

The Declining Young Adult Population in New England

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New England's economic future will shape and be shaped by demographic trends in the region, and there are some disturbing patterns emerging showing a decline in the young adult population. Businesses need a dynamic labor force that includes a pool of young adult workers. Young adults also make the region a vibrant and interesting place to live, contributing to cultural, intellectual and social life. And young families support local schools and demand a strong educational system.

New England lags significantly behind other U.S. regions in population growth, and is losing its youth.

Data recently available from the US Census American Community Survey suggest a troubled demographic profile emerging throughout the New England states. The region's population has grown less than the national average over the last 15 years, increasing 8 percent compared to an 18 percent increase nationally from 1990 to 2004. In all age cohorts

POPULATION CHANGE OF AGES 25-34 BY STATE.

Rank	State	1990-2004 Percentage Change Ages 25-34	1990 Population Ages 25-34	2004 Population Ages 25-34
1	Nevada	60%	222,027	354,894
2	Utah	45%	274,898	399,210
3	Arizona	31%	634,899	830,117
4	Idaho	21%	152,800	184,610
5	Colorado	17%	611,849	717,277
6	Georgia	16%	1,174,896	1,363,671
7	Oregon	12%	451,544	505,997
8	North Carolina	9%	1,143,875	1,241,888
9	Texas	8%	3,086,171	3,335,725
10	Tennessee	2%	812,321	828,111
41	Rhode Island	-20%	173,624	139,077
42	Massachusetts	-20%	1,101,361	880,404
43	Maryland	-21%	900,098	710,846
44	North Dakota	-23%	104,015	80,531
45	Pennsylvania	-23%	1,912,456	1,471,113
46	Vermont	-27%	95,257	69,580
47	New Hampshire	-27%	204,823	148,953
48	Alaska	-28%	112,965	81,152
49	Maine	-29%	205,235	145,686
50	Connecticut	-30%	583,882	409,393
	United States	-7%	43,175,932	40,031,938

*Data collected from the US Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/popest/datasets.html>



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New England's growth lags the national average, but the most alarming change is in the 25–34 year old group. The population in this “young adult” age cohort in New England declined nearly 25 percent (24.2 percent) from 1990 to 2004. This compares to the national average decline of 7 percent.

All the New England states are among the bottom 10 of the 50 states in population change in this important cohort and all the states in the region have lost one-fifth or more of their young adult populations. The decline in young adults in the New England states contrasts sharply with the greater than 10 percent growth in this cohort in seven of the Western Mountain, Northwest and Southeast States—Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Idaho, Colorado, Georgia and Oregon.

This loss of young adults has occurred throughout the region. Of the 67 counties in New England, every one except for tiny Nantucket county in Massachusetts experienced some decline in the young adult cohort.

What are the causes—and consequences—of the demographic changes?

Some of the causes of the population changes in New England are attributable to predictable demographic shifts, while other factors are less well understood. Clearly the decline in the young adult population in New England can be attributed in part to the aging of the large baby boom population, those born between 1946 and 1964. In 1990, more than half of New England baby boomers were in the 25–to–34 year old age cohort. In 2004, these baby boomers were no longer young adults. This explains part of the decline in the region, and we know that the aging of the baby boom generation is a primary cause of the overall decline in the percentage of young adults in the nation as a whole.

What is less well understood is why the distribution of the young adult age cohort is so unequal across different regions. Why do some of the Mountain, Northwest and Southeastern states have positive growth rates of 20 to 60 percent in the young adult age group while New England has double-digit decline? The dramatic differences suggest that New England is not “attractive” to young adults, but what factors contribute to young adults' preference for one region over another? What is the relative importance, for instance, of factors such as costs of living? What role do housing or energy costs play in the choices made by different age cohorts? Are certain types of jobs or environments more desirable by people of different ages? How do current “myths” about some regions being more youth-oriented and youth-friendly than others influence the changes we have seen in recent years? We do not yet have answers to questions like these and more research and analysis is needed.

Whatever the causal factors turn out to be, however, the consequences of the demographic changes are substantial and suggest leaders in the region need to pay attention to these trends. The decline of the young adult population in

BOTTOM 10 NEW ENGLAND COUNTIES IN POPULATION GROWTH FOR AGES 25–34, 1990–2004

County Name	State	1990–2004 Percentage Change for Ages 25–34
Aroostook	ME	-52%
Windham	VT	-41%
Newport	RI	-41%
Piscataquis	ME	-40%
Bennington	VT	-38%
Rutland	VT	-38%
Rockingham	NH	-38%
Coos	NH	-38%

New England has significant implications for the future labor force, economy and character of the region. Younger workers provide the economic foundation for the future strength and resilience of the region's businesses. They provide a critical pool of hard working, entry level workers for businesses in all industries, and often bring fresh ideas, new skills, and energy to the workplace. They make the region more interesting, more dynamic and can be a magnet that attracts others to come and visit and live in the region, both young and old. The region will struggle to achieve significant employment growth and new industry and business development without an adequate pool of young workers, and the imbalanced growth in the older population leaves the region vulnerable to a host of health and elder care costs without the productive base to support them.

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