

Population Change and Community Vitality Taskforce**Population Change & Community Vitality:
Developing a Roadmap for the Future of Mississippi****Prepared by**

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Executive Summary

The agriculture and forestry sectors both contribute to and depend on strong, vibrant communities. However, challenges arise when there are major fluctuations in the local population. It is important to better understand these relationships if we are to foster future community vitality. This report reviews recent population trends, especially the challenges of population decline through out-migration, and explores the implications for communities through services related to livability that are particularly sensitive to population fluctuations. The Taskforce recommends multi-sector (businesses, governments, water systems, educational systems, and nonprofits) and multi-community regional collaborations as strategies for enhancing community vitality. This will require sharing data and analysis along with information on opportunities and best practices with stakeholder associations, community leaders, state and federal agencies, and policy makers. Based on the assessment made by the Taskforce and information provided through a cross-campus convening held to identify and share resources, several recommendations are offered for MSU and the State of Mississippi more broadly. These include coordinating across sectors, mobilizing and enhancing key assets, and creating avenues for research-based information to be shared with decision makers. Advancing these issues will require ongoing engagement, with important steps including statewide convenings with stakeholders and periodic updates on the status of population changes and their implications for community vitality.

Introduction

Vibrant agriculture and forestry sectors depend on strong communities. Producers need access to skilled workers, goods and services, and infrastructure for their businesses to thrive and for families to enjoy a high quality of life. Communities, especially rural communities, need successful farm and forestry sectors for access to jobs (production, processing, and distribution), consumer base for goods and services, and the tax base. Ideally, there is a symbiotic relationship, but there can be problems when there are major fluctuations in the local population. It is important to better understand these relationships if we are to foster future community vitality. This report summarizes an assessment of these issues by the Mississippi State University (MSU) Population Change and Community Vitality Taskforce convened as part of the Division of Agriculture, Forestry, and Veterinary Medicine's Vision 2030.

Key Goals and Objectives

The goals of the Taskforce's work and this report are to raise population change as a critical issue for the State of Mississippi and to offer regional and cross-sector collaborations as avenues for building community vitality in the future. The work conducted to date should be used to inform dialogue, planning, and implementation of action steps.

Population Trends and Impacts

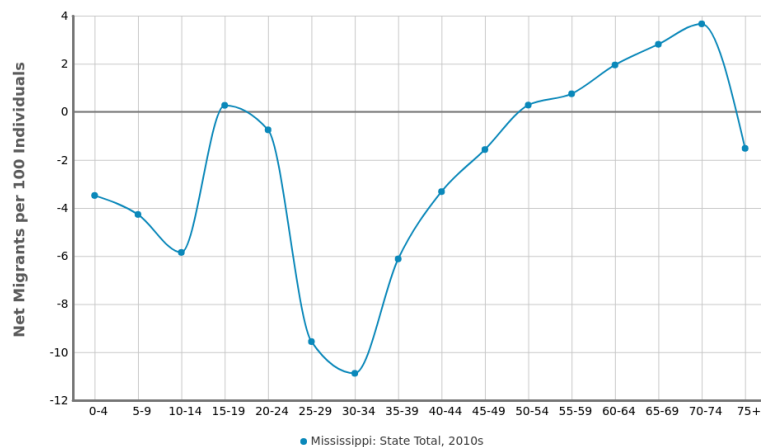
Population change—particularly decline—presents structural challenges for communities, especially in rural areas of Mississippi. It is driven by a range of economic and demographic factors and is closely tied to infrastructure and public services: what people and businesses need, how those needs are funded (e.g., taxes, user fees), and the overall quality of what is delivered. Whether infrastructure and services improve or deteriorate directly affects community livability, which in turn influences future population trends. Understanding the nature and impact of population change is essential for informed planning.

For instance, rapid growth can overwhelm infrastructure built for smaller populations, requiring substantial investment to meet increased demand. Conversely, population decline creates a different set of challenges. Infrastructure developed for a larger population remains in place, but there are fewer residents and businesses to support its upkeep. With reduced revenue, investment in maintenance may lag, leading to deterioration that further erodes livability. Over time, this dynamic can drive additional out-migration—often among the most mobile and resourceful residents—leaving behind a population with fewer resources and greater challenges. This cycle not only undermines community vitality but also limits the ability to fund future infrastructure and service improvements.

The State's population was estimated at 2,943,045 persons in July 2024 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). There was a .02 percentage decrease from 2010-20 (USCB, 2010 & 2020), and there was an estimated decrease of 18,233 residents from 2020 to 2024. Populations change from net migration, births, and deaths. In MS, there was estimated net out-migration for the decade 2010 to 20 (more people leaving than coming in during the period). The pattern held for all age groups from 20 to 49 and was highest among 30 to 34-year-olds at -10.88 per 100 individuals (Figure 1). That age range is estimated to have had a net loss of 22,570 persons (Egan-Robertson et al., 2024). During the 2020 to 2024 period, there was an overall additional estimated net out-migration of 2,185 persons across all ages (USCB, 2024). Looking at domestic net-migration alone, there was an estimated loss of 22,153 persons due to out-migration.

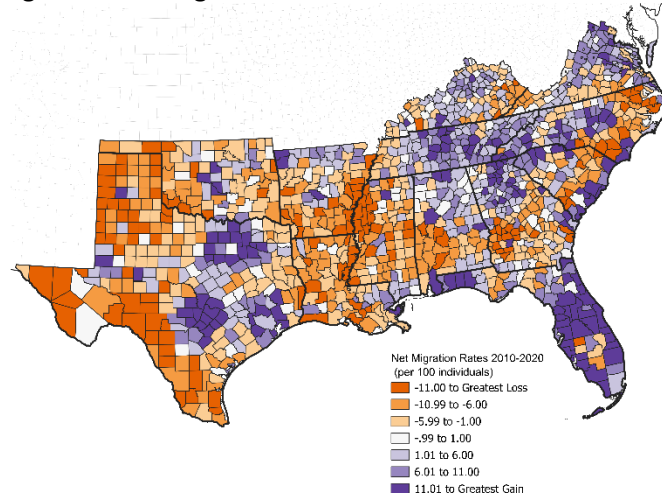
Exploring county-level patterns for 2010 to 20, the greatest out-migration rate in MS was -24.61 per 100 individuals and the greatest in-migration was 14.20. There was geographic concentration of counties with net out versus in-migration (Figure 2). There were just seven counties in Mississippi that experienced relative stability (-.99 to +1.00 net migrants per 100). More recently, 52 counties had net out-migration from 2020 to 24 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). MS is largely a rural state, with county-to-county differences. The U.S. Department of Agriculture produces the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes with categories ranging from large metropolitan areas to those that are nonmetropolitan/rural and without major urban areas. For the patterns mentioned above, the nonmetropolitan/rural counties were most likely to experience general population decline and loss. More research is needed to better understand the factors influencing these patterns and trends.

Figure 1: Net Migration in Mississippi by Age, 2010s (2010 to 2020)



Egan-Robertson, David, Katherine J. Curtis, Richelle L. Winkler, Kenneth M. Johnson, and Caitlin Bourbeau, Age-Specific Net Migration Estimates for US Counties, 1950-2020. Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2024. Web.

Figure 2: Net Migration in Southern U.S. Counties 2010-2020



Data: Egan-Robertson, D., Curtis, K.J., Winkler, R.L., Johnson, K.M., & Bourbeau, C. (2024). Age-specific net migration estimates for US counties, 2010-2020. Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin - Madison. <https://netmigration.wisc.edu/>. Analysis and map: Groon, J.J. (2024). Southern Rural Development Center.

Working Together for Community Vitality

There are several substantive sectors of special importance to community vitality, given how essential they are to everyday life and how they influence each other across sectors. This Taskforce directed

special attention to local businesses, governments, water systems, and educational systems. They are critical to all households and communities, including those involved in agriculture and forestry enterprises. Numerous strategies have been developed, piloted, and evaluated to enhance community vitality and improve quality of life, even in the face of population loss (Peters 2019). Synthesizing research-based insights, approaches have been developed focusing on community and regional development. Illustrative examples include the Thrive Rural Framework to take stock, target action, and gauge progress (Aspen Institute n.d.) and the TRIC Approach entailing efforts to be tailored, resilient, inclusive, and collaborative (Federal Reserve Bank; Dumont and Davis 2021).

To advance community vitality in the face of population change, this Taskforce recommends two critical steps. They are for stakeholders to:

- Document and analyze population changes and their implications for infrastructure, services, and economic activities at the local, regional, and state levels; and
- Pursue collaboration between organizations to share information, activities, resources, and capabilities to solve problems that no single organization or community can tackle alone (Bryson & Crosby, 2008), including regional and cross-sector collaboration for applied problem solving.

Multi-community regional collaboration allows small and rural communities to work together toward common goals. It can also entail work across the rural-urban continuum. Collaboration provides benefits by different entities within a geographic area sharing information, expertise, and resources for common efforts. It is expected to lead to more effective solutions and cost savings. Collaboration is a recommendation for economic development (Aspen Institute, n.d.2).

An example of collaboration, the [Homegrown Talent Initiative](#) in Colorado is working to advance the “educonomy” across multiple rural communities, helping to advance the role of K-12 educational systems in broader economic development.

Having experienced significant population out-migration in recent decades, the [Quitman County Economic Development and Tourism](#) in Mississippi is engaging in cross-sector collaboration to advance holistic community development including local food access, healthcare, workforce training, and tourism.

Cross-sector collaboration takes place when organizations from within and across different sectors (e.g., business, government, and nonprofits) work together to address complex challenges through applied problem solving. This can enable a more comprehensive approach to complex challenges (Bryson and Crosby 2008). Cross-sector collaboration is particularly important for rural areas in that it can support resilience in the face of economic and social changes and may create a wider network to tackle issues with a holistic strategy and build community-regional capacity. For instance, an immediate opportunity for realizing benefits from regional and cross-sector collaboration is group purchasing. Small, rural communities and agencies can come together to reduce costs and improve terms through volume purchasing of goods, supplies, and services. This can foster efficiency and make entities more visible.

Local Businesses are critical to community vitality; people need access to jobs, goods, and services. Agriculture and forestry producers are important to this mix, as are related businesses (processors, distributors, supply and equipment dealers) and those in other specialties (banking, retail, restaurants, etc.). The mix of businesses has implications for general economic activity, community livability, and

whether people want to reside there. A survey of MS communities with Main Street designations indicated that residents felt like there was a need for more business development (Carter, Kingery, & Poindexter, 2023), including dining, general shopping, grocery stores, farmers markets, and goods and services for youth. It showed that they often left their local community for goods and services, such as healthcare, eyecare, and other amenities. Stakeholders may pursue several strategies to recruit and/or sustain businesses and jobs, and many can entail collaboration for greater impact. These include downtown revitalization, entrepreneurship, targeting and attraction, tourism and recreation, and business retention and expansion. However, any one strategy or method does not work for every community.

Local Governments have numerous assets and engage each other through their county and municipal associations. Nonetheless, in Mississippi they operate under a “Dillon’s Rule” framework; they can only exercise powers explicitly granted to them by the state legislature. As such, they rely heavily on state authorization, limiting their ability to take some types of action. Within these constraints, local governments still have several effective strategies to enhance community vitality. Notable options are listed here.

- Tax abatements for economic development to attract or retain businesses;
- Leveraging federal and state programs for broadband expansion to secure infrastructure that enhances connectivity for residents and businesses;
- Investments in outdoor recreational spaces to improve quality of life, promote health, and serve as community hubs, increase tourism, and enhance property values;
- Heritage events to build local pride and connections and to attract visitors; and
- Efficient local service delivery policies to enhance their ability to meet community needs, including efforts to optimize public safety and infrastructure for livability.

Local Water Systems provide infrastructure and services necessary for community vitality. It is critical to maintain the current infrastructure and prepare for change. Systems have different governance structures that may prove informative to other sectors. Mississippi public water systems can be privately owned, a municipality, a utility district, or a rural association (cooperative). The state has more than 1,100 public water systems serving approximately 87% of the state’s population, with a high ratio of public water systems to the population. Capacity development and management are ever-pressing issues. Cross-sector concerns include having the financial preparedness to fund or have seed funding for needed economic development projects, and additional preparation may include installing infrastructures to incentivize such initiatives. Areas experiencing population loss face management and maintenance capacity with a dwindling user base. There are numerous avenues for collaboration for water systems, from sharing information, expertise, and equipment to multi-community/regional management. Cross-sector collaboration may also be pursued to involve other stakeholders (businesses, etc.) to partner with local water systems no matter how they are structured.

Local Educational Systems provide opportunities key to community vitality, including their importance for offering basic and advanced education and workforce training, and the importance that quality schools hold for where families live. School needs and funding are extremely sensitive to population change, with complex relationships (Sageman, 2022). Local schools require assistance from government, businesses, and nonprofits to address teacher shortages and staffing challenges, such as by engaging in cross-sector efforts to develop affordable housing for educators and to foster a sense of local connections for teacher recruitment and retention. Place-based curricula that leverage local assets and make the community a meaningful subject of study can foster community commitment to counter further out-migration and the “brain drain.” Schools may also collaborate with other sectors to align

work-based, career, and technical education with local industries and growing employment opportunities. They may work with community colleges and universities to identify workforce preparation opportunities aligned with local needs and provide online learning opportunities.

Nonprofit Organizations provide a range of functions at the local level, often addressing the needs of individuals and families where gaps exist in government services. They also facilitate and coordinate community and economic development activities, such as cultural activities and business recruitment and retention. Nonprofits often serve as conduits for volunteer leadership, service, and philanthropy.

State and Federal Government policies set parameters on what these organizations, especially local governments, can do. Furthermore, state and federal financial resources are critical. Much of the funding for addressing community issues is dispersed through complex grants, and local stakeholders often face capacity obstacles to applying for, obtaining, and managing those resources. More attention to capacity building and opening opportunities that facilitate collaboration would be beneficial.

Illustrative opportunities for collaboration include healthcare and broadband access. These are example topics where collaboration is critical for community vitality in the face of population change. People need general, emergency, and preventive care, and the distance they must travel if that care is not accessible locally is an additional dimension. Access to care influences where people want to/can live, and companies looking to invest must pay attention as well. Sufficient insured patient volume is essential for these services to remain viable. Economic pressures on rural hospitals have been pronounced (McDoom, Chang, Gnuschke, & Mirvis, 2015). Access to quality and affordable healthcare is critical for all community members, including those working in the agriculture and forestry sectors.

There are high costs to install and serve rural areas with broadband internet. Significant public investments have been made for unserved areas, coupled with public-private partnerships. Mississippi has and is expected to receive more investments for internet service providers to build out high-speed internet. Some of the locations are in the most rural areas. Population loss reduces the customer base for internet service providers and negatively impacts their “take rate,” the number of subscriptions to their services out of everyone in their service area. Regional and cross-sector collaboration is needed to address these concerns and not only increase but also sustain services and improve digital skills. These will be important for all community sectors in this digital age.

Healthcare and broadband are complex, inter-related systems with rapidly changing technologies directly influencing people’s lives. They entail public and private investments and require ongoing utilization and payment to be feasible. They are influenced by numerous regulations at multiple levels, but there are no-overarching systems managing them at the local level. Providing cost-effective services is a challenge, and even more so in areas with population loss. These challenges present the necessity and opportunities for collaboration across sectoral and community lines.

Education, Workforce Development, and Research to Drive Innovation

Colleges and Universities educate students, helping to meet the education and workforce development needs of the state in partnership with K12 school systems and others (Carnevale, Kam, & Van Der Werf, 2024). They also house units and programs useful for addressing broader community vitality. At Mississippi State University (MSU) they include those focused on local business, government, and nonprofit related applied research and Extension. Steps should be taken to amplify these offerings for stakeholders to pursue collaboration more easily. Additionally, with their research skills and access to critical data, researchers can examine population and community vitality patterns over time and gauge

the effectiveness of different community and economic development strategies. Using research-based information, the university can help inform programs and policies to aid communities to take better advantage of their assets.

Bold Moves

Building on the Taskforce's assessment, a cross-campus convening was held in late spring 2025 to gain additional insights and share resources. Among the activities involved with this virtual meeting, participants were asked to share "bold moves" for addressing the issues identified through this Taskforce. Recommendations from the multi-disciplinary group of participants included the following items, organized here for the University and the State of Mississippi.

Mississippi State University should consider the following actions:

- Coordinate across units under a common umbrella to inform efforts to address population change and community vitality with data and research for effective decision making to advance innovation;
- Mobilize university personnel and utilize university spaces to connect and facilitate dialogue among groups that traditionally do not work with each other;
- Take an asset-based approach to go beyond documenting challenges to identify strengths and resources to inform and build vitality;
- Conduct policy analysis to inform development of next steps or policies that build vitality;
- Offer more live classes in remote areas, and use Extension as a model for building capacity in these places to help improve community vitality; and
- Use the statewide reach of the University to facilitate local and regional cross-sector collaboration bridging industry, government, infrastructure, education, and health care leaders to identify needs and assets and strengthen community vitality.

Combining the ability to convene and provide research-informed education, some colleges and universities are experimenting with rural "innovation hubs" (Fouriezos, 2024).

There is a significant need for and potential to leverage data-driven insights to address the challenges and opportunities outlined in this report. Researchers can provide insights on development pathways, identifying gaps and opportunities to better align programs with regional needs and priorities. Such an approach can also highlight migration trends and workforce retention strategies, supporting more targeted and effective policy decisions in an ongoing manner. Working with Extension professionals, researchers can also enhance engagement and service delivery through digital tools and platforms, such as dashboards to visualize population trends and economic activity. University communication professionals' expertise in creating engaging content to convey complex topics can amplify the impact of data tools and report by ensuring they are visually compelling, widely promoted, and effectively used. Leveraging established communication channels and community connections will help drive engagement and real-time application of insights. Research and Extension centers and institutes can also leverage their expertise in cross-sector collaboration to become valuable partners in strengthening regional collaborations and supporting evidence-based policy recommendations to improve and sustain community vitality. Efforts may include relationship building, education and training to share knowledge, and work to take on challenges that transcend community boundaries, such as attracting and retaining a talent workforce, accessing healthcare and advancing healthy outcomes, expanding digital access and enhancing digital skills, providing public safety, and building wealth.

The State of Mississippi may consider the following moves:

- Provide more proactive and regular avenues to receive research-informed input for policy makers and other decision makers on what can be done on issues influencing population change and community vitality;
- Systematically and regularly collect and disseminate data and information on employment opportunities, state development efforts, current investments, and employers, including attention to the resource needs for these efforts;
- Attend to the needs of K-12 education as part of broader economic development efforts, addressing the need for teachers, workforce development, and student engagement;
- Invest in development of amenities and outdoor recreation, leveraging Mississippi's abundant natural resources for sustainable economic development.

These bold moves should be supplemented through a larger statewide convening with stakeholders. Outputs might include the development of a compendium of organizational resources to inform and assist with multi-sector and multi-community regional collaboration. This may also lead to the organization of an ongoing working group. Outcomes of interest could include local and state leaders across sectors who are informed on trends, implications, opportunities, and best practices. Furthermore, networks will be expanded to facilitate future collaborations.

Concluding Recommendations

Many MS communities have lost population, including through out-migration. These shifts influence community livability through reduced workers, customers, and tax bases needed to sustain local businesses and services, resulting in greater decline. These trends have important implications for the agriculture and forestry sectors, the communities they support and depend on, and the State of Mississippi as a whole. However, other directions are possible. For instance, reports of online searching suggest qualities that people might be looking for when they make choices on where to live, such as affordability, culture, outdoor recreation, and mild weather (Core, 2025). This Taskforce recommends more attention and awareness of population change issues coupled with dialogue and action steps focused on the ways that multi-community regional and cross-sector collaboration may help to address challenges and opportunities for the future.

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