

Demography ^[1]

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by Ron Holland, 2006; Revised October 2022.

See also: [Population \(from NC Atlas Revisited\)](#) ^[2], [Population Change](#) ^[3], [Population - Net Migration](#) ^[4], [Population - Change Components](#) ^[5], [Population - Change Distribution](#) ^[6], [Population - Urbanization](#) ^[7], [Total population](#) ^[8], [Population - Net Migration Distribution](#) ^[9], [Population - Age Structure](#) ^[10], [General Demographics](#) ^[11], [General Demographics - African American](#) ^[12], [General Demographics - Asian](#) ^[13], [General Demographics - Hispanic](#) ^[14], [General Demographics - Native American](#) ^[15], [General Demographics - White](#) ^[16]

North Carolina has grown from a collection of diverse [Indian](#) ^[17] communities and the [first small European settlements](#) ^[18] of the seventeenth century to the eleventh most-populous U.S. state in the early 2000s. By the 1660s, the first permanent settlers in what is now North Carolina had migrated from Virginia into the Albemarle Sound region. Subsequently, the colony of Carolina (which originally included modern-day North Carolina and South Carolina and all or parts of 14 other states) was granted to eight [Lords Proprietors](#) ^[19] in 1663. The population of the colony grew very slowly under Proprietary rule. In 1689 a government was set up to administer the area located "north and east of Cape Fear." This was the beginning of North Carolina's history as a separate colony.

In 1729 North Carolina became a royal colony under the king of England. As a royal colony (until 1775), North Carolina experienced rapid population growth, particularly during the last half of the period. The colony's population grew from 100,000 in 1752 to 200,000 in 1765, and by 1776 the count was approximately 300,000. North Carolina was then fourth among the 13 colonies in population, with only Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts more populous. The tremendous increase in North Carolina's population during this period can be attributed to a large influx of newcomers, most notably [Germans](#) ^[20], [Scotch-Irish](#), [Highland Scots](#) ^[21], and enslaved black people.

After the [U.S. Constitution](#) ^[22] was ratified in 1789, Congress passed legislation the following year requiring that a [census](#) ^[23] be taken every ten years beginning in 1790. According to the first census, North Carolina, with approximately 394,000 people, was the third-most-populous state behind Virginia and Pennsylvania. During the next three decades, North Carolina was ranked fourth among the states. That ranking, however, began to change dramatically when the state dropped from fourth in 1820 to twelfth in 1860. Poor economic conditions led to a steady exodus of North Carolinians, particularly to points west. Although the state's total population increased between 1830 and 1840, 32 out of 68 counties lost population. The 1850 census revealed that some 405,000 North Carolina natives were living in other states.

Following the [Civil War](#) ^[24], North Carolina experienced steady growth but showed relatively little movement in the state rankings from 1870 to 1920, remaining fourteenth. The decade of the 1920s, however, marked a change. The economy in general expanded dramatically, with help from improved modes of [transportation](#) ^[25], an ambitious road construction program, and the development of hydroelectric power. The 1930 census revealed that North Carolina had moved from fourteenth to twelfth in the rankings and was the most populous state in the Southeast, having surpassed Georgia in the 1920s and Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee in previous decades.

North Carolina continued to grow steadily in the succeeding decades, although not as rapidly as during the 1920s. The state was ranked eleventh in 1940, surpassing Indiana, and tenth in 1950, moving ahead of Missouri. In 1960, however, North Carolina dropped to twelfth place due to a phenomenal population increase in Florida and a growth spurt in Indiana. The state remained in twelfth place until 1980, when it moved back into tenth place ahead of Massachusetts and Indiana (a ranking that was maintained in the 1990 census).

Historically, North Carolina has been a predominately rural state. In 1860 only 2.5 percent of the population was classified as urban. Even as late as 1900, the state's urban population was only about 10 percent. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, however, there was a trend toward urbanization, with the proportion increasing to 19 percent. The trend continued in the decades that followed, and according to 2004 estimates, about 68 percent of North Carolina's population was considered urban.

In 1990 North Carolina was sixth among the states in attracting people from other states. As many as 10,000 retirees alone were migrating to North Carolina each year by the late 1980s and 1990s, and these figures remain on the increase. One definitive phenomenon has been the increase of the [Latino](#) ^[26] population in the state, which rose 26 percent during the decade of the 1980s (from 56,667 to 76,726). The Latino population has continued to rise dramatically, topping 600,000 early in the twenty-first century.

The 2000 U.S. census revealed growth beyond all expectations in North Carolina. State demographers had estimated the growth during the decade of the 1990s at approximately 16 percent, but when the official count was completed, the accurate figure turned out to be an impressive rate of 21.4 percent. In spite of this extraordinary growth, North Carolina dropped from tenth to eleventh in the national rankings because of an even greater increase in population in the state of Georgia—primarily attributed to growth in the Atlanta metropolitan area.

North Carolina Population

(U.S. Census, 1790-2000)

1790	393,751	1900	1,893,810
1800	478,103	1910	2,206,287
1810	555,500	1920	2,559,123
1820	638,829	1930	3,170,276
1830	737,987	1940	3,571,623
1840	753,419	1950	4,061,929
1850	869,039	1960	4,556,155
1860	992,622	1970	5,082,059
1870	1,071,361	1980	5,881,766
1880	1,399,750	1990	6,628,637
1890	1,617,949	2000	8,049,313

References:

William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (1989).

Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1991 (1991).

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1990 and 2000).

Additional Resources:

Census and Survey Data, NC:

http://www.osbm.state.nc.us/ncosbm/facts_and_figures/socioeconomic_data/census_home.shtm [27]

Image Credit:

Census and Survey Data, Office of State Budget and Management:

http://www.osbm.state.nc.us/ncosbm/facts_and_figures/socioeconomic_data/census_home.shtm [27]

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[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) [29]

1 January 2006 | Holland, Ron

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