

The following chapters are the synthesis of public forum notes and interviews, statistical polling, written comments, trend line research, and the many other contributions from Vermonters described in the Introduction in Part One of *Imagining Vermont*. They reflect, to the best of the Council's ability, the essence of what Vermonters shared. The Council's purpose in these chapters is to reflect what we have gathered about important subjects, whether they are emotional, divisive or matter-of-fact. All of the information was organized into ten key issues areas: *Vermont Culture; Population; Natural Environment; Working Landscape: Agriculture and Forestry; Built Environment: Development and Land Use; Economy; Education; Human Services, Health, and Safety; Infrastructure; and Energy*.

While each chapter encompasses a wide range of research and discussion, a common framework is used. Quotes from Vermonters illustrate specific points or show a range of opinions, and research and polling provide balance to the individual voices, lending authority or illuminating contradictions in the ideas expressed. All references, unless otherwise noted, are from the St. Michael's report *Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends*, the companion volume to this report. When UVM's Center for Rural Studies web and telephone surveys are referenced, these percentages and data are found in the *Looking Ahead: Vermonters' Values and Concerns* reports.

The Council invites every reader to think about conclusions from the data and what directions it might suggest for Vermont. These chapters summarize what the Council heard; the Council's own conclusions can be found in Part Two of *Imagining Vermont*.





## Population



In listening sessions that the Council on the Future of Vermont conducted throughout Vermont, citizens talked about trends in race, age, income, educational attainment, home ownership, regional differences, employment status, and location of the citizens who live here. A few demographic characteristics, such as the loss of young people, newcomers to the state, increasing diversity, graying of the existing population, the number of people the state can support, and growing disparities in wealth and income are emphasized by citizens as they think ahead about priorities for the future. Vermonters interpret these changes in population both positively and negatively, focusing on the opportunities presented or challenges predicted.

### General Population Characteristics

Vermont has a small and relatively homogeneous population. The research conducted for the Council on the Future of Vermont showed some very interesting characteristics of Vermont, some of which were worrisome to Vermonters, and some of which seemed

natural or normal to them. While the state is distinct from other parts of the country for a number of reasons, it also follows trends that New England or the country as a whole experience.

Vermont has grown slowly over the past century at an average annual rate of about one half of one percent. Some decades, however, have seen much more rapid population growth. In the 1970s the state grew by 15 percent; in the 1980s it grew by another 10 percent; and in the six years between 2000 and 2006 Vermont added another 2.5 percent to its population. In the recent past Vermont has had lower than average birth rates, as well as lower than average death rates. There has also been a steady decline in the number of residents born in Vermont; in 1960 approximately 75 percent were born here, but by 2005 that number was around 53 percent of the population.

Most Vermonters identify themselves as being white and non-Hispanic. In 2006, while 67 percent of the United States as a whole identified themselves this way, in Vermont, 96 percent did. This demographic characteristic tends to affect other trends, such as Vermont's older population (white people in the United

States generally have an older population average), or low mortality rate (while white people have higher suicide rates, they generally have lower mortality rates than other ethnicities). Vermont also follows the national trend of an aging population, and like neighboring New England states, has a somewhat older profile than those southern or western states that also have a much more diverse population.

Vermont has a highly educated population. In 2007 the percent of adult population in Vermont with a bachelor's degree (35.5 percent) was much higher than the national percentage (28.7 percent). Research also shows that some Vermont characteristics – its highly educated citizens and fewer young people – correlate with lower rates of poverty and unemployment. It is also interesting that Vermont has an unusually high percent of people over sixteen years of age in the labor force (sixth highest in the nation). This is explained by the fact that women in Vermont participate in the workforce today at much higher rates than they do nationally (67 percent compared with a national rate of 59 percent).

Over the last generation, family structures have changed significantly in Vermont. In 1970, 80 percent of families in Vermont consisted of two married parents with children. By 2006 that figure had declined to 65 percent, and only 50 percent of all Vermont households were married couple families.

## Old and Young in Vermont

### Age Related Challenges and Opportunities

“The aging demographic is a challenge,” a young inmate at a work camp in Caledonia County told the Council. The aging demographic is a commonly known phenomenon across the United States, especially in rural areas; Vermont's trend reflects the national aging of the “baby boom” generation (the generation born between 1946 and 1964). Today 13 percent of Vermonters are over 65 years old. In Europe, 16 percent of the population is over the age of 65 and in Japan the figure is 21 percent. By contrast, in less developed countries, the percent of population over 65 ranges closer to 5 percent; these are places of high mortality and high fertility with dramatically younger populations. The causes of an aging population are low fertility (producing fewer children), low mortality (which allows more people to reach old age); and migration (which is always selective of age). In Vermont's case a combination of all three is at work.

In 2007, Vermont's median age was 40.8, compared to the US median of 36.6, which ranked Vermont second oldest (behind Maine at 41.6). It is important to note that this aging phenomenon is taking place throughout the U.S., but New England states have historically been “older” in various measurements than west coast and western states in general and Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont ranked among the ten states with the highest proportion of elderly for much of the twentieth century.

Some Vermonters fear that the number of older people in the state who will be dependent on the working-age population will be disproportionate to the capacity of the economy to support them. Across the state, many forum participants see a future in which Vermont will need more medical and social services to support those who are growing older and will have fewer wage-earning adults to support their costs. “Looking ahead, the demographic shift to more senior citizens creates a health insurance crunch, tax issues, teachers' pension plans being short-funded, Medicaid issues... All those expenses will need to be covered by fewer working people,” a resident in St. Albans said

On the positive side, many Vermonters expressed their hope that there is a significant opportunity in having an older population of retirees or part time workers. These individuals might have more time to offer volunteer services in the communities where they live than the young families and full time working Vermonters do. Moreover, supporting these older citizens may stimulate job creation in the medical professionals, investment and financial planning, and labor-related jobs (gardening, landscaping, plowing, etc).

Since there will be increasing numbers of people in this generation retiring around the same time, employers in the state, including state and municipal government, will have to fill the vacancies in the workforce created by this aging population, as well as provide employment to new workers. At a meeting with the Rutland Regional Planning Commission, one participant put it this way: “We need to boost the family-age workforce. There is a disproportionate amount of near-retirement-age people – those with the highest skills will be leaving – and we'll have to fill those jobs.”

### Youth: Mobility and Connection

While Vermont is seeing the increase in the number of people living in their senior years, there are fewer people in the younger age cohorts. Research shows the decline in young adults in the state. Many forum participants are particularly worried about this combination.



More Vermont high school students are deciding to attend college out-of-state than in-state today. Many Vermonters believe that this out-migration is normal and parallels previous historic trends. To some of them the fact that young people go away is not a bad thing in itself; it makes for well-rounded and better-educated youths. Research findings demonstrate that highly educated young people are the mostly likely to be mobile, whether they live in Vermont or elsewhere in the country. Indeed, Vermont, like many other states has a net loss of college graduates – many young Vermonters leave and do not come back – but it also has one of the highest densities of college graduates in the country today.

Even as more Vermont high school students are choosing to attend school out-of-state, data shows that the state imports more young people to attend its colleges and universities than it exports. There are vital and eager young people moving in and making their homes here, at least for four years. Young people are attracted to Vermont, whether for schooling or because with the way of life appeals to them. A young man in Bolton commented that: “There’s a sense of community here. I’m staying because I like that sense of community – [I] grew up in Massachusetts and most of the friends I know have gone back there. But while I like to visit those places, I want to stay here.” Some young Vermonters do return to Vermont eventually, and the state attracts other well educated residents.

Still, Vermonters worry that some of the most talented youth leave for higher education or professional training, and then stay out of state for the better jobs. Many point to the high cost and limited availability of housing, the lack of entry-level job opportunities, and the expensiveness of life in Vermont as the primary reasons why young people leave. But little systematic research has been done to ask young people what they need to stay, succeed, or actualize their skills here.

Clearly, Vermonters want to see young people energizing the state with their vitality and innovation. In Poultney, one respondent put it this way: “There is an out-migration of people in their 20s and 30s, but we need those people to remain a vibrant state.” Others feel strongly that youth should have opportunities to return and take up a job here. In Barre, one participant told the Council on the Future of Vermont: “It’s normal for kids to leave Vermont; but I’m not sure if the kids of this present generation will come back.”

A municipal leader in Randolph phrased this in stark terms, “Vermont has a brain drain. We’re educating our children well and they have to go elsewhere for a job. There are not enough decent jobs for young people.” A student at Randolph Union High School expressed in positive terms that, for her, “Vermont is a comfort zone; on the other hand, young people like adventure and there is nothing to do. Cities provide more adventure and stimulation.” A student at Vermont Youth Conservation Corps told the Council of his intentions: “I think it’s good that kids leave the state because we got no jobs... I’d leave for, like, construction in Arizona because they need English speaking people.” At most of the forums, participants were well aware of the issue, but most people were less worried about young people going away than with ensuring that Vermont had the economy and quality of life to attract them back home after their travels.

The Council on the Future of Vermont launched a contest with the Vermont Young Writers Project to solicit writings from current students in elementary and high school. Hundreds of students contributed their perspectives on Vermont, its challenges and its future. Their essays, poems, and other writings demonstrate a great pride in having been born and raised in the state, but they also show the draw of seeing the wider world or finding a job that can expand their experience outside Vermont. Young people resonate strongly with the natural landscape, the seasons, and even the small

town and community life, but that doesn't prevent their restlessness or stop them from also wanting to gain knowledge and experience outside Vermont.

## Migration: Who's Here? Who's Coming?

Vermonters worry about the trends around age in the state, but they are equally or even more concerned about the effects of newcomers to the state on everything from community cohesion to the state's changing landscape. The Council's research shows that the percentage of people moving into Vermont is higher than in other New England states. Some newcomers move to Vermont to stay; others are here part time. The concerns the Council heard most often about Vermont newcomers related to their effects on their new communities.

Vermont has a reputation as a beautiful and tranquil vacation spot – an ideal place for a summer camp on a lake, or a ski-in condominium on the side of a mountain. The state has its share of second-home owners, vacation homes and summer camps, many of which are only used for portions of the year. Some Vermonters describe challenges when part-time residents leave for long periods of time, neglecting their properties, posting their lands against hunting or trespassing, or generally restricting traditional uses by members of the community. Staff at a Vermont ski resort told the Council on the Future of Vermont that, "Vermonters are protective of community here. For tourists it's 'come, spend your money, and then go home!'" There is a common concern that the wealth of these part timers drives up land and home values and so forces low and middle income Vermonters off the land and away from areas they might otherwise be able to purchase. At a public forum in Washington County, one respondent said, "In twenty years, the rich people will come in and buy the land. Taxes will go up." Many of these immigrants have resources and time to help their communities but may not feel invited to contribute. An elected official in Brighton said, "The new people are a mixture of retirees and people who don't need jobs to live here, like part-timers. These populations have more time to volunteer." But others feel differently, as this participant in Barre explained "Vermont isn't planning for working people to live here. Most people who own homes now would not be able to buy a home if they didn't already have one."

When newcomers arrive, they may stress the

systems in place, challenge the existing rules, expect services comparable to those where they've come from, or question regulations or patterns of behavior that are established in the local culture. Vermonters frequently express frustrations that many areas have passed a tipping point, the old ways are gone, and the historically strong community is deeply undermined.

"Newcomers to Vermont challenge its independence."  
– *Franklin County*

"We should maintain Vermont as a place where Vermonters can preserve their Yankee values and not be replaced by people who want to define Vermont as something else."  
– *Rutland*

"Vermont used to be more distinct. The culture has changed because other people have moved here."  
– *Bennington County*

"We hear that we're facing an increase in newcomers which threatens to destroy the sense of community."  
– *Windsor County*

Yet many of these immigrants are active, well intentioned, and have come to Vermont because they like the idea of participating in real communities. They join school boards or select boards, they volunteer and they reach out to their newly adopted community – sometimes successfully and sometimes not. What they see as help to the community, others may sometimes perceive as interference. Acceptance can take time, patience, and demonstrated commitment, especially in small towns.

No matter who they are, newcomers to Vermont generally seemed to be classified by forum participants into categories: those who give back to their town new town or state, and those who treat Vermont simply as a playground or retreat but never try to connect to community. Many forum participants described how they came to Vermont because there are attracted to the land, lifestyle, communities, and values of the place, and they describe the challenge of fitting in when there is so much division between newcomers and native Vermonters.

## Income Disparity

The cost of living in Vermont, and owning a home and land, have come to be seen as increasingly expensive by Vermonters across the state. For many, the cost of living and who can afford to live here are connected to the migration and trends in population change in the state.

“There are two Vermonts – the people who choose to come or to stay here, and those who cannot afford to leave. For many low-income families there is generational poverty, like those who are undereducated and cannot get out of that loop.”

– *Randolph*

“There’s an increasing economic division – the wealthy versus the rest, working people versus non-working people, second home owners, etc.”

– *Charleston*

“It’s like all the out-of-staters are more wealthy than other Vermonters.”

– *Manchester*

This issue reflects a perennial tension within Vermont, but one that comes to a point as people look to the growth of gated communities and see the functional segregation of wealth and poverty in other states. Most believe that this is not the Vermont way. The dedication to community affirmed as a common value in the state seems to be threatened by a separation of people by class. According to many who testified, in Vermont there is a tradition of working shoulder to shoulder with neighbors. The state lacks a celebrity culture. Most who spoke to the Council on the issue want to preserve the egalitarian character of Vermont life.

## Growing Diversity

Newcomers to the state include people of racial and ethnic diversity. In 2006, 4 percent of Vermonters identified themselves in the U.S. Census as other than white. From 1990 to 2000, for example, the state’s non-white population went from approximately seven-thousand to over nineteen thousand (an increase of more than 200 percent). Public schools in Vermont have gone from having 1.8 percent non-white enrollment in 1990 to over 6 percent in 2008. This change has not been even across the state; certain areas of the state have grown more diverse faster. In Winooski, for example, one-quarter of the students are reported as being “English language learners.” But the change in racial and ethnic identity is not just in Vermont’s populated areas; rural counties and towns have growing numbers of non-white and minority residents as well.

Some Vermonters report instances of racism or prejudice as well as a lack of structural support to handle the needs of new populations; such as not having translators for refugee or immigrant populations

and their children in schools. Non-white residents describe the challenge of fitting in, facing public perception and being accepted as Vermonters. “It’s difficult for white people to think about – they ask me ‘where are *you* from?’ but there’s a subtext of ‘you can’t be from here, so when are you going back to where you’re from?’ There’s no way you could be born and raised here!” reported a person of color to the Council. Some Vermonters see benefits to this steady stream of growing diversity in the state’s population. A Poultney resident looks forward to an increase in diversity over time as providing new ideas and new energy to communities, “Vermont may have some prejudices due to its geographic nature. There has been some racial isolation, but as diverse populations move here, Vermonters need to learn how to address that. Diverse populations may bring new skills and opportunities to the state.” A young member of the Vermont Youth Conservation Corp also sees benefits to welcoming new Vermonters to the state: “I moved here from Chicago, and schools could be more diverse here. People from other places are good – there’s some in Burlington from Africa, Tibet, and other places. This is good – it gets you into the real world to be around kids from other places.”

Refugees and immigrants from other parts of the world add to the diversity in the state. Over the years Vermont has seen immigrants from Cambodia, Bosnia, Congo, and other areas who have arrived as the result of disturbances far from Vermont. Approximately 200 refugees from other countries settle here each year. Many immigrants appreciate the welcome that Vermont has provided, but many of them also wrestle to find ways to realize their potential in the Vermont economy. A member of the Association of Africans Living in Vermont described his situation: “I am a doctor, I was a doctor in Africa, but I can’t practice here. I have to find other ways to help my community, even though I can’t practice medicine.”

In public forums across the state, Vermont residents celebrated the value of tolerance in the state, explaining how different life styles and different people are more likely to be accepted here than in other places. Vermonters seem to want to ensure that there is room for all kinds of people in this state. Many cited the historical example of old farm families that welcomed the ‘back-to-the-land’ movement immigrants to Vermont in the 1960s and 1970s, or the diverse waves of ethnic immigration that Vermont has experienced throughout its history.

There are hidden and illegal populations in Vermont as well. When issues related to Mexican and other immigrant labor in agriculture came up in public forums, the discussion was mostly driven by sympathy for these foreign workers and recognition of their important contribution to farms and the Vermont economy.

Vermont's discourse on racial and ethnic newcomers can sometimes include civic disagreement, values of tolerance and acceptance, privacy and diversity, as well as stories of xenophobia, resistance to change, and even prejudice. The challenge of Vermont's growing diversity, while recognized, rarely receives due focus. One respondent of color told the Council, "There are only a few 'ways' to be black in Vermont. The diversity of the non-white populations exist here, but they don't tend to get recognized or appreciated."

## The Size of the State

Vermont residents express immense pride in the small scale of community life, the strength of neighborliness, accessibility to government, and the ability to influence changes as individuals. In the Council's forums, people stated that small size means everyone is connected but also that people have a keen awareness of social issues: inequalities, divisions, and differences. Most Vermonters have a positive feeling about the small scale of this state. At just over 600,000, Vermont's population remains the second smallest in the nation. Although Vermonters feel strongly about preserving the human scale of the state and its communities, the size of the state provides challenges when it comes to affording services. There are many strains on the Vermont economy and on individual Vermonters as a result of the costs of the services provided.

Many Vermonters talked about what a "sustainable" population would look like – a steady-state population that would allow the state to pay for its needs without altering the rural nature of most of its communities. Many forum attendees expressed deep concerns about over-population, especially if their fears about global warming are realized and areas of the West and Midwest dry out or coastal areas are flooded. To them, sustainability connects directly to the carrying capacity of local agriculture. The assets of clean air, abundant clean water, and rural land that are so attractive to newcomers could draw even more people to Vermont if communities and states elsewhere become unattractive or are threatened.



## Common Points

Vermont is part of a larger economic and demographic region and subject to dynamics well beyond its borders. Some of the trends that concern Vermonters most, such as an aging population or a mobile young demographic, are national and regional in scope. While statistics do not show Vermont trends dramatically different from the nation as a whole, the small scale and rural nature of Vermont enlarges the impact of any shifts, positive or negative.

The testimony gathered through the public forums of the Council demonstrates that while some worry about the loss of youth, others want to attract new employers and jobs. Most Vermonters, however, place high value on the small size of the current population. They recognize the rewards, as well as some of the challenges, of having a small population. Despite the limitations this implies or imposes, they actively embrace the cultural and social benefits of Vermont's human scale communities as a defining characteristic that is worth preserving. They also recognize some of the most important trends in the state's population; trends that may not be unique to Vermont, but that affect the way of life and are a part of the state's history and heritage. Growing diversity, for example, presents a challenge that Vermonters believe can be tackled with consideration and forethought. Many other states have undergone changes in diversity with success or failure; Vermont has seen incremental growth and seems ready to welcome more diversity over time.

Vermonters have a strong sense of state and local identity. While they see themselves as a tolerant people, it can take time to accept newcomers, and it can take time for newcomers to figure out their neighbors and communities.

Historically, rural areas export youth. Vermonters are concerned about the loss of young people and the potential burden of supporting an older population. Giving young people a good reason to stay or move back to the state is a high priority issue for many Vermonters who attended the public forums. Many, however, have stated that current fears may be somewhat over-blown and that Vermont's quality of life, strong communities and growing emphasis on sustainability, innovation, and green economic development will continue to attract young people in the future.