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Population in three area counties, including Lackawanna grew, while four others lost residents

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The populations of Lackawanna, Luzerne and Pike counties increased slightly over the past decade, while four other counties in the northeast region saw an exodus of residents, according to data released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Lackawanna County grew by 1,459 people, jumping from 214,437 in 2010 to 215,896, a 0.7% increase. Luzerne and Pike saw similar hikes, with Luzerne increasing from 320,918 to 325,594, a 1.4% increase, and Pike from 57,369 to 58,535, or a 2% increase.

The growth, while small, is important, experts say. Census data plays a crucial role in determining county and municipal governments' eligibility for a vast array of federal and state funds, said Andrew Chew, a senior research and policy analyst with the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development in Wilkes-Barre.

Several other counties are in a more precarious position because their populations dwindled. Susquehanna County saw the largest decrease, dropping from 43,356 to 38,434 residents, a loss of 4,922, or 11.4% of its population.

Wyoming, Wayne and Monroe counties also lost residents. Wyoming fell from 28,276 to 26,069, or 7.8%; Wayne from 52,822 to 51,155, or 3.2% and Monroe from 169,842 to 168,327, or 0.9%.

A key population-dependent program is the state's Community Development Block Grant program, which provides funding for a wide range of municipal improvement projects, Chew said.

"With a program like CDBG ... a community has to be under or over a certain population threshold," he said. "Which side of the line they fall on matters a lot."

Lackawanna County Chief of Staff Brian Jeffers believes the uptick in the county's population is partly tied to an influx of people from larger cities who relocated here during the pandemic and opted to stay.

"I'm not surprised our population has grown," he said. "I know a lot of people who work in New York and Connecticut came home because they were able to work from home."

In Luzerne County, council Chairman Tim McGinley credited the population increase to strong economic growth. He's hopeful the hike will translate to more state and federal funding.

Officials in several of the counties that shed residents are bracing for the potentially significant economic impact.

Wyoming County Commissioner Ernest King Jr. said the loss of 2,207 residents may not seem like a lot to residents of larger counties, but it's a big deal for a small county like Wyoming.

"We only have 28,000 people to begin with," King said. "So many of the state and federal grants are based on population. You lose that percentage of your population, it can have a very negative impact on our economy, no question about it."

With so much at stake, it's crucial that the census data is accurate. At a press conference Thursday, census officials said they're confident in the data despite challenges they faced because of the pandemic, including the inability to conduct as much door-to-door canvassing compared to past censuses.

Wayne County Commissioner Joseph Adams questioned the accuracy of the county's figures, noting the census bureau heavily relied on residents filing forms via the internet.

That's a problem, Adams said, because about one-third of the county does not have reliable internet. Residents reported they tried to call the bureau, but gave up after remaining on hold for 45 minutes to an hour, he said.

"It was a perfect storm to have what we believe to be a pretty substantial undercount of what our actual population is now," Adams said. "We will be penalized with state and federal dollars for the next 10 years."

Attempts to reach Susquehanna County commissioners for comment Thursday were unsuccessful.