

# An Overview of North Dakota's Population Since Statehood

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North Dakota celebrated its centennial anniversary in 1989. Since becoming a state in 1889, North Dakota's population has changed dramatically in size, composition and occupation. This article highlights some of those changes.

## POPULATION SIZE

In 1880, less than 10 years prior to statehood, 36,909 people were counted in the part of Dakota Territory that now constitutes North Dakota. The total population grew rapidly, reaching 319,146 by the turn of the century.

The state reached its first peak in population in 1930 with 680,845 persons, then declined in population during the four succeeding decades. The state's population began to rebound in 1970, growing from 617,761 in 1970 to 652,717 in 1980 until it reached a second peak in 1984 of an estimated 686,777. Since that time, the number of North Dakotans has declined (see Figure 1).

The population in rural areas (places with populations less than 2,500) comprised nearly 95 percent (just under 180,500) of the state's total population in 1890. The number of rural residents increased continually until 1930, with a high of 567,539 persons. At the same time, the proportion of the state's population living in rural areas slipped to 83 percent that year because the state's overall population grew even faster than the state's rural population.

Since 1930, the actual number of persons living in rural parts of the state has been in continual decline. There were 334,407 rural North Dakotans in 1980 and an estimated 330,825 in 1988.

In 1890, only 10,643 persons, or 5 percent of the state's population, lived in urban areas (places with populations of 2,500 or more). The number of North Dakotans living in urban places continued to increase over the subsequent nine decades, reaching a high of 318,310 in 1980.

The urban population comprised 49 percent of the state's population in 1980. For the first time in the state's history, the number of urban residents began to decline in 1986. Also for the first time in the state's history, the proportion of

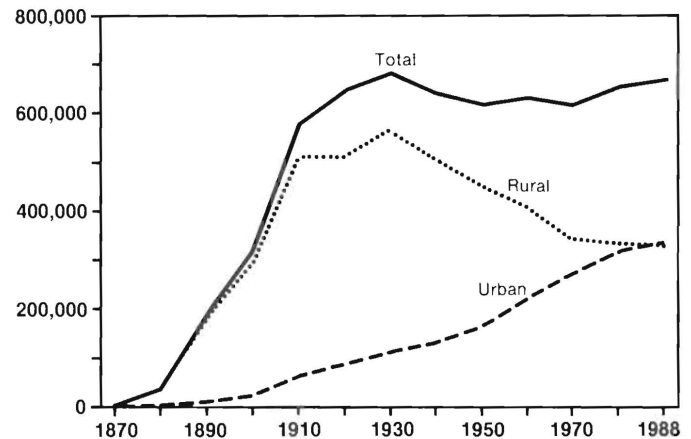


Figure 1. Rural and Urban Population in North Dakota, 1870-1988.

the state's residents living in urban areas (50.4 percent) exceeded that living in rural areas (49.6 percent) because the rural population declined more rapidly than the urban population. Thus, as of 1986, North Dakota was classified as an urban rather than a rural state.

## POPULATION COMPOSITION

### Family Characteristics

At the time of statehood, more people had migrated into North Dakota than had been born in the state. Fifty-six percent of the state's population at the time of statehood were male.

The unequal gender distribution may be better understood by remembering the settlement pattern of the times. Many of the residents had moved into the territory as homesteaders, hoping either to send for their family members or marry later. Between 1900 and 1980, well over half of the adult population (persons aged 15 years and over) were married. By 1980, the figure had increased to over 60 percent (see Figure 2).

Concomitantly, the number of single persons declined from about 41 percent of the adult population at the turn of the century to roughly 28 percent in 1980. The proportion of divorced and separated persons increased from less than

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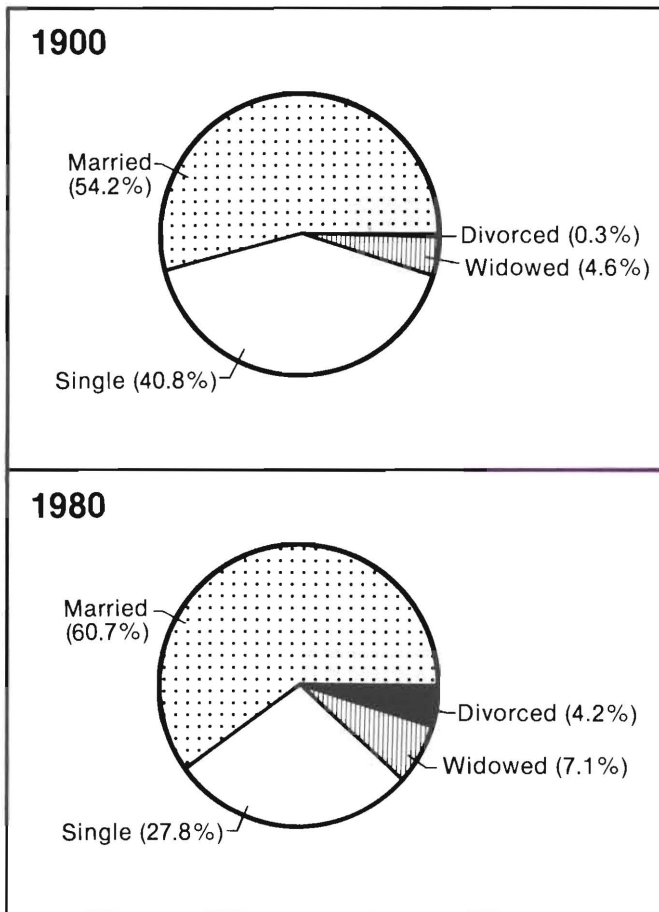


Figure 2. Marital Status in North Dakota, 1900 and 1980.

1 percent in 1900 to over 4 percent in 1980. Widowed persons accounted for nearly 5 percent of the 1900 adult population and 7 percent in 1980.

The average family size of nearly five persons per family in 1900 is illustrative of a relatively high birth rate and high rate of natural increase (births minus deaths). In 1923, the birth rate was 25.4 births per 1,000 population; in 1932, it was 22.8; but by 1988, the state's birth rate had fallen to only 15.2 births per 1,000 population. And given the changes in medicine, technology, and hygiene, the infant mortality rate, which was 51.5 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1932, improved to 10.6 deaths per 1,000 births in 1988.

### Age of the Population

Figure 3 shows that in 1900 nearly four out of every 10 residents (39.3 percent) were under age 15—a very young population. Only 3.8 percent of the population at the turn of the century was aged 60 years or over.

The number of residents under age 15 accounted for 24 percent of the total population in 1986, down from 39 percent in 1900. At the turn of the century, the number of residents aged 60 years or over comprised nearly 15 percent of all North Dakotans (see Figure 3). The “baby boom” cohort, those born between 1945 and 1964, comprised over one-third (35.6 percent) of North Dakota's population in 1986 (Figure 4). As that cohort continues to age, the average age of the state's population will rise. To illustrate the aging of the state's population, compare the state's median age in 1900 with the same factor in 1988; the median age was 20.7 in 1900 and increased to 30.3 in 1988.

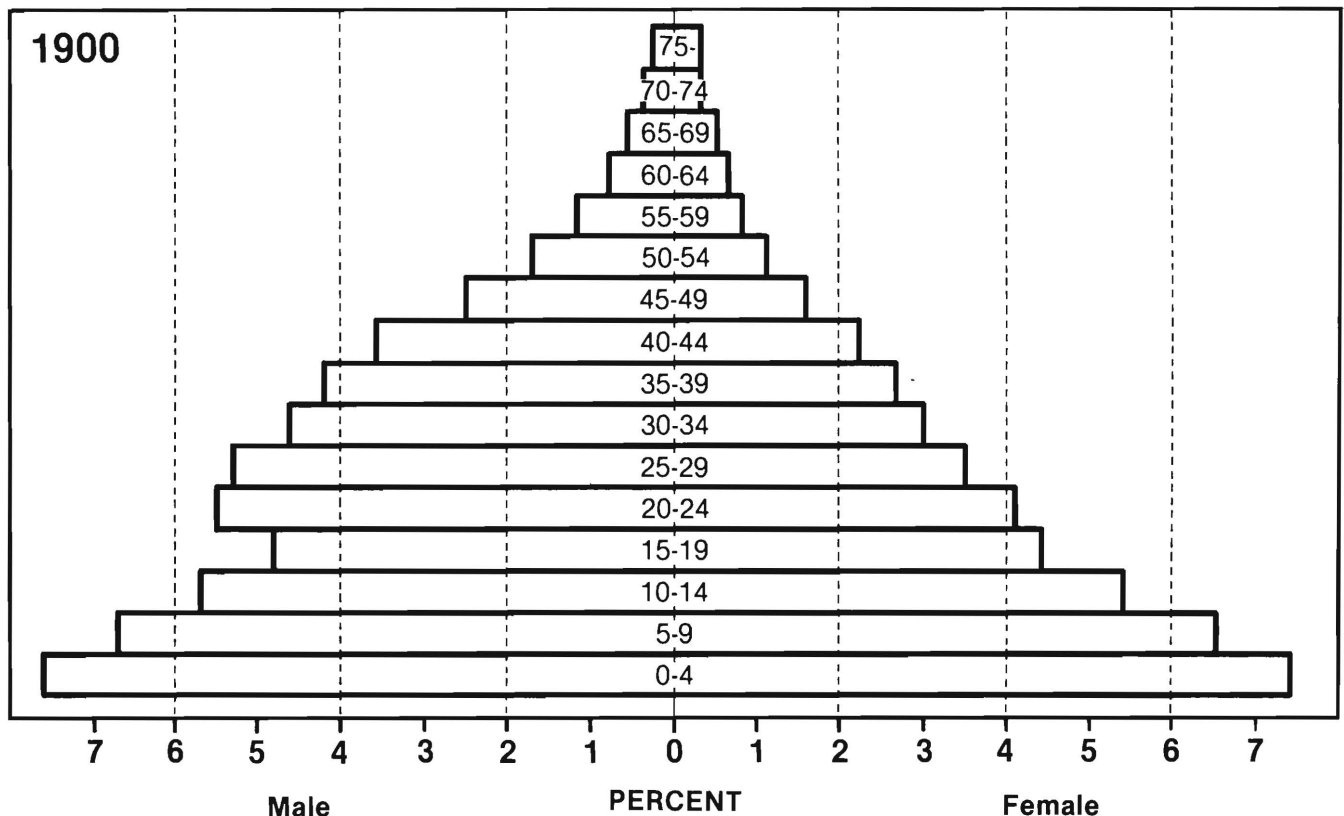


Figure 3. Proportion of Males and Females by Age, North Dakota, 1900.

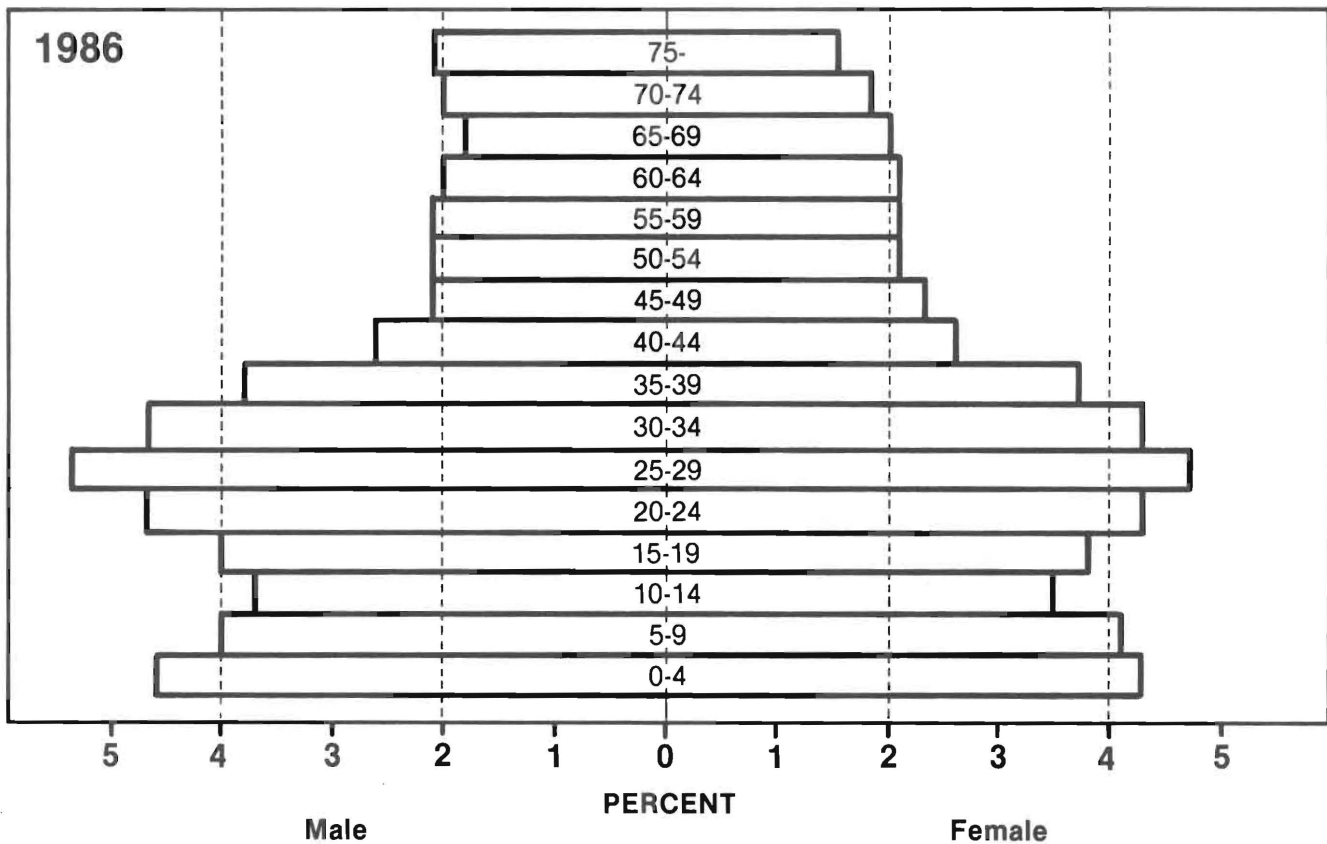


Figure 4. Proportion of Males and Females by Age, North Dakota, 1986.

Another factor associated with an increase or decrease in median age is migration. The state's early history of high immigration of young adults and high rates of fertility kept the median age low. However, recent patterns of outmigration of young adults, coupled with the aging of the baby-boom population, result in a higher median age for its population.

#### Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

North Dakota's population is racially and ethnically very homogenous. The 1900 census listed 182,407 Whites (97.7 percent), 8,174 American Indians (2.2 percent), 373 Blacks (0.1 percent), and 29 persons of other races (0.0 percent).

By 1980, the racial composition had become only slightly less homogenous. There were 625,557 Whites (95.8 percent), 20,120 Native Americans (3.1 percent), 2,568 Blacks (0.4 percent), and 4,472 persons of other races (0.7 percent). Indians have had the most steady increase in population since the turn of the century, growing by over 146 percent.

In 1900, over one-third of North Dakotans (35.3 percent) were foreign born. Of those born in other countries, 29 percent were born in Norway, 22.5 percent in Russia, nearly 11 percent in Canada, just over 9 percent in Germany, 8 percent in Sweden, and 4 percent in Denmark. By 1980, the number of foreign born dropped to only 3 percent of the total population.

Even though the number of foreign born persons declined to 3 percent in the '80s, ethnic ties continued to play a key role in a substantial number of the state's population. Fifteen percent of North Dakotans (ages five and older) spoke a language other than English at home in 1980. Of those, 56 percent spoke German, 16 percent spoke Norwegian, and 5 percent spoke Spanish.

Another indication of the state's homogeneity can be seen in the population's religious affiliations. Of those who claimed church adherence in 1980, 44 percent were Lutherans and 36 percent were Catholic. Methodists, Presbyterians, and United Church of Christ members comprised 6 percent, 3 percent, and 2 percent, respectively, of church adherents. Less than 9 percent of the state's church participants belonged to some other denomination.

The number of church participants has steadily increased since the turn of the century, despite population declines. There were 263,829 church participants in North Dakota in 1916, accounting for 43 percent of the state's population. In 1980 that figure increased to 482,574 or 74 percent of the state's population. With 74 percent of the population claiming church participation, North Dakota is the third most-churched state in the nation.

In 1906, there were 1,960 churches in the state. The increase in the number of churches followed the increase in population, until 1926 when it reached a high of 2,435 churches. Since that time, the number of churches in North Dakota has fallen. In 1980 there were a total of 1,695 churches in the state.

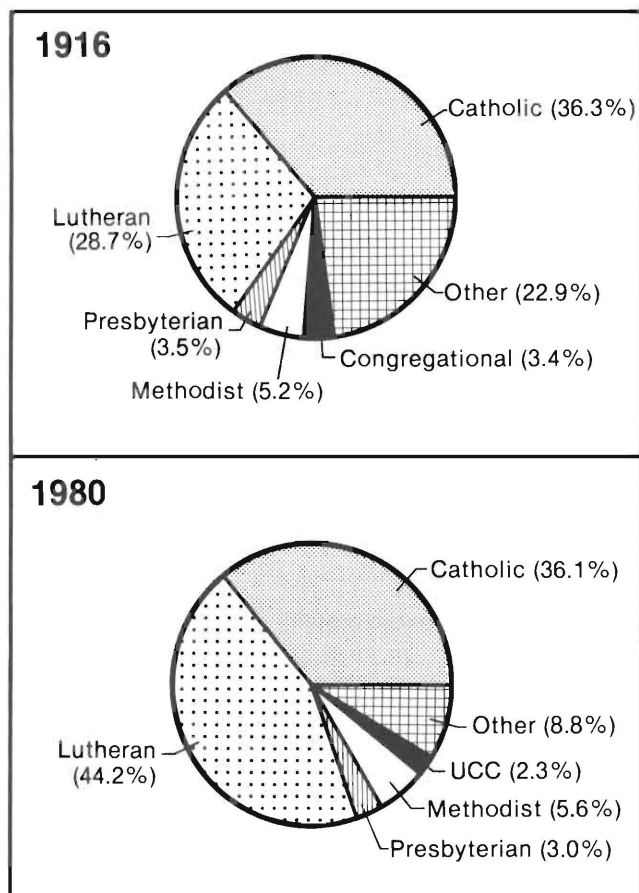


Figure 5. Denomination of Church Adherents in North Dakota, 1916 and 1980.

### Education

Along with the rest of the nation, the population of North Dakota has increased in years of formal education. In 1930, slightly over half (54 percent) of the population were high school graduates. By 1980, the state boasted 82 percent of the adult population had graduated from high school. Nationally, the increase has been from 35 percent in 1930 to 66 percent in 1980. Thus, North Dakota retained a more highly educated population than much of the nation.

### OCCUPATION

Early in the state's history, farming was nearly the only occupation. In 1930, agriculture was the major employer (56 percent), but by 1980 it captured only 15 percent of the employees of the state. Vying for the lead in number of employees were wholesale and retail trade and professional services, both attaining about 23 percent of the total number of the state's employees in 1980.

Table 1 provides information on employment by industry from 1930 through 1980. Total employment grew by nearly 34 percent during this time period, while the population itself actually declined by 4 percent (see Figure 1). Thus, more persons have been employed relative to the number of persons in the state in more recent times.

Among the employment sectors shown in Table 1, nine grew in the number of employees between 1930 and 1980. Two sectors, personal services and agriculture, declined by 45 to 69 percent, respectively. The decline in the number of farms between 1930 and 1980 was 49 percent (78,000 versus 40,000), and the number of persons working on farms decreased by 69 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Another change in the employment picture from the 1930 era is the increase in female participation in the workforce. In 1930 only 15 percent of those employed were female; in 1980 females made up 40 percent of the workforce. This increase in involvement among females is reflected across all employment sectors but is most striking in the traditionally male-dominated industries of mining and construction. Males still are an overwhelming majority of the workers in these two industries. However, female participation increased from only 46 participants in 1930 to 1,967 in 1980, an increase of over 400 percent. Females have retained their long-term majority of jobs in the personal and professional services industries (roughly 78 and 65 percent, respectively). In 1930, however, females made up only 21 percent of the workforce in the finance, insurance and real estate sector. By 1980, women were the majority (57 percent) of these workers.

<sup>1</sup>This figure (69 percent) includes persons employed in forestry and fisheries as well as agriculture. Because of this overlap of industries within the category, the data in Table 1 must be interpreted with the understanding that the number of employees indicated here are not totally farm employees.

Table 1. Employment by industry in North Dakota, 1930-1980.

Year	Total	Agric.*	Mining	Const.	Manuf.	Transp.	Trade	FIRE	B'ness	Personal Services	Recr.	Profess.	Gov't.
----- number of persons employed by industry -----													
1930	240,317	134,495	1,249	6,105	5,690	17,955	22,398	3,632	4,420	16,516	1,516	17,450	3,066
1940	200,396	107,024	987	4,083	5,002	10,158	27,468	3,152	3,726	12,201	1,103	15,801	7,081
1950	223,460	98,841	755	11,670	6,746	15,814	3,943	4,025	6,171	7,732	1,337	19,072	8,333
1960	213,661	70,166	2,067	11,426	7,856	13,619	42,975	6,495	4,016	11,152	1,295	28,851	9,854
1970	218,261	43,122	1,573	10,538	9,571	12,958	46,162	7,228	3,824	9,552	1,289	43,500	10,903
1980	272,620	41,400	6,029	18,999	15,877	20,935	63,801	12,493	7,052	9,036	1,653	61,280	13,978

\* Column heads were shortened; the full titles and inclusive categories are Agriculture (agriculture, forestry, and fisheries), Mining (extractive industries), Construction, Manufacturing (durable and nondurable goods), Transportation (communication and other public utilities), Trade (wholesale and retail), FIRE (finance, insurance and real estate), Business (and repair services), Personal Services (private household and other personal services), Recreation, Professional (and related services), and Government (public administration).

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, "General Social and Economic Characteristics: North Dakota," U.S. Census of Population (various years). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

## SUMMARY

North Dakota's population has increased dramatically since statehood. However, it has shifted from a predominantly rural population to one in which over half of the state's residents live in urban areas. Frontier North Dakota consisted of substantially more males than females, whereas modern North Dakota approximates a near gender balance. North Dakota's early population consisted primarily of younger people, whereas today's population is considerably older. While the primary occupation had been farming, North Dakotans today are employed in a wide variety of occupations.

Yet, some aspects of the state's population have changed very little over the decades. The vast majority of the population is White, predominantly of Norwegian and German extraction, and predominantly of Lutheran or Catholic background.

What does the future hold for the state's population? The size will no doubt depend on the availability of employment. Social and technological change will impact the homogeneity of the population's composition. At the accelerated rate with which we have experienced such changes over the past few decades, we can expect that North Dakota's population is likely to change significantly by the state's bicentennial celebration, 2089.

## REFERENCES

A wide variety of sources were used in this report. Some of them include the following:

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