

Aging population a concern, K-State researcher says

Staff reports

Kansas and its communities face many challenges as the population ages, said a Kansas State University population sociologist.

Laszlo J. Kulcsar, assistant professor of sociology, anthropology and social work and director of the Kansas Population Center, based at K-State, said the state's population grows less than the general U.S. population. In addition, aging and out-migration affect Kansas more than the United States as a whole.

This means most people who live in Kansas are getting older and will retire in place, while the younger generation moves away. The population is growing mostly in cities and in areas where immigrant workers are being attracted. Rural areas are slowly depopulating, he said.

"While the population of the state grows, the age composition is much more balanced in cities," Kulcsar said.

Some Kansas towns could be completely gone in the coming decades. Kansas' projected population growth by 2030 is 250,000; 235,000 of those residents will be 65 years and older, according to Kulcsar.

As towns get smaller and begin to consolidate schools,

hospitals and businesses, many people may begin to wonder, "Why should I stay here?" Kulcsar said. Tax dollars in these communities will begin to dwindle and services lessen, he said.

And although the immigrant population in some areas of the state has a younger age composition than does the rest of the state, Kulcsar said, communities with large immigrant populations still face challenges, with offering English as a Second Language classes, for example.

"Kansas was very unprepared for the huge influx of immigrants in the 1990s," he said.

Sixty-seven of the state's 105 counties had population peaks before the 1930s; six have lost population in every decade since 1900. Only nine Kansas counties grew at or above the United States rate from 1990-2000; most are declining in population.

"It's very difficult to come out of the situation," Kulcsar said of the population trends in Kansas. One solution is for in-migration to occur, he said, with communities determining what type of in-migration they want to promote. Would it be farmers, retirees, meatpackers? Kulcsar said areas like Kansas may have an

opportunity to attract retirees when currently popular retirement destinations get overcrowded or too expensive.

A strategy in North Dakota, for example, has used is encouraging out-migrants to come back to the state to retire, he said.

Although the aging population problem is a concern, it's not really just a Kansas phenomenon, Kulcsar said.

"All of the states in the Great Plains are going through the same processes — any traditional agricultural areas," he said.

Another option is to retain portions of the population, which Kulcsar said might be easier. However, communities would have to offer amenities, community services and jobs.

Not only is the population of Kansas centered in the cities, so is the legislative power, according to Kulcsar. This means that the attention of the Kansas Legislature typically focuses on urban problems and the issue of addressing Kansas' population problems may go undone. In addition, politicians don't always look far ahead, he said.

Although the state could work to promote Kansas and retain or attract population at the state level, Kulcsar thinks it's mainly up to the localities themselves to address this issue.