12,518. Domestic gains in Weld and Douglas surpass the 17,729 added statewide, which reflects their ability to lure residents from other parts of the state. James said he sees nothing but opportunity for Weld County, provided people can think differently and stay open to new ideas. "We are excited about geothermal, we are excited about renewables — and by God, bring on nuclear," he said. "The fact that Weld County is a county of almost 400,000 people tells me we're doing it right

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