

Chapter 3

A Sociodemographic Portrait of the Intermountain West*



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Introduction

As we have detailed in the preceding chapter, rural America has experienced unprecedented demographic and social changes over the past half-century. Rapid population growth has occurred in some areas, while at the same time other rural communities have experienced significant population decline and economic stagnation. These changes are altering the foundations of rural American communities and

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reshaping their economic, social, and resource bases. This paradox of rural growth and change, in which some areas and locales prosper and at times grow too quickly while others wither, represents a crucial challenge to rural development policy and practice in the twenty-first century.

In this chapter we examine 30 years of sociodemographic change in the Intermountain West region, highlighting the role of the environment and natural amenities in advancing growth and development. Consistent with the multi-level analytic strategies that inform our approach to this study, our focus in this chapter is initially on the region as a whole. After providing a regional overview, we shift the analytic scale to examine similarities and differences across eight spatially distinct physiographic provinces differentiated by terrain and topography across this vast and wide-ranging region.

The findings detailed in the following pages highlight substantial variability in patterns of growth and change that occurred in recent decades across these physiographic provinces, and help illuminate some important ways in which spatially differentiated environmental and landscape contexts interact with and influence social and demographic conditions and trends. In brief, those physiographic provinces advantaged by a concentration of highly desirable natural amenities – the Rocky Mountains and the Colorado Plateaus – consistently demonstrate high levels of growth and development. In contrast, the less amenity-rich Great Plains and Wyoming Basin provinces have struggled to capture their share of population and economic growth. The variation in sociodemographic change patterns observed across the physiographic provinces of the Intermountain West reaffirms the important role of resource conditions, natural amenities, and recreation opportunities as major drivers of population growth and development in modern rural America.

The Intermountain West

The western portion of the United States has experienced rapid population growth during recent decades, moving from the least populous region in 1980 to the third-most populated region in the nation by 1990 (Perry 2002). This rapid growth continued through the 1990s, with Park, Elbert, and Douglas counties, Colorado, registering the highest rates of growth within the region during the decade, and Maricopa County, Arizona, and Clark County, Nevada, registering the largest numerical increases. In terms of population loss during the 1990s, however, the two largest declines in the West occurred in Sweetwater and Carbon Counties, Wyoming (Perry 2002), both of which had previously experienced extensive growth related to energy resource development during the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, the western United States helps define the rural paradox, simultaneously demonstrating growth and decline across spatially-differentiated locales throughout the region.

Our focus in this chapter is on the Intermountain West, a region exemplifying the full spectrum of economic and sociodemographic transformations affecting much of rural America. The Intermountain West includes portions of Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana and contains some of the nation's most rapidly

expanding rural areas (portions of Colorado and Utah), as well as agricultural areas of the Great Plains that have experienced sharp and sustained decline. The area is home to the Rocky Mountains, Yellowstone National Park, and thousands of acres of public forests, parks, monuments, and lands with unique natural resources that have been and remain highly important in shaping the economies and the social structures of rural communities throughout the region.

Methods

All data used for analysis in this chapter are drawn from the United States Decennial Census for the years 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. The historical census data were derived from the GeoLytics census software packages for 1970 and 1980; 1990 and 2000 data were obtained through the Census Bureau's web-resource, American Fact Finder.

For the purposes of the ensuing analysis, we defined the nonmetropolitan Intermountain West at the county level, excluding metropolitan counties surrounding Salt Lake City, Utah, and Boise, Idaho. In total, the nonmetropolitan Intermountain West includes 134 counties, with 130 of those counties classified into a primary physiographic province constituting at least two-thirds of the county's land area. Key sociodemographic data were initially analyzed at both a state and physiographic provincial level.¹ The variables of comparison included: total population, population 65 years of age or older, total number of housing units, number of vacant housing units for seasonal or recreational use, percent of the population with at least 1 year of college education, median family income, and families with incomes over \$50,000.

Our analysis is based upon the physiographic regions of the United States as defined by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) North American Tapestry Project. The spatial data for these regions were also provided by the Project.² The USGS classifications are based on Nevin Fenneman's 1931 report on the physiographic regions of the United States and utilize his three-tiered classification system. We chose to perform our analysis at the provincial level in order to balance the specificity and diversity of the area's regions with the need for identifying generalizable trends. Provincial categories provided the most appropriate level of geographically specific data upon which to base our analysis and conclusions.

¹After analyzing the data with counties grouped at the state level versus counties grouped by physiographic province, we determined the physiographic level better represented the patterns of change. There were more similarities among counties within the same physiographic province than among counties within the same state.

²The Basin and Range province contains 11 counties, Colorado Plateaus 23, Columbia Plateau 17, Great Plains 9, Wyoming Basin 8, Northern Rocky Mountains 34, Middle Rocky Mountains 14, and Southern Rocky Mountains 16 counties. Within the Intermountain West, the largest land area is in the Northern Rocky Mountains, followed by the Colorado Plateaus, with the Southern Rocky Mountains having the smallest surface area.

Patterns of Change at the Regional Level

The Intermountain West experienced important changes over the last 30 years of the twentieth century, exemplified by a number of basic sociodemographic shifts. The region’s population increased from 1.6 million people in 1970 to almost 2.8 million in 2000. This 68% growth was nearly double the national growth rate during the same period (38.43%). The largest growth rates occurred during the 1970s and 1990s.

Rural portions of the Intermountain West experienced substantial population growth over this period – indeed, rural areas as a whole grew significantly faster than their urban counterparts, a fact often lost in popular understandings of rural America. Table 3.1 summarizes the sociodemographic changes for the five states, the portions of the states included in the Intermountain West region, and the comparison to national rates of change.

The Intermountain West also experienced growth of over 118% in the number of residents of retirement age, 65 years or older. In many ways this change mirrors the aging of the U.S. population overall as baby boomers continue to move through the life course. The U.S. population 65 years and older totaled 8,436,167 persons in 1970. That number grew to 34,991,753 in 2000, a 315% increase over 30 years. By comparison, over the same time period, the Intermountain West has clearly experienced a smaller increase (118%) in the number of people over 65. Nevertheless, growth in the retirement-age population has outpaced overall growth within the region (68%) over this time span, a pattern of change that has contributed

Table 3.1 Percentage change in key sociodemographic indicators from 1970 to 2000 for states and portions of states in the Intermountain West region

	Population	Pop. >= 65	At least 1 year college	Median family income ^a	Housing units	Seasonal housing
Colorado	94.90%	131.80%	21.10%	209.61%	138.80%	478.50%
IMW	98.60%	132.60%	18.50%	143.01%	168.10%	757.90%
Colorado						
Idaho	81.60%	125.40%	15.90%	166.75%	115.70%	394.20%
IMW Idaho	59.80%	115.80%	15.00%	133.76%	92.90%	383.20%
Montana	29.90%	82.40%	16.60%	138.63%	67.30%	378.80%
IMW	39.10%	89.90%	18.50%	107.55%	81.30%	398.10%
Montana						
Utah	110.80%	157.90%	15.90%	183.27%	143.40%	765.90%
IMW Utah	123.40%	177.90%	12.70%	126.69%	170.70%	1019.90%
Wyoming	48.50%	97.90%	16.50%	109.22%	92.40%	821.00%
IMW	49.40%	103.50%	16.50%	97.77%	96.10%	732.30%
Wyoming						
IMW Total	67.80%	118.20%	16.30%	156.25%	112.50%	595.20%
Total U.S.	38.43%	315.00%	88.36%	60.00%	68.75%	105.00%

^aMedian family income represents the change from 1980 to 2000

to a reshaping of Intermountain West economies and communities. As the population ages and as in-migration of retirees increases, the human face of the Intermountain West has inevitably shifted as well.

Tied to its rapid population growth, the Intermountain West also experienced substantial growth in the number of housing units between 1970 and 2000. Housing units more than doubled during the study period, a level of increase that significantly surpassed the region's overall population growth. The difference is explained in large part by the considerably more rapid growth in seasonal housing units in the Intermountain West. The number of seasonal housing units increased from less than 19,000 in 1970 to nearly 130,000 in 2000, nearly seven times the number of units that existed 30 years earlier. The most rapid growth occurred during the 1980s. This is indicative of a dramatic increase in the number of part-time residents across the region. Such growth in seasonal populations has been shown to have important consequences for the structure and function of rural areas, contributing to changing local economic bases and a diversification of populations that can simultaneously enhance and detract from community capacity and local quality of life. While seasonal population growth can contribute to new economic opportunities as demand for housing construction and goods and services expands, there is also potential for a variety of less positive consequences. For example, growth in the number of seasonal residents may generate both economic and social strains in settings where property values and taxes increase or where differences in values and preferences about community conditions, environmental and resource use and management priorities, and cultural traditions contribute to clashes between new populations and long-term residents (Clendenning and Field 2005; Stynes et al. 1998; Stedman 2002; Egan and Luloff 2000; Krannich and Petrzelka 2003; Krannich et al. 2006; Krannich and Smith 1998; Smith and Krannich 2000).

The Intermountain West has also seen a dramatic spike in family income levels as new residents moved into the area. From 1980 to 2000, median household income more than doubled, well above the 60% increase for the nation as a whole. Also, there were more than ten times the number of families reporting incomes above \$50,000 in 2000 than in 1970. Overall, the growth in income levels reflects substantially increased economic vitality that has simultaneously resulted from and helped to stimulate population growth across the region over the past several decades.

During this period, the region also experienced an increase in the percentage of residents with at least 1 year of college education, although the increase was fairly modest and considerably below what occurred for the nation as a whole over the past three decades. In 1970, fewer than 15% of residents across the region had this level of education, compared to 30.13% in 2000. The most dramatic increases in educational attainment occurred during the 1970s, a period when population growth and in-migration to the region were unusually high. This is consistent with general and well-documented tendencies for migration to be more prevalent among persons with higher levels of educational attainment.

Physiographic Provinces of the Intermountain West

The Intermountain West encompasses a broad spectrum of geomorphic or physiographic regions, each characterized by its own rock types, geographic structure, terrain, and history. Based upon Fenneman's (1931) divisions, the Intermountain West encompasses all or portions of eight physiographic provinces: the Basin and Range, the Colorado Plateaus, the Columbia Plateau, the Great Plains, the Wyoming Basin, and the Northern, Middle, and Southern Rocky Mountains. These eight provinces span our study area, representing the diverse environments found within the Intermountain West. The locations of each of these spatially distinct provinces are depicted in Fig. 3.1.

The *Basin and Range* province lies west and south of the Colorado and Columbia Plateaus, stretching across the western United States south into Mexico. In our study area, it includes western Utah and a portion of southeastern Idaho. The province is bounded by the Sierra Nevada mountain range on the west, the Columbia Plateau to the north/northeast, and the Colorado Plateaus to the south/southeast. The Basin and Range province is climatically distinguished by its aridity and extremely low precipitation; overall the province is the driest place in the United States. The province contains several key amenity features of interest, including portions of the Dixie, Fishlake, Uinta, Wasatch, Cache, Caribou, and Sawtooth National Forests; Great Basin National Park; the Great Salt Lake; and several reservoirs and intermittent lakes (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008). Approximately 4.2% of the population is employed in tourism and recreation, four times as many as are employed in extractive industries.

The *Colorado Plateaus* province encompasses southern and southeastern Utah and western Colorado. The boundaries of the province are defined by steep changes in elevation from the Basin and Range and Wyoming Basin provinces and from the high mountains of the Middle and Southern Rocky Mountains provinces. The province's magnificent canyons and red rock formations are geologically young features resulting from dramatic erosion of the province's hard rocks encouraged by terrain uplift. The Intermountain West portions of the Colorado Plateaus province include a number of major recreation destination areas and amenity features of interest, including Zion, Capitol Reef, Canyonlands and Arches National Parks; Glen Canyon National Recreation Area; Canyon De Chelly and El Malpais National Monuments; and several national forests. This province is home to many of the Intermountain West's most distinguishing features and areas of high recreation potential (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008). More than any other area of the nation, it has experienced significant growth in tourism and recreation-driven employment – to the point that such jobs were held by about 12% of the employed population by 2000.

The *Columbia Plateau* is the last province within the Intermontane Plateaus division. It encompasses about 100,000 square miles of land and is bounded by the Cascade Mountains on the west and the Rocky Mountains to the north and east, with the Great Basin to the south. In our study area it encompasses the western and southwestern portions of Idaho. This province holds the Sawtooth and Payette

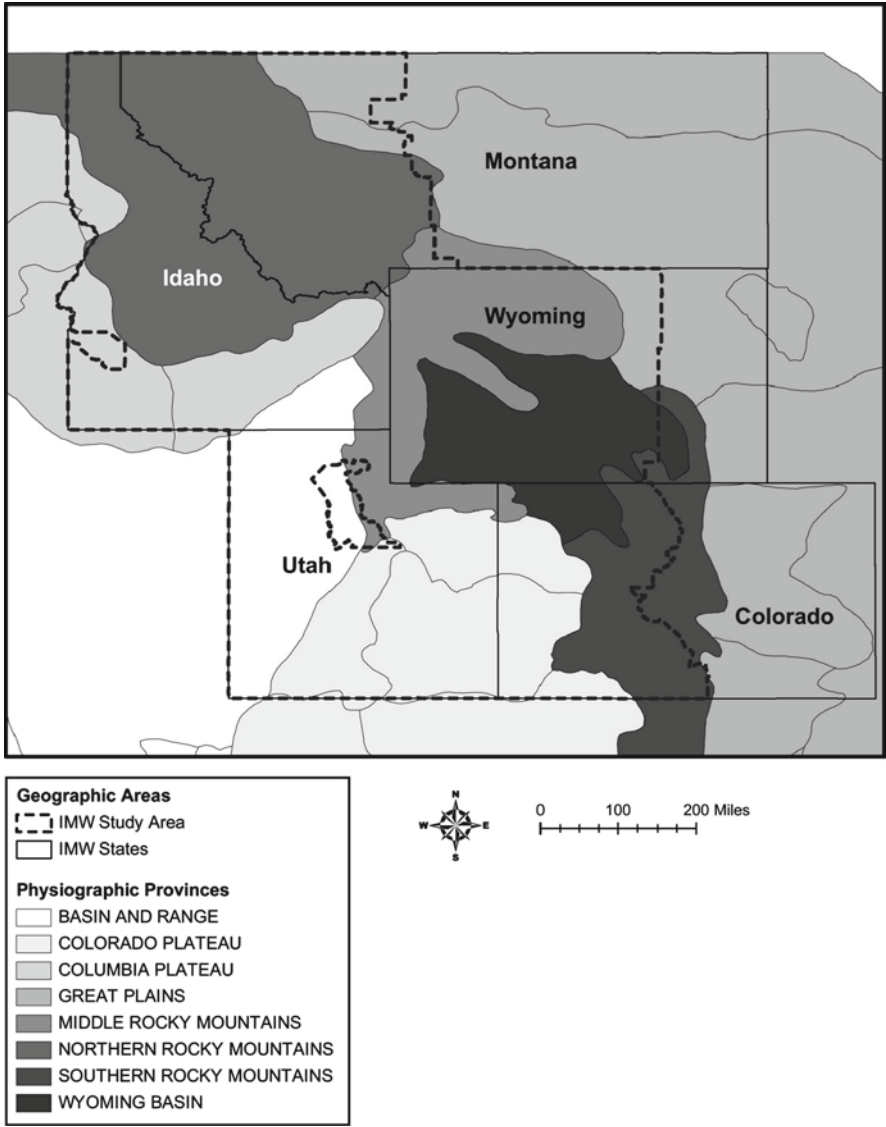


Fig. 3.1 The Intermountain West physiographic provinces

National Forests and the Craters of the Moon and the Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monuments (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008). Less than 1% of employment in this province involves work in tourism-based sectors.

The *Great Plains* physiographic province stretches from the Canadian border beginning in Montana and North Dakota south to west-central Texas. In our study area, the Great Plains province covers the easternmost edge of the Intermountain

West region – portions of Wyoming and Montana. The most striking feature of the Great Plains province is its exceptional flatness, with an eastern tilt to the landscape. The province has historically been dominated by agriculture and ranching, and has maintained this traditional base. The Great Plains province includes portions of the Lewis and Clark National Forest and several smaller state and local parks; it is home to the fewest public lands and parks in the study area (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008). In contrast to the tourism-dependent provinces, extractive industries remain a significant portion of the economy, with over 15% of the population employed in agriculture.

The *Wyoming Basin* province interrupts the higher elevation landforms that characterize much of the Rocky Mountain system. It is a deep basin of nearly 40,000 square miles located in the center of an otherwise mountainous region. The Wyoming Basin covers central and southern Wyoming and a portion of northeastern Colorado. The basin contains the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area and portions of the Bridger, White River, Medicine Bow, Routt, Ashley, and Wasatch National Forests (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008). The Wyoming Basin also continues to maintain significant extractive employment, with more than twice as many employed adults in the extractive industry as in tourism-based employment.

The *Northern Rocky Mountains* physiographic province includes the portion of the Rocky Mountain range located north of Yellowstone Park and extending toward the Canadian border. This mountainous province covers all of northern and western Idaho and the majority of Montana within our study area. The province contains significant natural resources that have been a variable focus of economic activity and development over time, including an important lead industry, vast expanses of timber, and substantial tracts of agricultural lands located within the basins and river valleys. It is home to several areas of extremely high recreation potential, including Glacier National Park, while nearly two-thirds of its land area falls within the boundaries of multiple national forests. In 2000, over 10% of the labor force in the province was employed directly in tourism-based industries (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008).

The *Middle Rocky Mountains* province covers the portion of the Rocky Mountain range extending from the Yellowstone Plateau to the Wyoming Basin. It covers the northern and western borders of Wyoming, the northeast corner of Utah, the southeast corner of Idaho, the south-central border of Montana, and a small portion of the northwest corner of Colorado. The Yellowstone Plateau is the most prominent feature of the province. This province includes some of the most popular recreation areas of the United States. Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, Dinosaur National Monument, and several national and state forests are located in this portion of the study area. Yellowstone National Park alone attracts approximately three million visitors annually, making it one of the nation's most popular parks. Grand Teton averages over two million visitors per year and is also a nationally and internationally important recreation destination. Tourism has become a major component of the economic base of the province, employing twice the number of persons as was the case in traditional extractive industries as of 2000 (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008).

The *Southern Rocky Mountains* province includes the portion of the Rocky Mountain range bordered by the Wyoming Basin to the north, the Basin and Range province to the south, the Great Plains to the east, and the Colorado Plateaus to the west. It covers the eastern portion of Colorado and the southeastern corner of Wyoming. The province is home to several of the nation's largest and most popular downhill ski resort destinations, including Crested Butte, Aspen, Breckenridge, Vail, and Winter Park. The province contains Rocky Mountain National Park, the most heavily visited park within our study area (over three million visitors annually), and contains large public land areas administered by the Pike, Roosevelt, White Mountain and several other national forests (Fenneman 1931; USGS 2008). It includes several important areas for our study that exhibit extremely high recreation potential. Within this physiographic province, employment in tourism-related businesses is now more than five times greater than for extractive industries that at one time represented the dominant sources of employment across the province and the region.

Patterns of Change Across the Physiographic Provinces

The varied experiences of the Intermountain West's physiographic provinces can be used to illustrate the uneven patterns of growth and development that characterize the rural paradox. Each province has exhibited its own types and rates of change during the 30-year time period considered in our analysis. Amenity-rich areas have generally experienced rapid and dramatic growth, while other areas without such amenity endowments have often struggled to maintain populations and sustain traditional economies. The variation across physiographic provinces indicates the growing importance of resource-driven migration and development as urbanites, retirees, and seasonal residents increasingly make relocation decisions based upon quality-of-life factors.

For each of the comparisons presented in the remainder of this chapter we present data on change patterns in terms of both absolute numbers and percentage change. The tables present information on percentage change over time, while information presented in charts focuses on numerical change. It is important to examine both sets of information, because of the significant variation in baseline conditions across the provinces. For example, the starting population of the Northern Rocky Mountains province in 1970 was 456,222. In contrast, the starting population of the Southern Rocky Mountains province in 1970 was only 78,171. Because of these dramatically different baselines, analyzing solely percentage changes can be misleading, as the smaller denominator for the Southern Rocky Mountains leads to much higher percentage changes relative to those that would occur in the Northern Rocky Mountains when numerical increases are similar. By including both sets of change measures, a more clear-cut picture of both relative and absolute change can be presented.

Population. Findings highlighted in Table 3.2 and Fig. 3.2 reveal that while no province of the Intermountain West experienced net population decline over the

Table 3.2 Percent change in population, by province

	70–80	80–90	90–00	70–00
Basin and Range	30%	16%	39%	108%
Colorado Plateaus	44%	9%	16%	82%
Columbia Plateau	24%	3%	16%	47%
Great Plains	5%	–3%	6%	8%
Wyoming Basin	60%	–12%	8%	52%
Northern Rocky	24%	5%	39%	80%
Middle Rocky	34%	12%	32%	98%
Southern Rocky	31%	14%	43%	114%
Total U.S.				38%

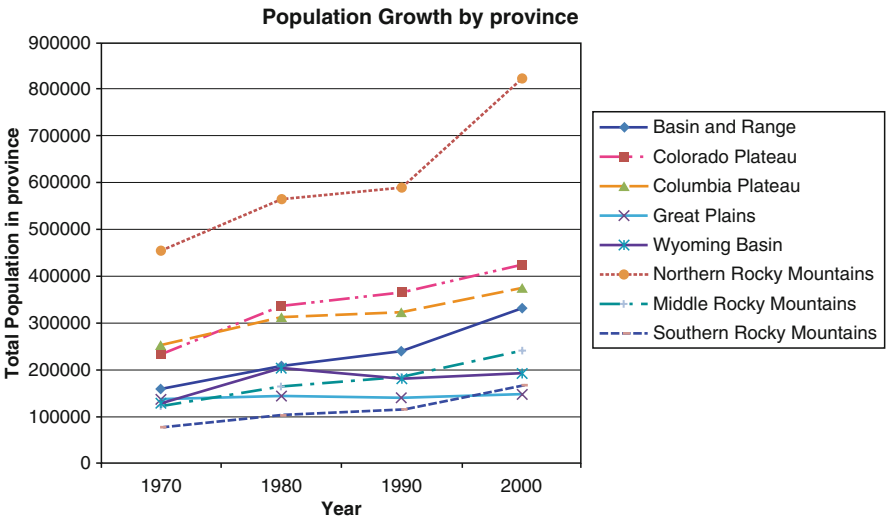


Fig. 3.2 Change in total population, by province

30-year period, there has been considerable variation across the provinces in rates of growth. The lowest growth, less than 8% overall, was in the Great Plains province. Overall, the Plains areas within the Intermountain West region have maintained their population over this period, and experienced no significant growth. In contrast, the Northern, Middle, and Southern Rocky Mountain provinces, the Colorado Plateaus, and the Basin and Range province each experienced major percentage increases in population during this 30-year period, at 80%, 98%, 114%, 82%, and 108%, respectively. The Wyoming Basin, Great Plains, and Columbia Plateau provinces experienced the smallest percentage growth in population.

There is also significant provincial variation with respect to growth in the retirement age population. As indicated in Table 3.3 and Fig. 3.3, the highest growth rate occurred in the Basin and Range province, where the population age 65 and older increased consistently over the entire 30-year period considered here. In contrast,

Table 3.3 Percent change in population age 65 and older, by province

	70–80	80–90	90–00	70–00
Basin and Range	46%	41%	46%	200%
Colorado Plateaus	40%	31%	26%	132%
Columbia Plateau	41%	16%	17%	92%
Great Plains	24%	13%	21%	70%
Wyoming Basin	27%	29%	29%	111%
Northern Rocky	36%	22%	45%	142%
Middle Rocky	38%	15%	29%	105%
Southern Rocky	27%	28%	42%	132%
Total U.S.				315%

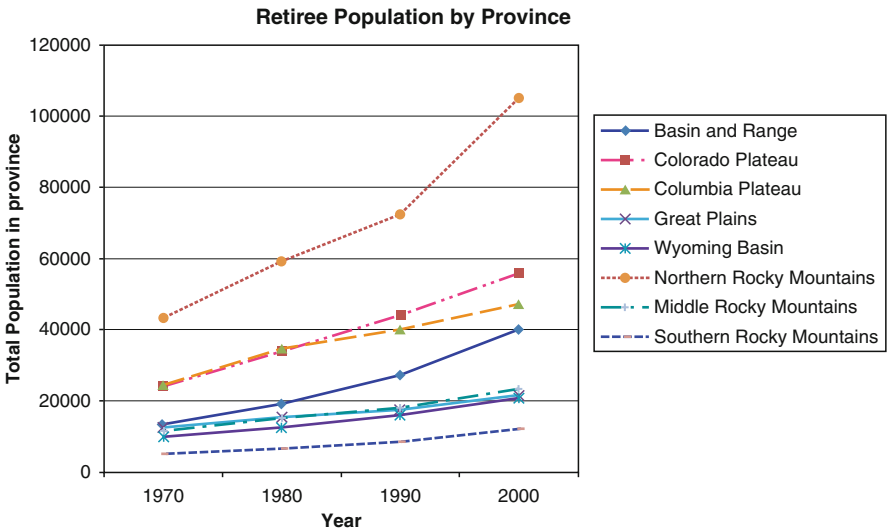


Fig. 3.3 Change in total population age 65 and older, by province

the Great Plains province once again registered the lowest rate of change and lowest absolute change, reflecting the overall lower level of population growth linked to in-migration in this portion of the study region. Although all provinces fell below the national growth rate of 315%, there was clearly significant variation across the provinces with respect to their ability to attract and retain population in the 65 years and older age bracket.

Table 3.4 and Fig. 3.4 depict changes across the eight physiographic provinces in the percentage of the population with at least 1 year of college-level education. The largest increases occurred in the Southern Rocky Mountains province, where the percentage of the adult population with this level of educational attainment grew from under 15% in 1970 to nearly 40% by 2000. The lowest increase in this indicator of educational attainment occurred in the Columbia Plateau province,

Table 3.4 Percent change in the percentage of the adult population with at least 1 year of college-level education, by province

	70–80	80–90	90–00	70–00
Basin and Range	10%	4%	–1%	13%
Colorado Plateaus	11%	5%	0%	16%
Columbia Plateau	11%	3%	–1%	12%
Great Plains	9%	6%	1%	16%
Wyoming Basin	11%	6%	0%	17%
Northern Rocky	12%	5%	1%	18%
Middle Rocky	13%	3%	1%	17%
Southern Rocky	21%	3%	2%	26%
Total U.S.				88%

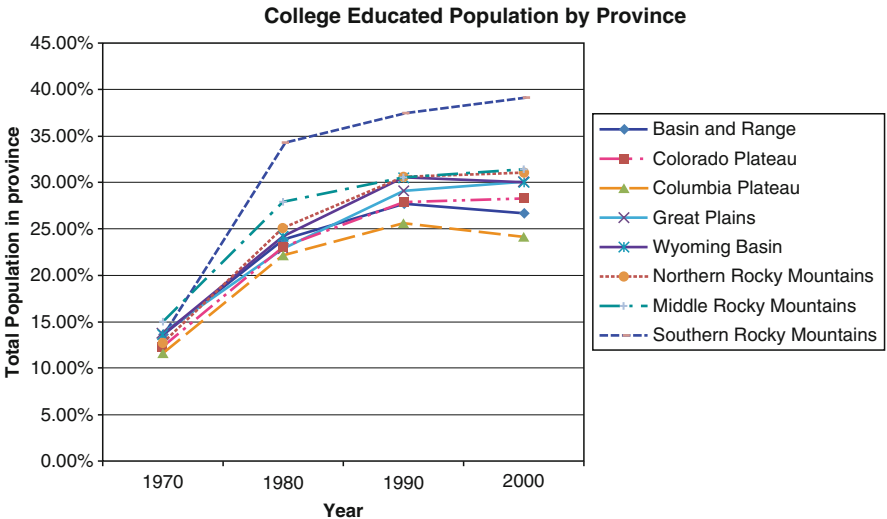


Fig. 3.4 Change in the percentage of the adult population with at least 1 year of college-level education, by province

where increases observed during the 1970s tapered off during the 1980s and shifted into a period of modest decline during the 1990s. There was a statistically significant difference in this change pattern among the provinces, with the Rocky Mountain provinces leading the pace in terms of increased educational attainment, followed again by the Colorado Plateaus.

Like the Intermountain West generally, all eight provinces experienced significant growth in median household income during the study period. As the data summarized in Table 3.5 reveal, the largest percentage increase occurred in the Basin and Range province, while the Wyoming Basin and Great Plains provinces experienced the lowest increases in median incomes. Further, as indicated in Fig. 3.5, the Basin and Range and Colorado Plateaus provinces had more than 30 times the

Table 3.5 Percent change in median household income, by province

	80–90	90–00	80–00
Basin and Range	75.84%	44.16%	153.49%
Colorado Plateaus	60.90%	50.77%	142.59%
Columbia Plateau	64.74%	46.00%	140.51%
Great Plains	55.43%	28.61%	99.90%
Wyoming Basin	28.38%	41.54%	81.71%
Northern Rocky	50.40%	43.54%	115.89%
Middle Rocky	56.62%	55.53%	143.59%
Southern Rocky	56.09%	50.37%	134.72%
Total U.S.			60.00%

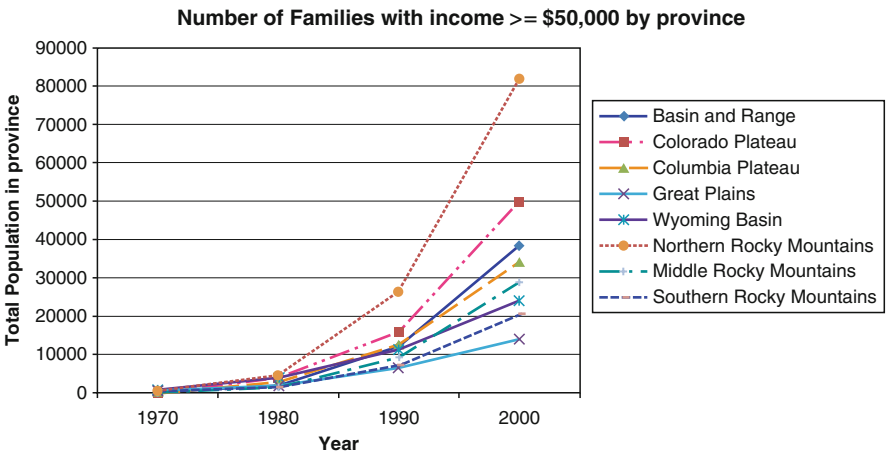


Fig. 3.5 Change in the number of families with income above \$50,000, by province

number of families with incomes over \$50,000 in 2000 as was the case in 1970, a shift substantially beyond what occurred in the region’s other provinces. Again, the Great Plains province experienced the lowest growth in terms of actual median income and number of families with incomes over \$50,000.

Housing. All provinces in the Intermountain West study region experienced housing growth during 1970–2000, but there were important differences amongst them (see Table 3.6 and Fig. 3.6). The number of housing units in the Southern Rocky Mountains province more than tripled during this period, while the Great Plains province experienced only a 39% increase and the smallest absolute increase with most occurring during the 1970–1980 period. Along with the Great Plains, the Columbia Plateau and Wyoming Basin also lagged well behind the other provinces with respect to increases in the number of housing units over this period. In absolute terms, the Northern Rocky Mountains had the highest increase in the number of housing units, but it had only the fourth highest percentage change because of its significantly higher baseline in 1970. However, the Northern, Middle, and Southern

Table 3.6 Percent change in the total number of housing units, by province

	70–80	80–90	90–00	70–00
Basin and Range	46.50%	22.86%	37.95%	148.30%
Colorado Plateaus	61.55%	20.92%	15.49%	125.60%
Columbia Plateau	38.70%	5.42%	16.41%	70.20%
Great Plains	25.19%	2.77%	7.94%	38.87%
Wyoming Basin	82.37%	3.39%	6.51%	100.82%
Northern Rocky	47.24%	12.72%	37.97%	128.98%
Middle Rocky	55.59%	21.57%	29.98%	145.88%
Southern Rocky	97.12%	31.74%	24.26%	222.70%
Total U.S.				68.75%

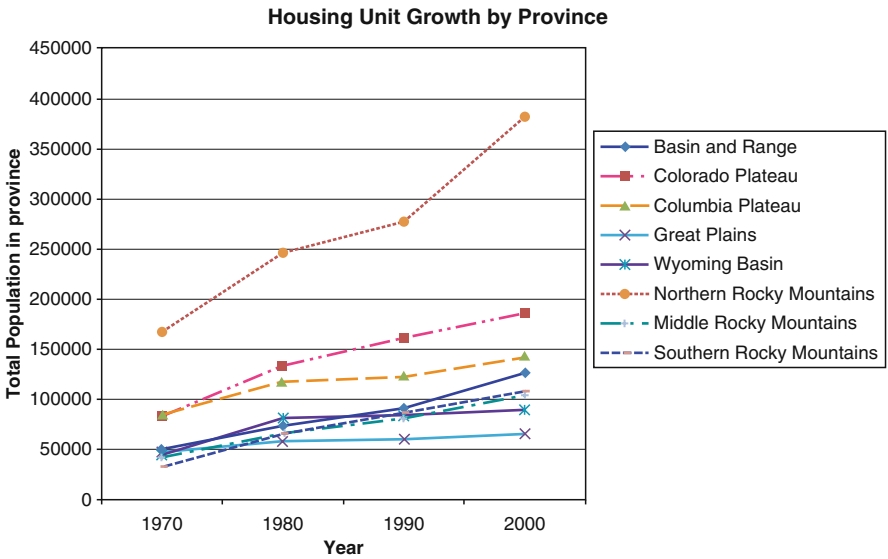


Fig. 3.6 Change in the total number of housing units, by province

Rocky Mountains and the Basin and Range provinces all experienced significant growth of housing in both percentage and absolute terms.

Finally, as is evident from the data summarized in Table 3.7 and Fig. 3.7, all provinces exhibited growth in seasonal housing units at a rate substantially greater than their population growth. At the same time, variation across the individual provinces was substantial. The outliers with respect to this indicator were the Great Plains and Northern Rockies provinces, with by far the lowest rates of seasonal housing growth. The Northern Rocky Mountains province actually had the second highest absolute growth in seasonal housing, behind only the Southern Rocky Mountains, but had the highest baseline level in 1970. The Great Plains, in contrast, had the lowest growth both in terms of percentage and absolute units. This is why it is important to analyze both percentage and absolute change over time. The Basin

Table 3.7 Percent change in the number of vacant housing units designated for seasonal/recreational use, by province

	70–80	80–90	90–00	70–00
Basin and Range	110%	345%	53%	1,332%
Colorado Plateaus	25%	401%	19%	649%
Columbia Plateau	116%	190%	28%	702%
Great Plains	17%	295%	1%	366%
Wyoming Basin	70%	315%	3%	628%
Northern Rocky	–15%	321%	22%	337%
Middle Rocky	–13%	540%	55%	759%
Southern Rocky	267%	140%	12%	885%
Total U.S.				105.00%

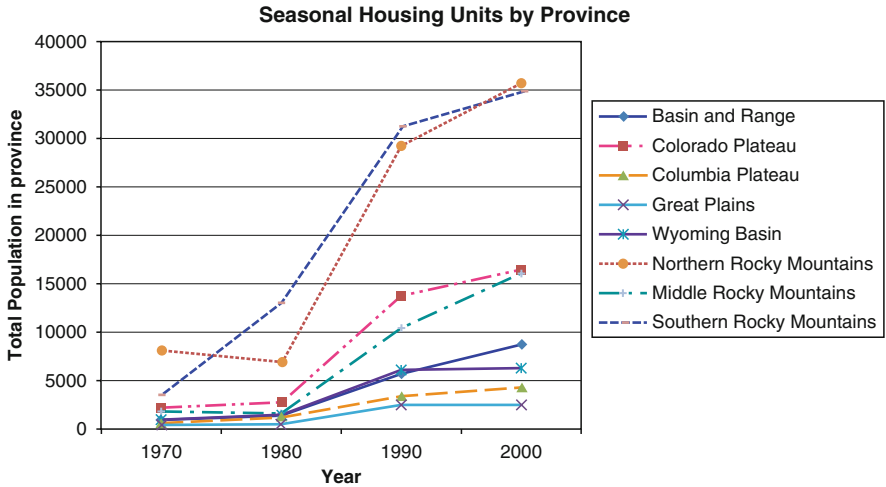


Fig. 3.7 Change in the number of vacant housing units designated for seasonal/recreational use, by province

and Range province exhibited the largest percentage increase in seasonal housing. In all areas other than the Southern Rockies, seasonal housing growth occurred most rapidly during the 1980s, while the rate of increase declined sharply across all provinces during the 1990s.

Conclusions

Comparing sociodemographic conditions and trends across the distinctively different physiographic provinces of the Intermountain West region enables us to better understand how spatial variations in geography and natural amenities influence

patterns of social and demographic change in rural regions. While it is clear the human face of the Intermountain West is changing, it is also clear that sociodemographic changes have not occurred equally across provinces. In subsequent chapters we further explore differences among communities throughout the Intermountain West and the spatial patterns of variation that characterize this complex and rapidly changing region.

Portions of the Intermountain West that fall on the “upside” of the rural paradox have experienced unprecedented growth and change over the past 30 years. These areas have attracted a different, more educated, and wealthier population base. Their populations have increased dramatically, and aged even more dramatically as factors contributing to general population growth seem also to be contributing to growth in the retirement-age population. The seasonal housing boom is also reshaping economic and social networks of some rural areas as they become increasingly dependent upon seasonal residents for work and tax support while at the same time experiencing growth-related strains and social tensions. These changes, along with variation demonstrated across physiographic provinces in the increasing percentages of college-educated adults, have undoubtedly contributed to significant shifts in the social dynamics of many regional communities. The Intermountain West, as a whole, is indeed transitioning to become a New West (see Riebsame et al. 1997; Travis 2007), with economic, demographic, and social conditions changing rapidly as it grows and develops.

Examining these key sociodemographic variables by both percentage growth and changes in total numbers, it is evident the Southern Rocky Mountains, Basin and Range, and Northern Rocky Mountains provinces have consistently experienced the highest levels of growth and change over the past three decades. These portions of the Intermountain West region share two critically important attributes – indisputable aesthetic qualities and abundant recreation potential. The dominance of public lands in the Northern Rocky Mountains and the combination of public lands and private ski resorts located in the Southern Rocky Mountains contribute to their attractiveness as high-amenity areas. The Basin and Range Province is also dominated by extensive public land areas and scenic vistas offering great potential for amenity-driven development and growth. The consistently high growth of the Middle Rocky Mountains, Colorado Plateaus, and Columbia Plateau, all of which also contain high amenity areas with aesthetic and recreational value, further demonstrates the significance of the natural environment in driving rural growth and change. Those provinces with natural resource conditions that dovetail with the socially constructed ideals of urban-origin in-migrants and seasonal homeowners seeking beautiful natural environments in which to escape city life and practice their preferred recreation activities are experiencing the most rapid rates of change.

On the “downside” of the rural paradox, the Great Plains province has consistently exhibited the lowest growth overall, and the least evidence of changes linked to the emergence of a New West. The lagging of the Great Plains province supports our conceptualization of the role of natural resources and amenity factors as key drivers of sociodemographic change. In short, relative to other portions of this region, the Plains area simply has less to offer in terms of unique, culturally valued,

high-amenity natural resources and landscapes; as a result, this subregion has not experienced the rapid growth observed elsewhere in our study area. This is the paradox of rural America: exceptional growth tends to occur in some locales even as simple survival becomes a concern in neighboring areas.

The provincial differences in growth and change evident across the Intermountain West illustrate the ways in which sociodemographic change is tied to the natural resources of an area. The demographic and social changes affecting parts of rural America on both sides of the rural paradox are driven and shaped by the specific natural resources available in spatially-differentiated locales. As Americans increasingly make location decisions based on quality-of-life indicators linked to natural amenities, we can expect such patterns of change to persist and, perhaps, strengthen. The implications of this change for rural communities are vast, as some struggle to maintain their populations and build new economic bases while others attempt to control forces of rapid growth and change that can at times threaten cultural traditions, adversely impact environmental conditions, and overwhelm the adaptive capacity of local social structures.