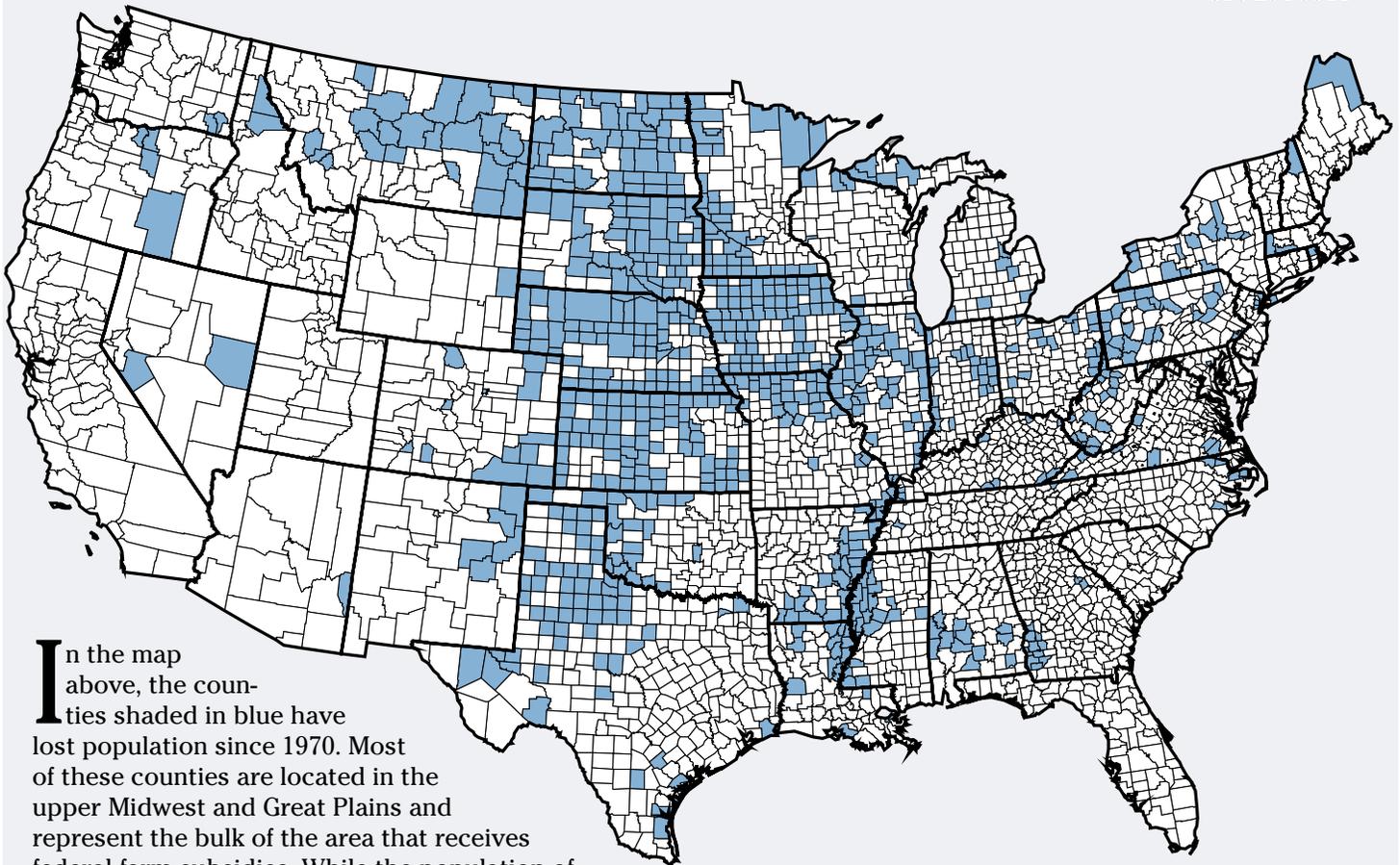


By the Numbers: County Population Trends

Chad E. Hart
chart@card.iastate.edu
515-294-9911



In the map above, the counties shaded in blue have lost population since 1970. Most of these counties are located in the upper Midwest and Great Plains and represent the bulk of the area that receives federal farm subsidies. While the population of the United States has grown from 203 million in 1970 to 281 million in 2000, a 38.4 percent increase, population growth in the upper Midwest over the same period ranges from 3.6 percent in Iowa to 29.3 percent in Minnesota. Midwestern states have failed to keep up with population growth in the rest of the country. And, within these states, population growth varies greatly from county to county. For example, Iowa has had an overall population growth of 3.6 percent since 1970, but only 28 of the 99 counties have had positive population growth. In the upper Midwest, what characteristics distinguish the counties with population gains from those with population losses?

The most obviously common characteristic among counties that gained population is their location near urban centers. In the upper Midwest, the counties surrounding Des Moines, the Quad Cities, Omaha, Sioux Falls, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Fargo grew. As the suburbs around these cities have grown, they have spilled over county lines and expanded the population base for neighboring counties.

A second characteristic of county growth is location near transportation lanes. The corridors around Inter-

state 80 in Nebraska and Interstates 35 and 94 in Minnesota follow this pattern. Rural counties along interstate highways offer residents the opportunity to live in a rural setting but with quick access to urban areas and alternative transportation choices, such as air travel. Quicker and easier transportation, combined with changing economic opportunities, has made it more likely for people to move away from their birthplace. For the WWII generation and its predecessors, it was common for most of the extended family to live within the same geographic area (often in the same county). Now, it is more common for grandparents and grandchildren to live in different states. Thus, convenient access to transportation routes can play a crucial role in population growth patterns.

A third characteristic is location near tourist attractions. The Black Hills area of South Dakota and the Lake Okoboji region of Iowa are good examples of this. Population growth in these areas is not only spurred by the availability of the attractions but also by the tourist dollars brought into the areas. The tourist industry provides an economic incentive for population growth by providing an alternative source for jobs in the area. ♦