

Alabama in Focus: Population Trends Snapshot 2005–2024

► Since 2005, Alabama’s total population has grown by 13 percent from 4,542,912 to 5,157,699—slightly slower than the 15-percent population growth of the United States. While the state’s overall population numbers have risen over the last two decades, there are significant differences in population growth and decline rates for rural and urban counties in Alabama. Examining these trends is important for a better understanding of the broader impact of population growth and decline on individual communities.

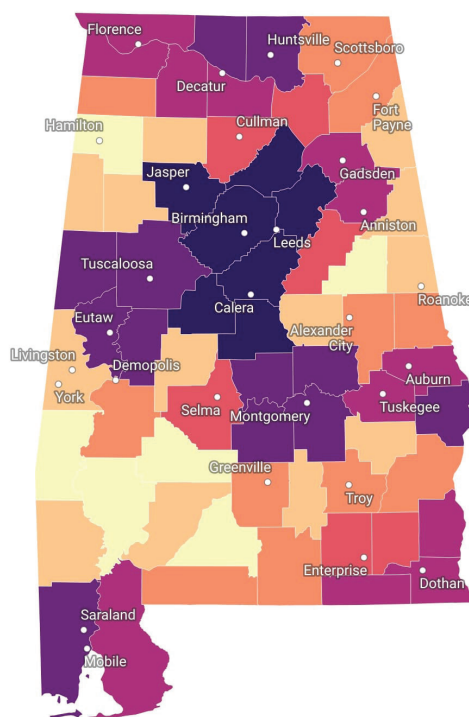
Population growth and decline—rapid or slow—impact and shape local communities through both social and economic factors. For example, rapidly urbanizing areas need additional community infrastructure investments in roadways, schools, and health care systems to support the growing number of individuals within that community. In communities experiencing slow population decline, elected officials and community members should develop plans for a smaller tax base and workforce when planning for the future of their city or town. Understanding population change trends is central to planning for a county or community’s future.

This publication summarizes population trends in Alabama between 2005 and 2024, relying on county-level data drawn from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service and the U.S. Census Bureau Population Division.¹ The focus is on overall population change and the components of births, deaths, and migration, with special attention to divergences between urban and rural areas of the state.

Population Change in Urban and Rural Counties in Alabama

The divergent trajectories of urban and rural areas of the state can be seen when population figures are grouped into rural or urban counties according to the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This classification system divides metropolitan (urban) from nonmetropolitan (rural) counties. See tables 1 to 7 for individual county classifications.

Since 2005, urban counties in Alabama have collectively grown by around 13 percent. For rural counties, only those with an urban center of 20,000 or more have experienced population growth. All other rural counties have experienced population decline over the past 20



2023 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

- Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
- Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
- Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
- Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
- Urban population of 5,000 to 20,000, adjacent to a metro area
- Urban population of fewer than 5,000, adjacent to a metro area
- Urban population of fewer than 5,000, not adjacent to a metro area

Figure 1. Alabama county classifications based on the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.²

years. This suggests a sharp divergence, with urban areas of Alabama experiencing growing populations, while rural areas decline in population.

While Alabama is experiencing overall population growth, this fails to remark on the rural and urban differences and masks a great deal of regional variation (see figure 3). Counties in the state’s rural southwest, northwest, and southeast have experienced population decline. For instance, Greene, Lowndes, Perry, and

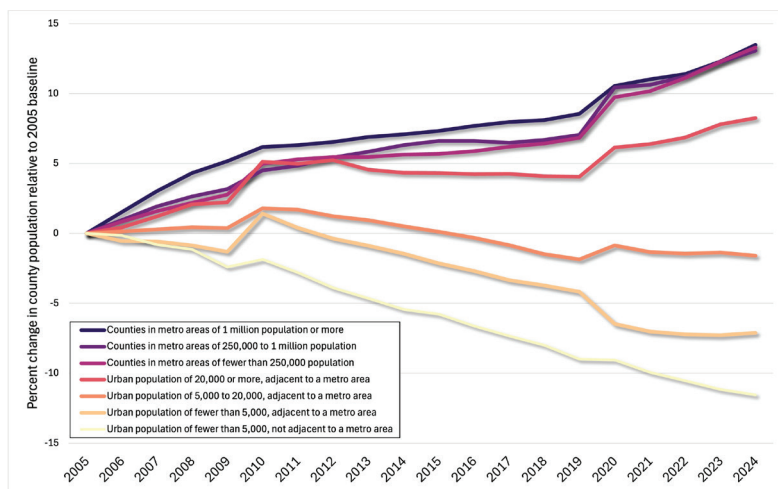


Figure 2. Percent change population by county type, relative to 2005. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.

Wilcox Counties have lost more than 20 percent of their population over the past two decades. In contrast, Baldwin, Lee, Limestone, Madison, and Tuscaloosa Counties have grown by more than 40 percent. While areas experiencing population growth may experience many benefits, policymakers and residents must prepare for new challenges in terms of transportation infrastructure, municipal services, and education costs. In contrast, areas experiencing population decline will likely be challenged by a smaller tax base, a shrinking labor supply, and rising costs for elder care. Tables 1 through 7 provide detailed county-level population change figures.

Natural Population Change

Population change occurs through natural change (births and deaths) in a community and through in- and out-migration. Examining these population change factors individually helps to provide a fuller, more complete picture of what communities are experiencing. This information is also vital for community decision-makers to help plan for the resources and programs their community members might need.

The rate of natural change expresses the difference between births and deaths. Since 2005, this rate in Alabama has been declining for urban and rural counties, although it has consistently been higher for urban counties than rural counties. This two-and-a-half-decade trend has continued despite a sharp decline and rebound during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2020, the rate has been negative across all county categories, meaning that the number of babies born in rural and urban counties has not outpaced the number of deaths.

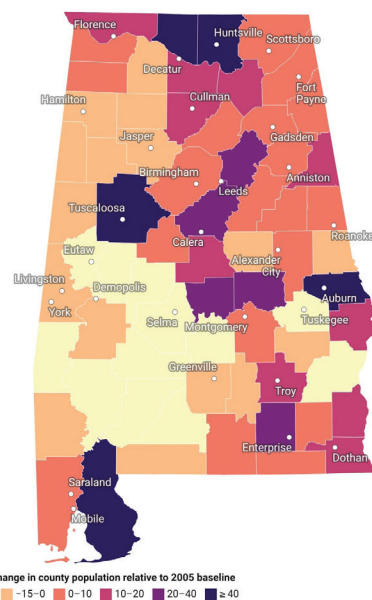


Figure 3. Percent change in total population in Alabama counties between 2005 and 2024. Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Division.

Migration

Besides births and deaths, migration (both domestic and international) is the other major component of population change. The net migration rate shows how many people moved into or out of a county (see figure 5).

Among Alabama counties, urban areas have generally had a positive net migration rate, meaning more people are moving into these counties than are leaving. Rural counties, conversely, have generally had a negative net migration rate, meaning more people are leaving than arriving. Following a period of decline from 2005 to 2015, net migration rates across all county types have been rising over the past 10 years. In a context of declining rates of natural population change, much of Alabama's growth over the past two decades can be attributed to positive net migration in counties in metropolitan areas.

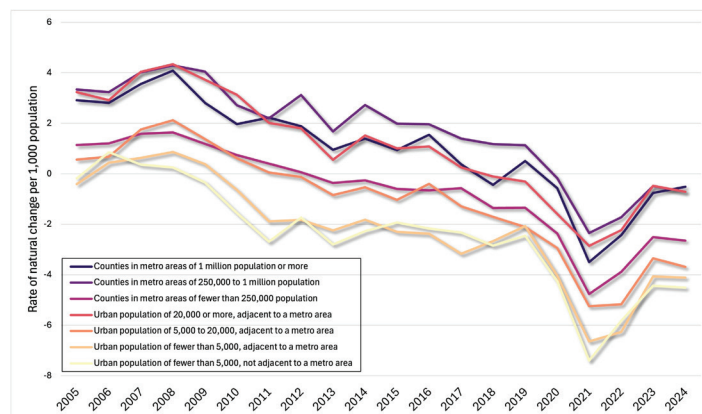


Figure 4. Rate of natural change (births minus deaths) by county type, 2005 to 2024. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau Population Division and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Conclusions

Alabama has experienced slightly slower population growth relative to the United States over the past 20 years. Community leaders, businesses, and Alabama residents should recognize the importance of in-migration to this figure and the variation of population growth and decline regionally across the state.

Rural counties have largely declined in population, whereas many urban counties in Alabama have experienced significant population increases. As these communities change, policymakers and local elected officials should draw on population change information to adequately plan for the future shifts in the local workforce, schooling, health care infrastructure, and tax revenue that natural population change and in-and-out migration may bring.

The following tables show the percent change in population in Alabama counties by category between 2005 and 2024.

Table 1. Counties in Metro Areas of 1 Million Population or More

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Bibb	21,304	22,258	4.48
Blount	55,041	60,163	9.31
Chilton	41,640	47,262	13.50
Jefferson	659,425	664,744	0.81
St. Clair	72,023	96,927	34.58
Shelby	171,856	235,969	37.31
Walker	69,131	65,260	-5.60

Table 2. Counties in Metro Areas of 250,000 to 1 Million Population

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Autauga	47,875	61,464	28.38
Elmore	73,107	91,042	24.53
Greene	9,428	7,127	-24.41
Hale	17,930	15,116	-15.69
Limestone	69,807	118,942	70.39
Lowndes	12,885	9,485	-26.39
Madison	299,845	423,355	41.19
Mobile	397,698	412,339	3.68
Montgomery	222,039	225,894	1.74
Pickens	19,794	18,508	-6.50
Russell	49,139	58,837	19.74
Tuscaloosa	172,178	241,212	40.09

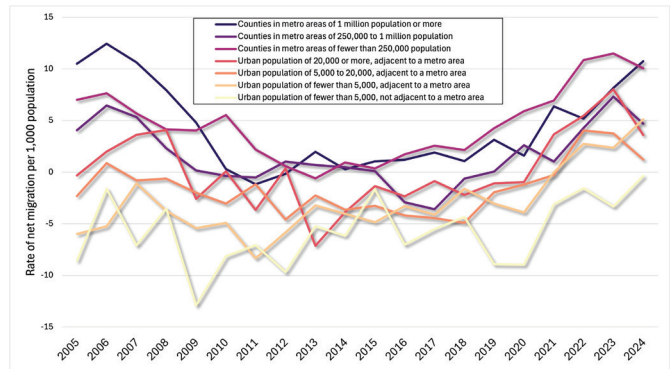


Figure 5. Rate of net migration (domestic and international) by county type, 2005 to 2024. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau Population Division and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Table 3. Counties in Metro Areas of Fewer Than 250,000 Population

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Baldwin	162,623	261,608	60.87
Calhoun	111,760	116,427	4.18
Colbert	54,408	58,785	8.04
Etowah	102,637	103,207	0.56
Geneva	25,526	27,259	6.79
Henry	16,398	18,141	10.63
Houston	93,648	109,366	16.78
Lauderdale	87,431	97,502	11.52
Lawrence	34,323	33,567	-2.20
Lee	125,280	187,847	49.94
Macon	22,454	18,159	-19.13
Morgan	113,037	126,084	11.54

Table 4. Counties with an Urban Population of 20,000 or More, Adjacent to a Metro Area

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Coffee	44,960	56,358	25.35
Cullman	79,386	92,604	16.65
Dale	47,849	50,067	4.64
Dallas	43,347	35,545	-18.00
Marshall	85,415	102,156	19.60
Talladega	80,382	81,375	1.24

Table 5. Counties with an Urban Population of 5,000 to 20,000, Adjacent to a Metro Area

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Barbour	29,466	24,358	-17.34
Butler	20,310	18,256	-10.11
Chambers	35,163	33,813	-3.84
Covington	36,608	37,784	3.11
DeKalb	66,960	73,122	9.20
Escambia	37,698	36,630	-2.83
Franklin	30,739	31,874	3.69
Jackson	52,908	53,780	1.65
Marengo	21,384	18,512	-13.43
Pike	29,674	33,124	11.63
Tallapoosa	40,367	40,699	0.82

Table 6. Counties with an Urban Population of Fewer Than 5,000, Adjacent to a Metro Area

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Bullock	10,952	9,901	-9.60
Cherokee	24,191	26,138	8.05
Cleburne	14,278	15,905	11.40
Coosa	10,933	10,291	-5.87
Crenshaw	13,518	13,114	-2.99
Fayette	18,074	15,863	-12.23
Lamar	14,706	13,543	-7.91
Monroe	23,179	19,057	-17.78
Perry	10,793	7,719	-28.48
Randolph	22,452	23,067	2.74
Sumter	13,616	11,607	-14.75
Washington	17,387	15,018	-13.63
Winston	24,185	23,869	-1.31

Table 7. Counties with an Urban Population of Fewer Than 5,000, Not Adjacent to a Metro Area

County	2005 pop.	2024 pop.	% change
Choctaw	14,537	12,052	-17.09
Clarke	26,728	22,142	-17.16
Clay	13,823	14,239	3.01
Conecuh	13,163	11,109	-15.60
Marion	29,484	29,323	-0.55
Wilcox	12,627	9,865	-21.87

¹These datasets are county population estimates, produced annually by the Census Bureau and relying on data inputs from administrative sources such as the Internal Revenue Service, Medicare, and the Federal Election Commission. While these are the most robust annual estimates available, there is a degree of uncertainty in these figures, which is especially relevant for certain areas (e.g., sparsely population rural counties) and certain subjects (e.g., migration).

²The Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUC) classify metropolitan counties into three categories based on population size of the metro area (1 million or more; 250,000 to 1 million; fewer than 250,000). Nonmetro counties are classified into six categories based on degree of urbanization and adjacency to metropolitan areas. These classifications account for the influence of proximity to urban services and facilities for rural areas. Two categories from the RUC are not present in Alabama: urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area and urban population of 5,000 to 20,000, not adjacent to a metro area.



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Rural Partnership Institute

Matthew J. Zinsli, Postdoctoral Scholar, Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute and Department of Agricultural Economics and Sociology, and **Kelli J. Russell**, *Assistant Extension Professor*, and **Mykel R. Taylor**, Professor, Alfa Endowed Chair, and Department Head, both with the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Auburn University

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