In the decades after World War II, Virginia experienced rapid population growth driven by a number of factors, including the nationwide baby boom; the growth of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area; and the southward migration of Americans after the end of segregation and the invention of air conditioning.

Although the population of Virginia will continue to grow for the foreseeable future, the tide is going out. From 2000 to 2005, the Commonwealth’s population grew by 6.6 percent, consistent with the previous three decades of growth. That growth was distributed broadly across the state and nearly every locality got a piece of the pie. From 2010 to 2015, however, the population grew only 4.5 percent,* with growth heavily concentrated in metropolitan areas (see Figure 1). This era of slowing population growth, spread unevenly across the Commonwealth, is likely to continue.

With population stagnation or decline, localities find themselves vying for a shrinking pool of residents while having to maintain overbuilt infrastructure and deal with deflated property values. Localities with a realistic view of their future demographic trends can embrace decline and plan for it—or take more effective steps to counteract it.

Components of Population Change

To understand population shifts, we need to distinguish between the two components of population change: natural increase and net migration.

Natural Increase

Natural increase is determined by a simple formula: births minus deaths. If there are more births than deaths in a given year, the population grows.

For the past few decades, Virginia experienced steady growth (currently around 40,000 residents a year) from natural increase. However, that’s not because people have been having more babies. There hasn’t been much change in total births since the first wave of baby boomers immediately following World War II. In fact, in 2015, there were more 60-year-olds in Virginia than 1-year olds. Instead, natural increase has been a result of an aging citizenry. As shown in Figure 2, the largest overall gains have come from people living longer—as more people live into their 80s and beyond—filling out the upper part of what demographers call the population pyramid.

How long do we have until we stop growing from this process of natural increase through aging? One way to calculate the answer is to use current...
If current birthrates remain constant, Virginia’s natural increase will decline to 0 by about 2035. Where we go from there will depend on whether birthrates go up again or continue to fall.

Whether Virginia’s population increase continues depends on two factors: life expectancy, which has increased significantly thanks to medical advances but now is leveling off; and migration.

**Net Migration**

Net migration refers to the number of people moving in minus the number of people moving out. For decades, Virginia has attracted a stream of new residents, both from other countries and from the Midwest and Northeast. Northern Virginia, considered part of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, has attracted the largest regional share of newcomers.

Recently, however, growth has slowed throughout the state, including in Northern Virginia. Virginia had the 48th fastest growing economy last year, despite attempts to shift its economic base away from federal spending. Migration is difficult to measure between Censuses, but according to Census Bureau estimates, Virginia experienced two consecutive years of net loss among domestic migrants: 18,000 in 2014 and 24,000 in 2015 (see Figure 3). IRS tax return data supports those estimates.

**Figure 1: Population Growth in Virginia: 2000 to 2005 vs. 2010 to 2015**

- Decline
- Less than 2.5% growth
- 2.5% to 5% growth
- 5% to 10% growth
- Over 10% growth

Source: UVA Demographics Research Group, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service
Migrants can be broadly classified into three groups by age, each with a distinct set of motivations and constraints when relocating. As a result, their movements are not spread evenly across localities.

**The Three Big Moves**

1. **Making a New Life**  
   *(Young adults)*  
   Young adults are by far the most mobile group in the country. (see Figure 4) Every year, 20-30 percent will move to a different home, with a large proportion heading to new cities or states.5

   In an increasingly complex economy, higher education plays a big role in population shifts. Today, nearly 44 percent of American high school graduates, including those with the highest future earning potential, enroll in a four-year university immediately after graduation. An additional 25 percent enroll in a two-year college.6 While some may commute to a nearby university or community college, the vast majority who attend a four-year college will select a school in a different city or state. The loss of 30-60 percent of a locality’s high school graduates each year is a serious blow. For many towns, their future depends on whether they can lure college graduates back later in life.

   Many individuals in their early 20s move frequently, chasing economic and social opportunity. Not surprisingly, city centers attract the highest concentrations of these young adults (see Figure 5).7 A declining violent crime rate, short commute times, and freedom from the costs of home ownership while saddled with student loans have contributed to a larger cohort of young, highly-educated city dwellers. As they move from place to place early in their careers, they are often single (today, the average age at first marriage is approaching 30.8) and free from concerns about living near good school systems and having enough space for children. The presence of these 20-somethings has increased demand for more housing and urban amenities and has driven urban revitalization efforts in many cities.
Figure 4: Migration Patterns by Age

Arlington County

Chesapeake City

Lancaster County

Note: Bars represent the net change in population for each age cohort between the 2000 and 2010 censuses. So a -100 change for 20 year-olds means that there were 100 fewer 20 year-olds in 2010 than there were 10 year-olds in 2000, after deaths are factored out. These numbers were calculated using census data and Virginia Department of Health data on deaths by locality.

Source: Author’s calculation using Decennial Census data and Virginia Department of Health vital statistics.
2. Settling Down (Middle-aged adults and children)

Middle-aged adults and children are really two groups, but their movements are correlated for obvious reasons. Once middle-aged adults move further into their careers and start families, they become less inclined to move frequently. Although some will move to different metro areas, many will move to suburbs that surround the metro area in which they established themselves as young adults.

The out-migration of families, which drove the suburban boom of the 70s, 80s and 90s, has slowed in recent years as the growth of the family-aged population has also slowed. While a reduced birth rate is partially to blame, the main reason for the change in out-migration is simply that no generation has significantly outnumbered the baby boomers. Since the baby boom (1946 to 1964), the annual number of births has stabilized, creating a fairly even population spread across age groups. Today there are about the same number of Virginians in their 30s and early 40s as there were in 1990. The number of children has also remained relatively stable.

Families migrating to suburban areas create a steadily increasing school-age population from first grade through high school, replacing high school graduates that leave the area.9

3. Cashing In (Baby boomers and older)

The first cohorts of baby boomers have had a profound impact on American life for decades. From 2005 to 2015, the population over age 65 grew by 38 percent, while the population aged 50 to 64 grew by 24 percent. In contrast, there was almost no change in younger age groups during this period. When the boomers reached middle age, they created a suburban expansion. Now, in retirement, they are having a different impact on the population of many Virginia localities.

Among older adults who move, there is a small contingent opting to downsize and move to city centers (especially in smaller cities and college towns). But the general movement of older adults has been primarily outward—from central cities and suburbs to rural areas.10

Those rural counties experiencing the heaviest influx of older in-migrants are concentrated along the Chesapeake Bay and in the Blue Ridge Mountains, two regions offering peaceful settings, a lower cost of living and relative proximity to at least one major metropolitan area (see Figure 6).

Many counties welcome this influx of semi-retired and retired individuals, who, after accumulating decades of earnings, bring disposable income to spend locally and generate increased local property taxes on new construction and improvements. However, while retirees do not bring many children with them to stretch school budgets, their addition to rural counties can lead to a declining birth-rate and a declining local workforce.11

Figure 5: Urban Concentration of Young Adults in the 60 Largest U.S. Metros

Source: “Changing Shape of American Cities,” UVA Demographics Research Group

Figure 6: Migration of Older Residents (born 1936-1945) between 2000 and 2010

Source: UVA Demographics Research Group, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service

“...while retirees do not bring many children with them to stretch school budgets, their addition to rural counties can lead to a declining birth-rate and a declining local workforce.”
budgets, their addition to rural counties can lead to a declining birthrate and a declining local workforce.

**Effects on Localities**

The movement of these groups creates localized demographic dilemmas, exacerbated by the statewide slowdown in growth. Whereas population growth was once present across the state and varied only in magnitude, today different regions are facing very different problems.

Counties and independent cities can be broken down into four groups based on two questions (see Figure 7). 1) Are they gaining more residents through migration than they are losing? 2) Are they experiencing natural increase or decrease? (In this case, the natural decrease category includes localities with small and declining natural increase.)

**Booming**

Booming Virginia localities are experiencing population growth from both in-migration and robust natural increase. The ability to continue to attract migrants suggests these localities are economically strong and can accommodate growth.

Two types of Virginia localities are currently booming.

First are successful central metropolitan areas, which are experiencing a renaissance nationwide, fueled by waves of incoming educated young adults. The most notable examples in the state include Arlington County and the cities of Alexandria, Richmond, and Charlottesville. While these locales may be suburbs of a larger city like Washington, D.C., or may not be particularly urban compared to large cities nationwide, they still function as central urban localities in their respective regions.

Second are the largely suburban or exurban counties that are experiencing significant new development driven by a strong in-migration from all age groups. While their residents aren't particularly young, they are also not old enough to be pushing suburban counties into natural decrease. Three examples are Montgomery, Albemarle, and Rockingham counties.

**Shedding**

Shedding localities are experiencing growth from natural increase while losing residents to out-migration. This is a common pattern for many central cities and built-out suburbs across the country, including New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles. In Virginia, this category includes the two most populous jurisdictions: Fairfax County and the city of Virginia Beach.

The shedding phenomenon occurs when incoming residents are younger, boosting an area’s natural increase, while various pressures cause older residents to leave. Two reasons for this exodus are a higher cost of living and lack of attractive or affordable housing options for families. New York City, for instance, leads the nation in out-migration, yet continues to add 60,000 residents a year as young people move in, have children and then leave seeking more space and better schools.

Rising costs and overcrowding aren’t the only reasons a city ends up in the shedding category, however. In cities that still have a relatively low cost of living, a shedding pattern suggests that the city is central and affordable, but not particularly desirable, making it a place for families to start out before earning enough money to get out.

**Attracting**

Attracting localities are experiencing or will soon experience population loss due to natural decrease,
which is offset by in-migration. This is becoming an increasingly common pattern across Virginia, especially in the beautiful rural areas of the New River Highlands, Central Piedmont, Blue Ridge and Chesapeake Bay. Examples include Clarke, Orange, Pittsylvania and Lancaster counties.

While a plurality of Virginia localities fall into this category, they are largely rural and account for only about 18 percent of the state’s population.

The dominant characteristic of attracting counties is that most of their in-migration consists of older adults, who are more likely than younger residents to die. For an attracting locality, the results are low birthrates and high death rates leading to a decreasing workforce.

Declining
Declining localities are facing or will face natural decrease while also losing migrants. With residents aging and fewer people replacing them, these counties quickly slip into a downward population spiral.

While some declining counties are close to becoming attracting counties, they may not have enough older migrants to offset the number of young people (and potential parents) who leave.

Declining counties, like Lee, Wise, Henry, and Madison, are located mostly in Southern and Southwest Virginia, with a few along the Blue Ridge. They are often areas that experienced a booming period when young workers followed an industrial or resource-extraction-based economy. As those industries or farming waned, a new generation of young workers moved on to places where economic growth was still strong.

Charting a Course
Localities cannot choose the external forces that are affecting them, but they can decide how to respond to those forces.

For booming counties and cities, the key issues are how much to embrace growth and how much to proceed with caution. Providing room for growth can keep housing prices from skyrocketing, making localities vibrant and livable for people of various income levels. Considering growth carefully can help localities avoid bubbles and ensure that what gets built will stand the test of time. Declining counties are a cautionary tale: economic cycles don’t last forever. The most economically sound localities are fiscally sustainable in good times and bad.

Shedding localities may struggle to attract or retain residents. The solution? Find new places for development or make the locality more attractive. In both Virginia Beach and Fairfax County, demand for suburban development has driven building booms in recent decades, but, with the disappearance of cheap and accessible land for single-family houses, these jurisdictions are now trying to redevelop aging suburbs into functional urban centers.

Attracting and declining counties, particularly in rural areas, face the biggest set of decisions. Across the country today, both economic and population growth are being concentrated in metropolitan areas. At the same time, a larger percentage of rural-county residents are commuting to the nearest metropolitan area for jobs.

For local governments in rural counties and small cities, there are a number of ways forward.

First: Focus on rural economic growth. Agricultural succession programs, local co-ops and creative farming practices may keep working farms from going under, while a few natural resource opportunities still exist. Many localities market their abundant land and low cost of doing business to try to attract manufacturing or distribution plants, but these prospects are diminishing as rural manufacturing jobs decline.

Second: Embrace decline in the way that Youngstown, Ohio, did in the 1990s. This means planning for population decrease by finding ways to structure public services and infrastructure projects to meet the needs of, and still be maintained by, a lower population in the future.

Third: Cooperate regionally, creating a large enough economic unit with nearby towns to compete with metropolitan areas. In the coalfields of Southwest Virginia and in the Shenandoah Valley, clusters of smaller towns are working together on economic development, recognizing that it is difficult for a small town to survive alone in the current economy.

Fourth: Link to a nearby metropolitan area to entice highly educated and well-paid commuters to patronize local services and agricultural businesses, rather than try to attract new industries. Floyd County, for example, reversed population decline by attracting workers who wanted to live in the county for its higher quality of life and were willing to commute to the Blacksburg metropolitan area. Culpeper and Rappahannock Counties outside of Washington, D.C., have seen a similar trend.

Fifth: Find new ways to serve metropolitan economies from afar. The most obvious route is to attract retirees and vacationers. For example, Franklin County has used Smith Mountain Lake to entice people to buy vacation homes. In rural counties along the Blue Ridge and Chesapeake Bay, retirees have purchased homes in declining areas, bringing in new property tax revenue and customers for local businesses but increasing the
likelihood of an aging population and declining workforce.

Localized economic and demographic trends are rarely static. Local governments cannot depend on inherited wisdom about their locales’ strengths and weaknesses, but must reassess often and think creatively to serve their residents in the face of larger economic trends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Luke Juday is currently Director of Planning for the City of Waynesboro, VA. Until recently, he was a research analyst at the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, where his work focused on helping local governments understand and react to demographic trends. Originally from Chesapeake, Virginia, he earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Grove City College in Pennsylvania and a Master of Urban and Environmental Planning from the University of Virginia. He has also been a transportation planner for the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission, a middle school teacher, and a Fulbright Scholar in Gaborone, Botswana.

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Correction
* An earlier version of this paper cited the 2010 to 2015 growth rate as 3.1 percent. It is actually 4.5 percent.

Endnotes
1 Unless otherwise cited, all population data is from either the Weldon Cooper Center’s Virginia Population Estimates (http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/virginia-population-estimates) or from the U.S. Census Bureau. Census data referenced in this article includes Decennial Census numbers available from the Census Bureau’s American FactFinder tool (http://factfinder.census.gov) and intercensal estimates from the Census Bureau’s Population Estimates Program (https://www.census.gov/popest/).
2 Based on a calculation performed by the author using the following tables:

4 IRS data suggests Virginia experienced a net loss of 13,000 returns and 28,000 exemptions (which approximates the number of people) in 2013 and 2014. From Statistics of Income Migration Data: https://www.irs.gov/uac/soi-tax-stats-migration-data
8 Based on data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Vital Statistics System: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm
9 See the Virginia Department of Education’s Fall Membership Data: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/enrollment/fall_membership/
16 See the City of Youngstown’s “Youngstown 2010 Plan”: http://www.cityofyoungstownoh.com/about_youngstown/youngstown_2010/
17 Joint efforts, such as the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Partnership’s branding of the area as “Virginia’s E-Region” reflect a shared commitment to attract investment to the region as a whole, rather than to one particular locality: http://vaceda.zetasites.net/location
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