

The Western Exception: Positive Migration Trends in Colorado's Slope Region

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Introduction

Relative to 2015, statewide net migration (i.e., in-migration subtracted by out-migration) has declined by **52.5%** as of 2025. This reflects 36,146 fewer individuals arriving in Colorado in 2025 – **roughly four times the capacity of Red Rocks Amphitheatre**.ⁱ Low net migration presents a growing challenge to Colorado's economic stability and labor force sustainability. Historically, net migration – particularly among working-age individuals – has been a critical driver of the state's labor force growth and overall economic vitality. A sustained decline in net migration reduces the inflow of skilled workers, limiting the ability of businesses to recruit talent and expand operations. This dynamic places upward pressure on wages, contributes to labor shortages, and constrains economic productivity across key sectors.

While this is the bleak truth for the state as a whole, there are areas that show promise as positive outliers. Garfield and Mesa counties, located on Colorado's Western Slope, are among the few regions expected to buck the trend. Projections indicate that both counties will see higher-than-historic patterns of net migration in the coming years, driven by a combination of economic opportunity, quality of life, and relative affordability. This report examines the demographic trends shaping this growth and considers the broader implications for regional planning and development.

Key Findings

- Net migration for Garfield County is projected to rebound significantly from its pre-pandemic level and surge to an estimated 623 by 2027 – **a 52.3% increase**.
- Long-term projections suggest this upward trend will continue, with net migration reaching approximately **852 by 2035**.
- Mesa County's net migration has not only recovered from its pre-pandemic level of 1,000 residents in 2019 – it has surged well past it. By 2023, net migration had climbed to 1,806, representing an **80.6%** increase in just four years. Looking ahead, this upward trend is expected to continue, with projections showing net migration nearly doubling again to approximately **3,037 by 2035**.
- Garfield County is projected to see approximately a **33% increase in births over the next decade**.
- Mesa County's birth rates are expected to experience slight upticks through 2035.

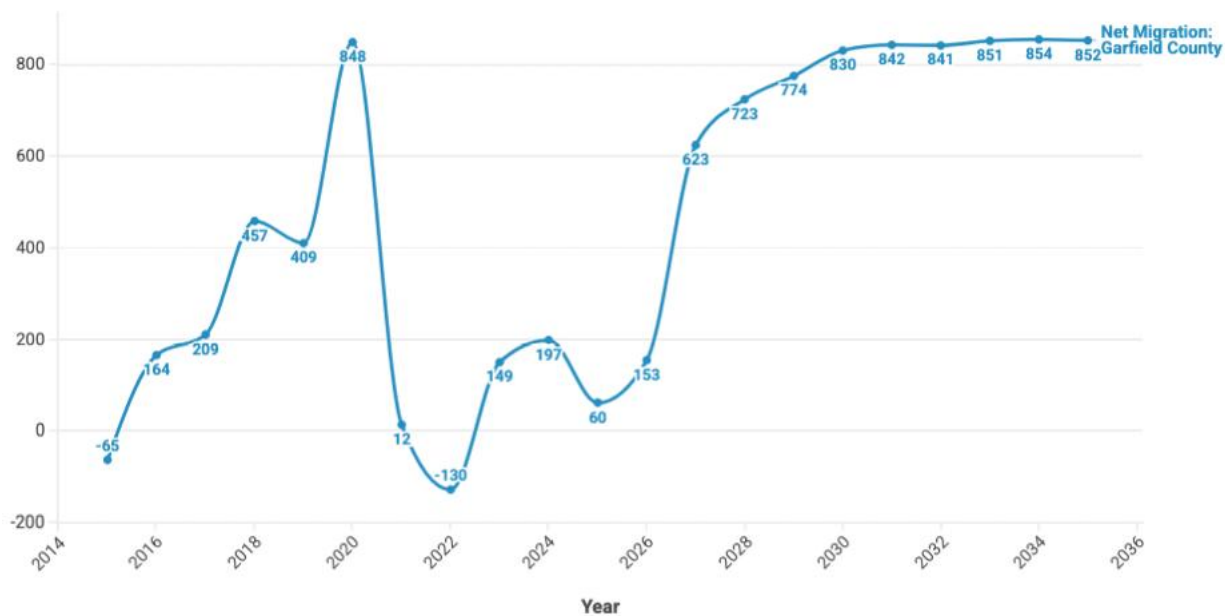
A Comparative Look at Migration & Demographic Trends Across Garfield & Mesa Counties

Net migration in Garfield County is projected to rebound significantly from its pre-pandemic level of 409 new residents in 2019, surging to an estimated 623 by 2027 – **a 52.3% increase**. Even more promising, long-term projections suggest this upward trend will continue steadily, with net migration reaching approximately **852 by 2035** (see Figure 1).

These changes are particularly significant given that just a decade ago, Garfield County was experiencing population decline, with a negative net migration of 65 residents. The shift from population loss to robust growth marks a dramatic turnaround and reflects broader changes in the region's appeal and economic conditions.

The overall cost of living in Garfield County is **1.2% lower** than the Colorado state average, though it remains **21.9% higher** than the U.S. national average.ⁱⁱ

Net Migration Patterns in Garfield County: 2015-2035



Source: Colorado State Demography Office, 2025



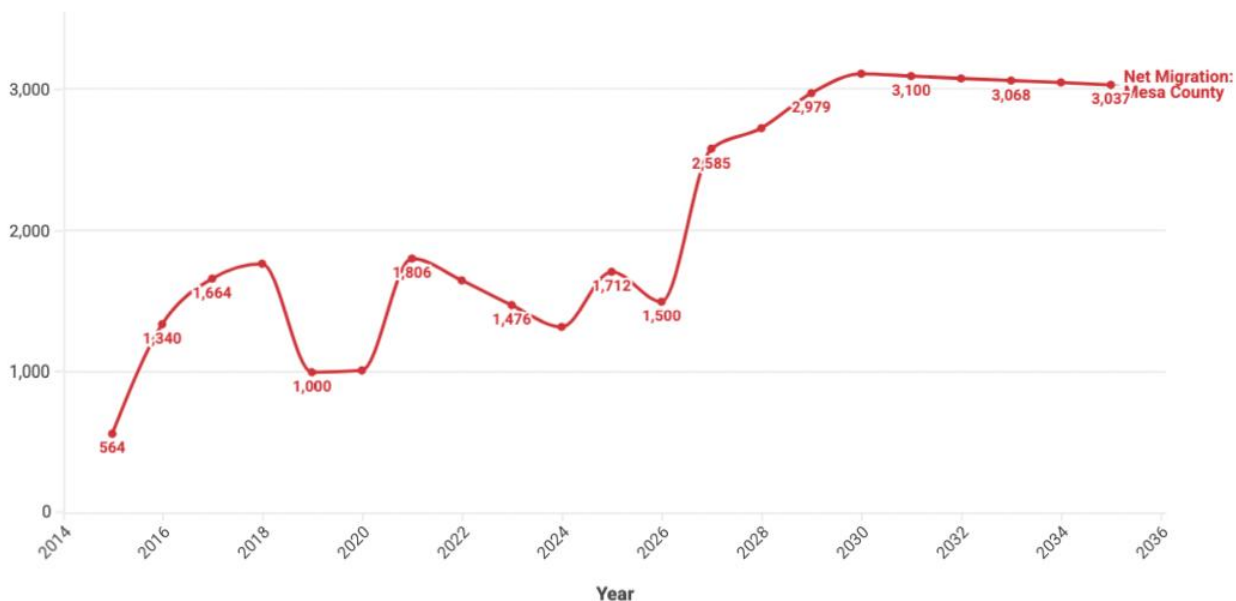
Figure 1

Mesa County’s net migration has not only recovered from its pre-pandemic level of 1,000 residents in 2019 – it has surged well past it. By 2023, net migration had climbed to 1,806, representing an **80.6%** increase in just four years. Looking ahead, this upward trend is expected to continue, with projections showing net migration nearly doubling again to approximately **3,037 by 2035** (Figure 2).

This rapid and sustained growth highlights Mesa County’s rising appeal as a destination for new residents, many of whom are drawn by the area’s affordability, access to outdoor amenities, and expanding economic opportunities. According to BestPlaces, Mesa County’s overall cost of living index is **99.1**, meaning it is **0.9% lower than the U.S. average** and **17.8% lower than the Colorado average**. Housing costs – such as rent and home prices – are notably more affordable compared to state levels.ⁱⁱⁱ

From an economic standpoint, strong net migration fuels demand for housing, retail, and services, while also expanding the local labor pool and tax base. This in turn supports job creation, infrastructure investment, and long-term economic resilience. As one of the fastest-growing counties on Colorado’s Western Slope, Mesa County is positioned to play a leading role in the region’s future growth and development.

Net Migration Patterns in Mesa County: 2015-2035



Source: Colorado State Demography Office, 2025

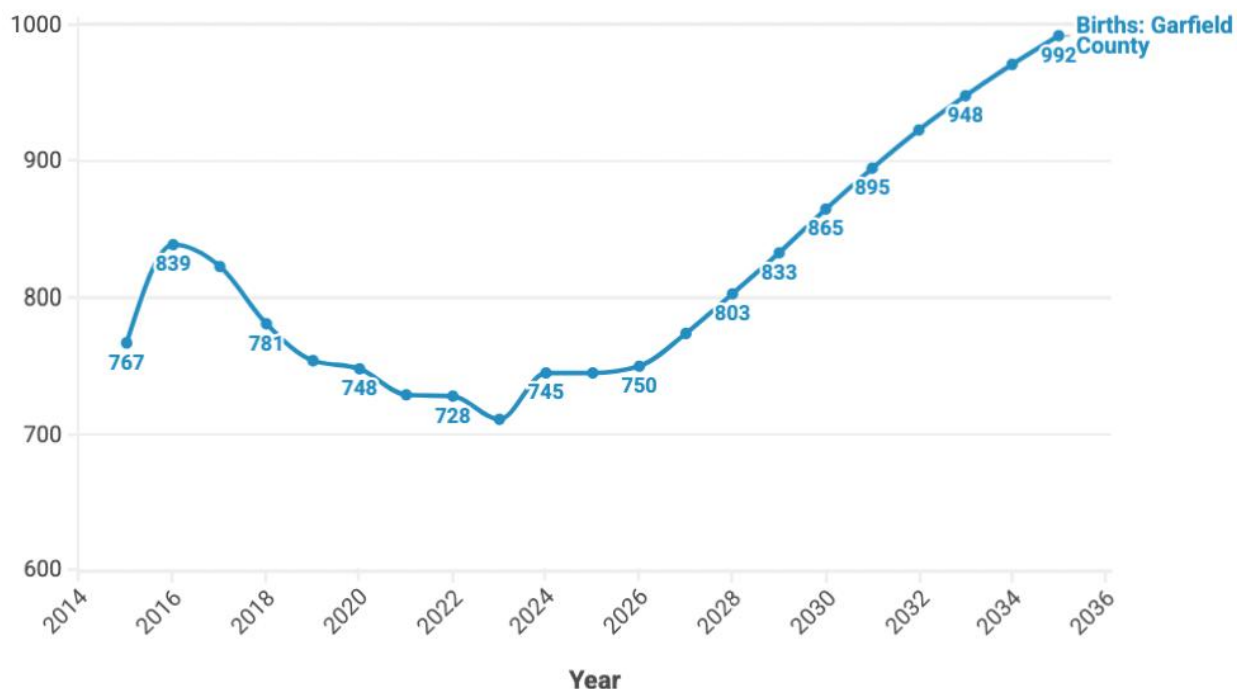


Figure 2

In addition to strong net migration, Garfield County is also expected to experience rising birth rates in the coming years—setting it apart from broader state trends. While Colorado as a whole has seen a decline in birth rates compared to historic levels, Garfield County is projected to see approximately a **33% increase in births over the next decade**. This growth represents yet another demographic outlier that signals the county’s expanding population and long-term vitality (Figure 3).

A rising birth rate has important economic and social implications. It suggests a growing base of young families, which in turn supports demand for schools, childcare services, housing, and family-oriented amenities. It also contributes to a more balanced age distribution—countering the aging trend seen in many parts of the state—and helps sustain the future workforce. Together with increasing net migration, this trend positions Garfield County as a key growth engine within the Western Slope and a rare example of demographic momentum in a state facing population slowdowns.

Births in Garfield County: 2015-2035



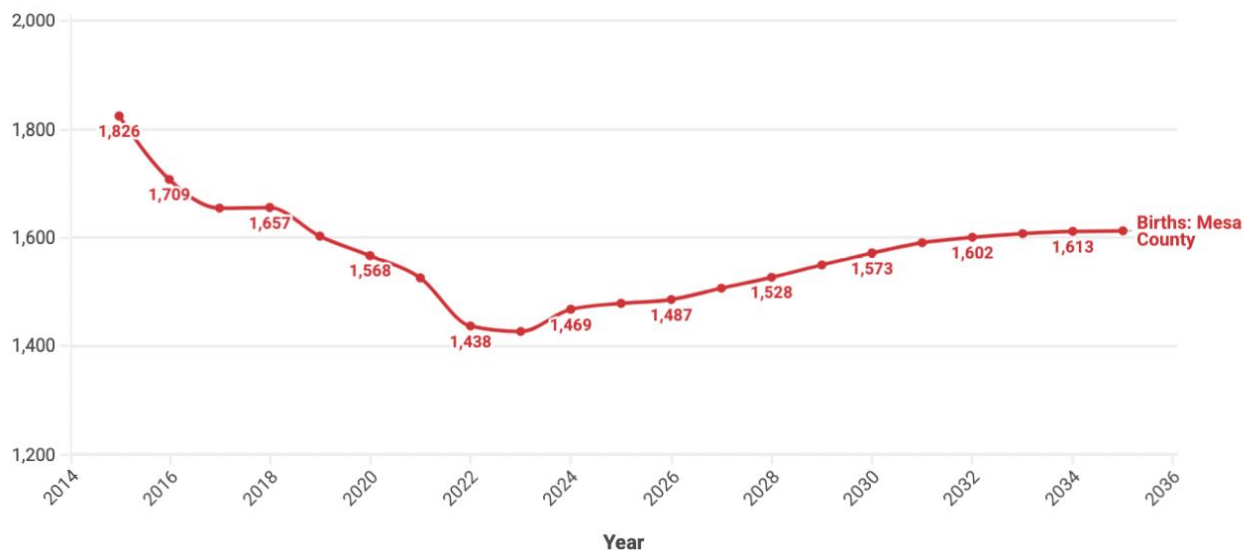
Source: Colorado State Demography Office, 2025



Figure 3

Mesa County's birth rates are projected to remain relatively stable, with a slight but steady increase each year through the forecast period (Figure 4). By 2035, annual births are expected to exceed **1,600**, reflecting consistent population growth and the continued presence of young families in the region. While not as dramatic as the surge in net migration, this gradual rise in births contributes to Mesa County's demographic stability and long-term economic resilience. It also supports the local education system, healthcare infrastructure, and family services, reinforcing the county's role as a sustainable and livable community within the Western Slope.

Births in Mesa County: 2015-2035



Source: Colorado State Demography Office, 2025



Figure 4

Why Are People Moving to the Western Slope?

Mesa County and Grand Junction – economic anchors of the Western Slope – are witnessing a strong recovery and expansion in their commercial real estate sectors. Retailers, multifamily housing projects, medical offices, and tech firms have all proliferated. The region's independence from ski season only economies offers- a more stable, -year-round- engine of growth. In addition, outdoor recreation remains a powerful economic driver for the Western Slope. In 2023 alone, the outdoor recreation sector generated **\$17.8 billion** in economic output and supported nearly **128,000 jobs** – significant figures that underscore its vital role in the region's economic health.^{ivvvi}

The Western Slope is also leading on sustainability and innovation. For instance, Garfield County's High Mesa Solar Plus Storage facility is pushing toward renewable energy goals – including Holy Cross Energy's ambition to achieve 100% clean power for tens of thousands of customers across multiple counties.^{vii}

Additionally, the region's startup ecosystem is gaining traction: coworking spaces, regional pitch events, and gatherings like West Slope Startup Week are fostering a new wave of entrepreneurial activity – from tech to manufacturing – anchoring this as a growth-friendly hotspot.^{viii}

Collectively, these sources paint a compelling picture: the Western Slope is emerging as a thriving economic outlier in Colorado—powered not just by its natural beauty, but by intentional diversification, strategic investment, and a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem.^{ix}

Bottom Line

This sustained growth in new residents and births is a positive indicator for Garfield and Mesa Counties' economies. An influx of people typically translates into increased consumer demand, which supports local businesses, stimulates the housing market, and attracts new investments in infrastructure and services.

As more residents settle in the area, local tax revenues can rise, enabling counties to invest in public amenities such as schools, transportation, and healthcare. Additionally, a growing population can help offset aging demographics by expanding the regional labor force and creating a more dynamic, diverse economy. In this way, positive net migration and upticks in births serve as both a sign of economic vitality and a catalyst for continued development in the Western Slope area.

ⁱ Colorado State Demography Office, 2025.

ⁱⁱ BestPlaces. (n.d.). *Garfield County, Colorado cost of living*. BestPlaces. Retrieved August 7, 2025, from https://www.bestplaces.net/cost_of_living/county/colorado/garfield

ⁱⁱⁱ BestPlaces. (n.d.). *Mesa County, CO cost of living*. BestPlaces. Retrieved August 7, 2025, from BestPlaces website: Mesa County cost of living data

^{iv} BudgyApp. (2024, April 3). *Colorado economy ranked top 10; Grand Valley growth cited as key factor*. <https://budgyapp.com/colorado-economy-ranked-top-10-grand-valley-growth>

^v Business Times Staff. (2024, February 16). *West Slope real estate outlook encouraging*. *The Business Times*. <https://thebusinesstimes.com/west-slope-real-estate-outlook-encouraging>

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- ^{vi} Young Boss. (2024, November 10). *What the latest Colorado data says about the Western Slope's outdoor recreation economy*. <https://youngboss.tv/what-the-latest-colorado-data-says-about-the-western-slopes-outdoor-recreation-economy>
- ^{vii} Turkewitz, J. (2025, February 28). *A new Western frontier is taking shape in Colorado*. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2025/american-west-frontier-transformation>
- ^{viii} West Slope Startup Week. (2024). *The evolution of Western Colorado's startup ecosystem*. <https://westslopestartupweek.com/the-evolution-of-western-colorados-startup-ecosystem>
- ^{ix} Whitaker, T. (2024, September 8). *Colorado startup culture expanding beyond the Front Range with West Slope Startup Week*. *KSUT Public Radio*. <https://www.ksut.org/business-economy/2024-09-08/colorado-startup-culture-expanding-beyond-the-front-range-with-west-slope-startup-week>