National Overview

Regional and State Trends

Our coasts are among the most rapidly growing and developed areas in the nation. In 2003, the coastal population was greatest in the Northeast and Pacific regions, followed by the Great Lakes, Gulf of Mexico, and finally the Southeast. Figure 1 shows the regional distribution of coastal population in 2003. Figure 2 shows the distribution of this population on a county basis.

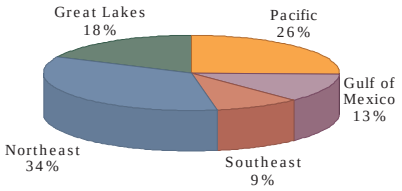


FIGURE 1. Regional distribution of the nation's coastal population in 2003

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Total coastal population between the years 1980 and 2003 increased by 33 million people or 28 percent, roughly consistent with the nation's rate of increase. Coastal population within the Pacific region showed the largest gain during this time with almost 12 million people, followed by the Northeast with 8 million people. The Southeast region, however, exhibited the largest rate of change with a 58 percent increase, followed by the Pacific at 46 percent, and the Gulf of Mexico at 45 percent. The rate of growth in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions was considerably smaller with 18 percent and 6 percent increases, respectively. Percent population change in coastal counties is presented in Figure 3.

The Southeast has increasingly become a leading destination for retirees and job-seekers. Between the years 1995 and 2000, the Census Bureau reported that the highest levels of migration were to states that fall within the Southeast region and the Gulf of Mexico region, particularly to Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina (Franklin, 2003).

In contrast, the lowest levels of migration were to states found in the Northeast region. Additionally, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey saw a considerable amount of population lost to out-migration during this period (Franklin, 2003).

The leading states in terms of absolute and percent coastal population change during the past two decades are found in Table 2. California led in coastal population change, increasing by 9.9 million people, over twice the growth of any other state (with the exception of Florida). This represents an increase of 1,179 persons every day in California's coastal areas. The coastal population change in Florida ranks second, accounting for an additional 7.1 million people. Other leaders in coastal population change included Texas, Washington, and Michigan. Of the states listed, half are within the Northeast region alone.

As one of the main drivers of coastal population increase in the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico regions, Florida shows the greatest percent population change between 1980 and 2003, reaching nearly 75 percent. Alaska and Washington also show high rates of growth, increasing by 63 percent and 54 percent, respectively.

TABLE 2. Leading states in coastal population growth, 1980-2003

State	Total Change (Million Persons)	State	Percent Change
California	9.9	Florida	75
Florida	7.1	Alaska	63
Texas	2.5	Washington	54
Washington	1.7	Texas	52
Virginia	1.6	Virginia	48
New York	1.6	California	47
New Jersey	1.2	New Hampshire	46
Maryland	1.2	Delaware	38
Michigan	0.8	Georgia	35
Massachusetts	0.7	South Carolina	33

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

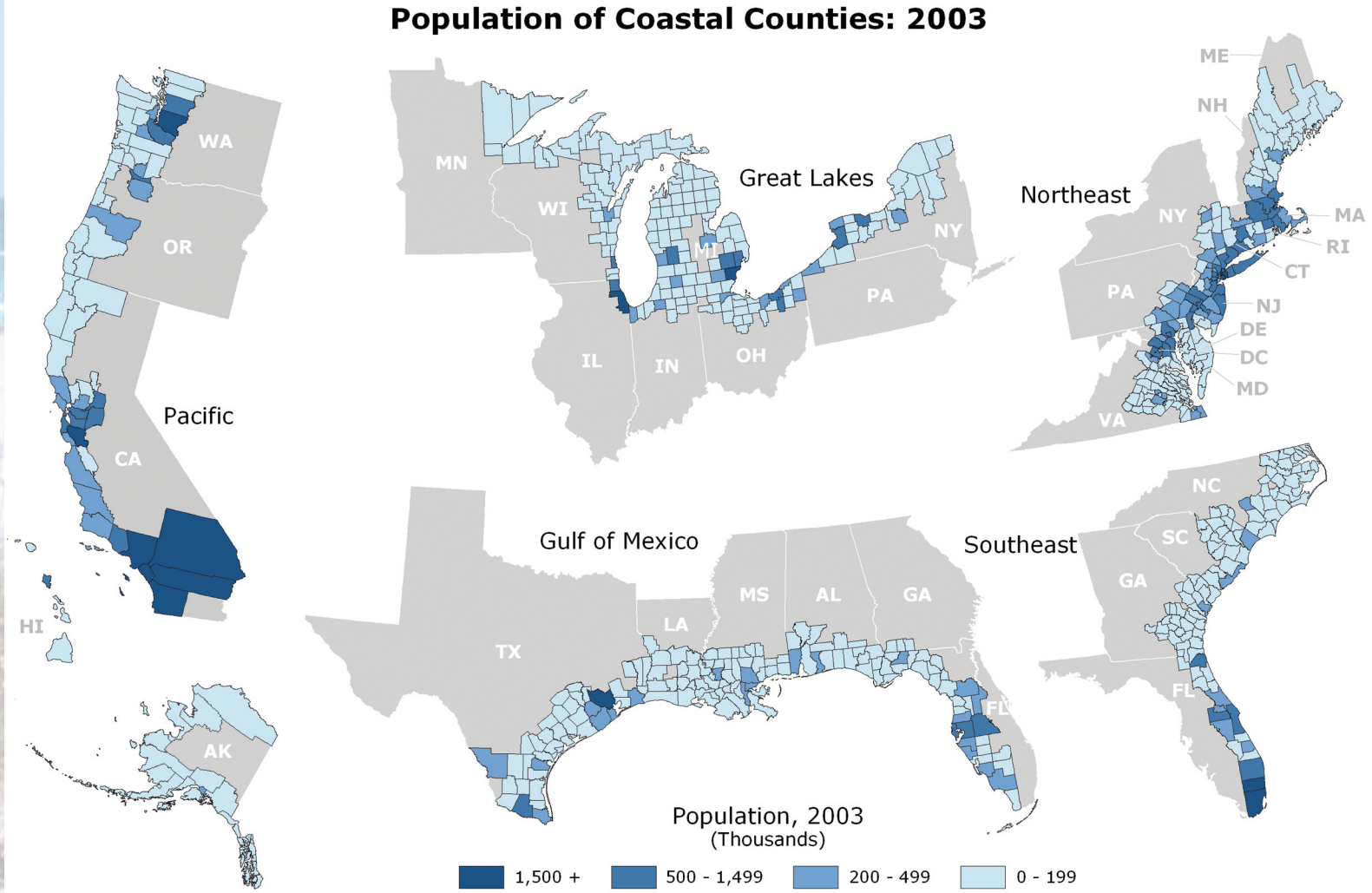


FIGURE 2. Coastal county population in 2003

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Leading Coastal Counties in Population in 2003 (Millions)

Los Angeles, CA	9.9	Harris, TX	3.6	San Diego, CA	2.9
Cook, IL	5.4	Orange, CA	3.0	Kings (Brooklyn), NY	2.5

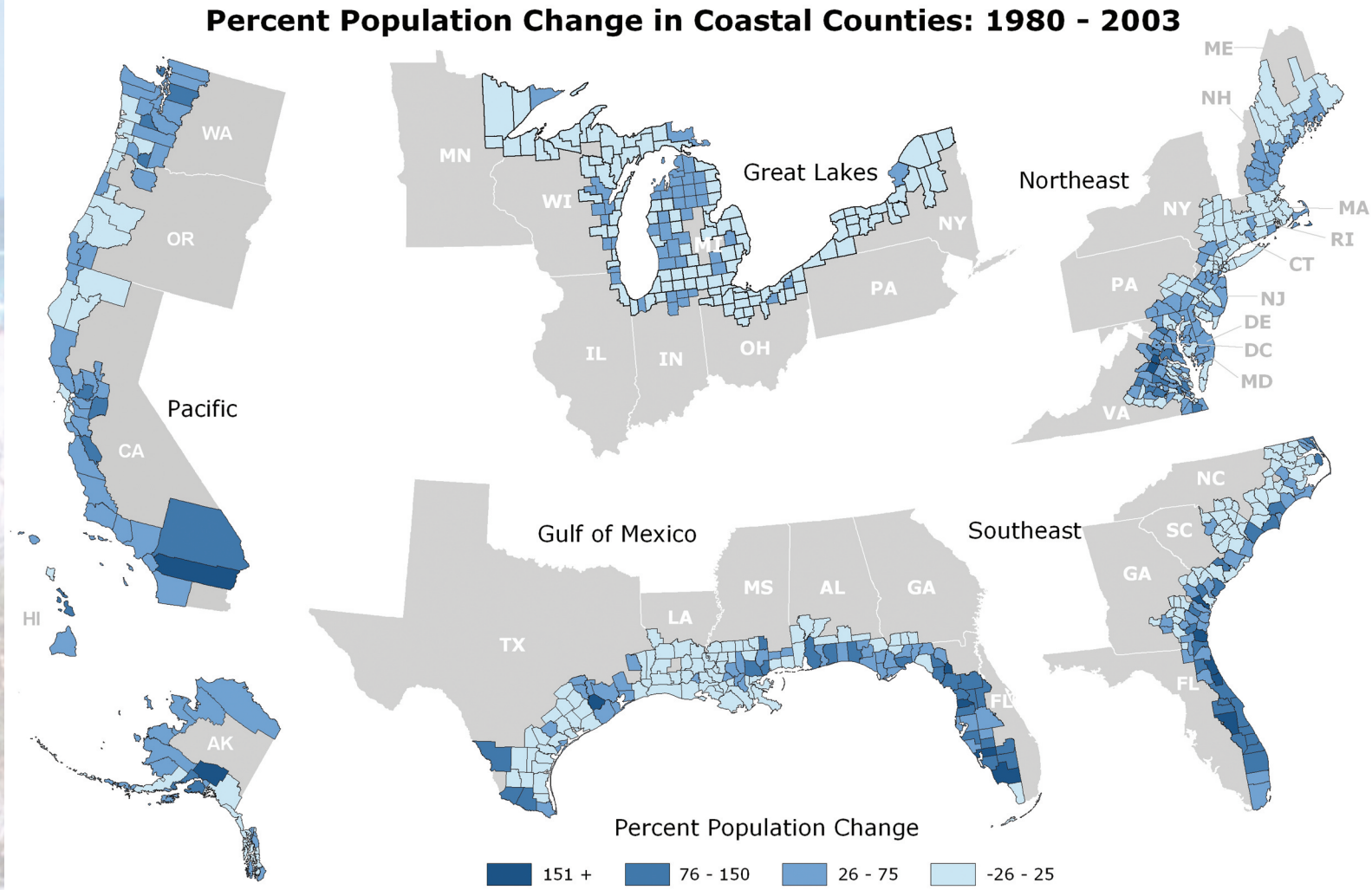


FIGURE 3. Coastal county percent population change in 2003

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Leading Coastal Counties in Percent Population Change, 1980 to 2003

Flagler, FL	470	Matanuska-Susitna, AK	284	Collier, FL	233
Osceola, FL	318	Camden, GA	240	Hernando, FL	223

Population in Coastal Counties

Population Trends

Coastal counties constitute only 17 percent of the total land area of the United States (not including Alaska), but account for 53 percent of the total population. This ratio of coastal county population to the population of the United States as a whole has remained relatively stable (between approximately 52 and 54 percent) since 1970. Coastal county population is not growing significantly faster than noncoastal population, but rather, it is the continued population growth in the limited land area of coastal counties that is of growing importance and the focus of increasing attention.

Coastal counties contain 53% of the nation's population, yet, excluding Alaska, account for only 17% of U.S. land area.

Of the 10 coastal counties that experienced the greatest increases in population from 1980 to 2003, six are in California, three are in Florida, and one is in Texas. The combined population increase of these 10 counties alone accounts for 30 percent of the coastal population growth during this period. Los Angeles, CA, had the highest growth overall, followed by Harris, TX, and Riverside, CA. In contrast, approximately 14 percent of all U.S. coastal counties (the majority located in the Great Lakes and Northeast regions) lost population.

Washington, DC; Hisham S. Ibrahim/ Getty Images

It is projected that San Diego, CA, will be the leading coastal county in population increase in the years to come (2003-2008). It, along with Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties, CA, will account for 12 percent of the nation's expected total coastal population increase. Counties in South Florida (Broward, Palm Beach, Orange, and Miami-Dade) along with Harris County, TX, also are anticipated to experience major growth during this period.

The largest rate of change from 1980 to 2003 occurred in coastal counties found in Florida, Alaska, Georgia, Texas, and Virginia. Flagler County, FL, located in the Southeast, increased 470 percent, followed by Osceola County, FL, at 318 percent. Several additional counties in Florida experienced substantial rates of increase during this time as well. Florida has increasingly become a "retirement magnet," a migratory destination for retirees in recent decades (Frey, 2003). The largest state-to-state migration between 1995 to 2000, for example, was from New York to Florida, reflecting this migratory trend (Perry, 2003).

Despite the continual population growth in coastal counties, recent trends have also shown an increase in migration from coastal states to noncoastal states. For instance, from 1995 to 2000, California contributed to large migration flows to Nevada and Arizona (attributed to retiree migration and other economic factors) (Perry, 2003). In addition, California has contributed to at least one-third of Colorado's net migration during this period (Perry, 2003). At the county level, Maricopa County, AZ, and Clark County, NV, are expected to be two of the four leading counties in population growth in the entire United States from 2003 to 2008. Overall, from 1990-2003, noncoastal counties emerged as having a greater population increase than coastal counties. This greater population growth and percent change in noncoastal counties is expected to continue from 2003 to 2008.

San Francisco, CA; Jeremy Woodhouse/Getty Images

Population Density

Most of the nation's most densely populated areas are located along the coast. In fact, 23 of the 25 most densely populated U.S. counties are coastal. Coastal counties average 300 persons per square mile, much higher than the national average of 98 persons per square mile (population density values presented in this report exclude Alaska because its extensive coastal land area dilutes the national average). The most densely populated counties in the nation, New York (Manhattan), Kings (Brooklyn), Bronx, and Queens comprise portions of New York City. Together, these counties average almost 39 thousand persons per square mile.

Since 1980, population density has increased in coastal counties by 65 persons per square mile, or by 28 percent. By 2008, it is expected to increase by 13 persons per square mile, or 4 percent. The ratio of national, coastal state, and noncoastal county population density to coastal population density has remained relatively constant since 1980 (only fluctuating by fractions of a percent). Figure 4 demonstrates this trend. For example, the population density of the nation as a whole has been approximately one-third that of coastal counties throughout this period. The population density of noncoastal counties has remained between 18% and 19% of coastal county population density. Figure 5 shows the population density of coastal counties nationwide.

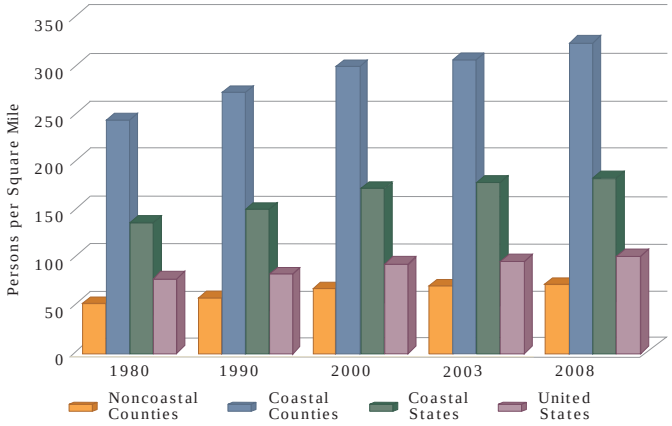


FIGURE 4. Population density of the United States, coastal states, coastal counties and noncoastal counties from 1980 to 2008

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and W&PE, Inc.

Leading States in Coastal Population Density in 2003 (Persons per Square Mile)

Illinois	4,330	Massachusetts	939
New Jersey	1,208	Pennsylvania	794
Rhode Island	1,030	Connecticut	719

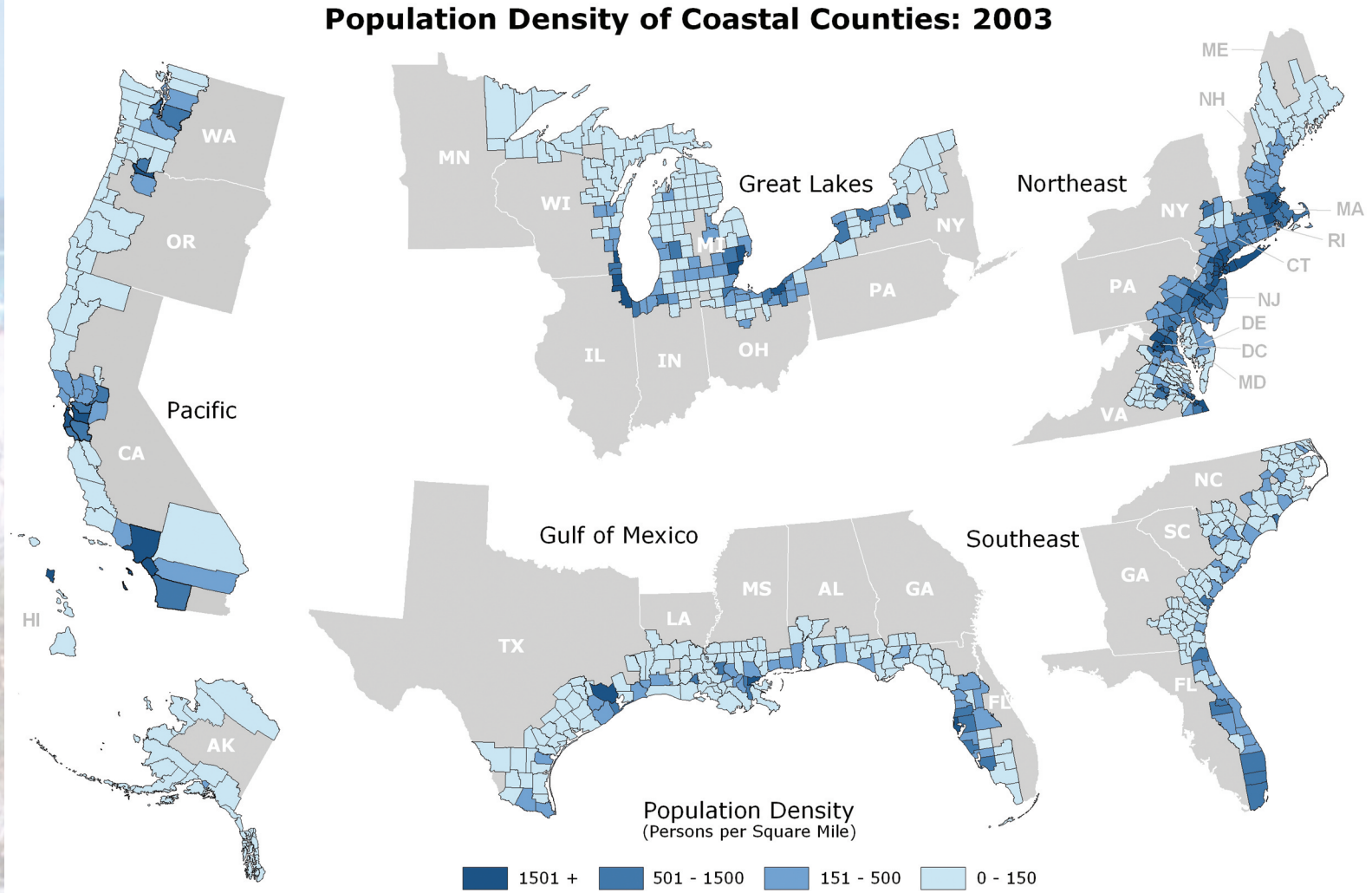
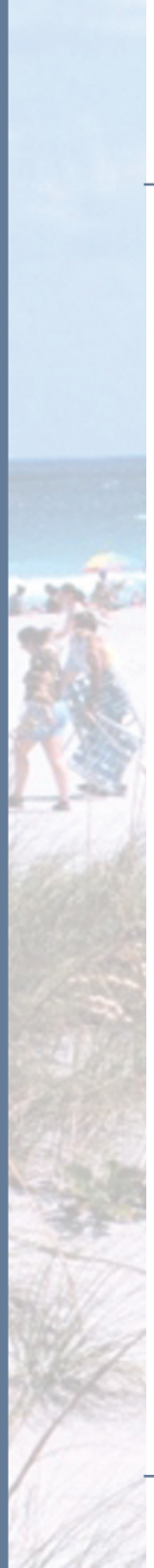


FIGURE 5. Coastal county population density in 2003

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Leading Coastal Counties in Population Density in 2003 (Thousands of Persons per Square Mile)

NewYork, NY	68	Bronx, NY	32	San Francisco, CA	16
Kings, NY	35	Queens, NY	20	Hudson, NJ	13



Building Along the Coast

Housing

In 2000, coastal counties contained 52 percent of the nation's total housing supply (comparable to the proportion of coastal population to total U.S. population). The leading states in total housing units in coastal counties were California, Florida, and New York. Together, these states comprised 41 percent of the coastal county total.

At the county level, Los Angeles County, CA, had the highest number of housing units at approximately 3.3 million, double that of any other county except Cook County, IL, with 2.1 million housing units. Total housing units within coastal counties are shown in Appendix B.

Seasonal Housing

More than 1,540 single-family housing units are permitted for construction every day in coastal counties.

One component of total housing units is seasonal or vacation homes. The location and growth in the number of seasonal housing units indicate areas where people congregate seasonally or for short periods. In 2000, there were approximately 2.1 million seasonal homes in coastal counties (54 percent of the nation's total). Florida had the largest number of seasonal housing units, 24 percent of the coastal county total, followed by Michigan, California, and New York. Figure 6 shows total seasonal housing units within coastal counties in 2000.

Several coastal counties that are low in population emerge as being popular seasonal destinations. For instance, looking beyond the dominance of Florida and Southern California, large numbers of seasonal homes are found in Maine, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, northern Michigan, Maryland, and Delaware (Figure 6). It is important to note that some coastal counties and communities are subject to intense development not indicated by total housing or seasonal housing numbers.

Commercial, hotel, and recreational construction is an important component of the coastal economy and contributes significantly to overall development in some areas.

Building Permits

The construction of single-family and multi-family homes may act as an indicator of both economic growth as well as increased "sprawl" along the coastline. The number of building permits issued for homes helps pinpoint where the greatest amount of residential development has occurred. In coastal counties from 1999 to 2003, 2.8 million building permits were issued for the construction of single-family housing units (43% of the nation's total) and 1 million building permits were issued for the construction of multi-family housing units (51% of the nation's total). Within this five-year period, the leading states in single-family unit construction were found in all five regions. Florida and California combined made up 37% of all permits issued for single-family units and 42% of all multi-family units in coastal counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2001a, 2002, 2003a, 2004). Table 3 shows the 10 leading states in coastal residential housing construction during this five-year period.

TABLE 3. Leading coastal states in building permits issued for single-family and multi-family housing units from 1999 to 2003.

State	Building Permits for Single-Family Units (Thousands)	State	Building Permits for Multi-Family Units (Thousands)
Florida	607	Florida	264
California	443	California	186
Texas	199	New York	103
Michigan	193	Texas	66
Virginia	142	Washington	53
Washington	118	Illinois	45
New Jersey	113	New Jersey	42
Maryland	105	Virginia	40
New York	101	Michigan	36
Pennsylvania	90	Maryland	26

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

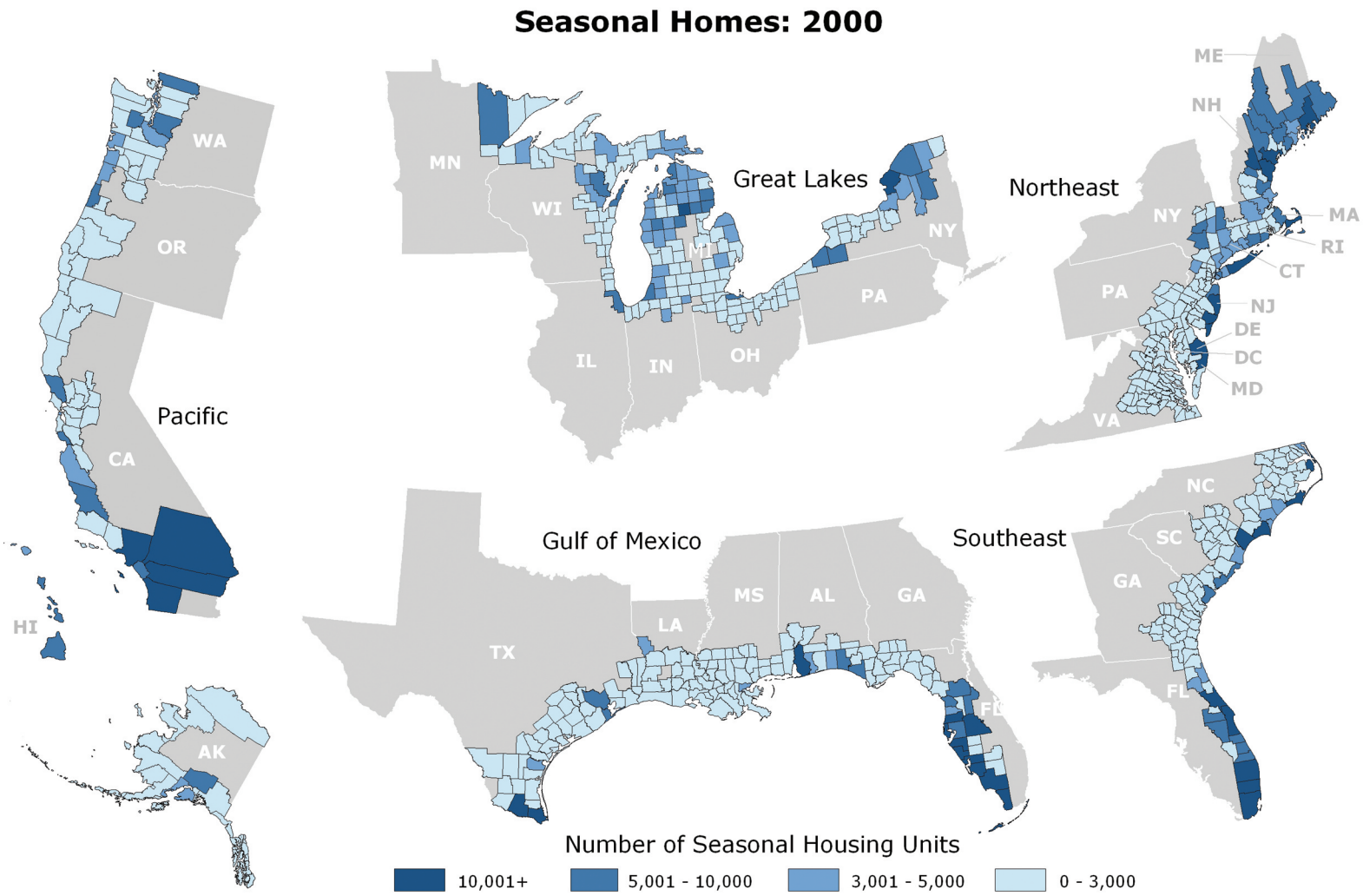


FIGURE 6. Seasonal housing units in 2000
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Leading States in Coastal Seasonal Housing in 2000 (Thousands)

Florida	506	California	177	New Jersey	115
Michigan	230	New York	173	Massachusetts	95

Age

The breakdown of age groups can be a useful method to gauge the direction of population in coastal counties with regard to community lifestyle priorities (e.g., active marine recreation, family-oriented activities, senior-oriented features). Figure 7 provides a breakdown of age groups in 2000 for coastal and noncoastal counties. The majority of the population within each age group lives in coastal counties. The difference between coastal and noncoastal county population is largest in the under-16 age group and in the 35-44 age group, which encompasses a significant portion of the Baby Boomer generation. In these age groups, coastal county population exceeded noncoastal population by approximately 3.2 and 3.3 million persons, respectively. In 2000, Baby Boomers ranged in age from 36 to 54 (Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2004).

Between 1980 and 2000, middle-aged adults rose from 21 to 30 percent of the population in coastal counties.

In coastal counties, over the 20-year period from 1980 to 2000, the 35–44 and 45–54 age groups saw a significant increase in population, rising from 21 percent of the total coastal population to 30 percent of the total coastal population. The proportion of young adults (aged 18-24) fell from 13 percent to 9 percent of the total during this same time period. However, in the year 2000, the proportion of the population within each age group that resided in coastal counties (and within each specific coastal region) was relatively consistent with the national average (falling within 1 to 2 percent).

The oldest age group (65 and older) is often one of special interest because of the assumption that older Americans retire to warmer areas near the ocean. The data do not show any great change over the years, as this group increased 1 percent of the total coastal population each decade (from 1980 to 2000). Of growing attention, however, is the number of Americans that will enter the 65 and over age group in the upcoming decades.

Patuxent River, Maryland; Mary Holinger NODC/NOAA

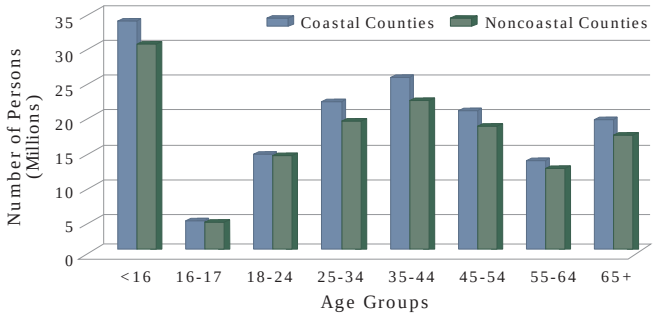


FIGURE 7. Population by age group in coastal and noncoastal counties in 2000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Income

Income is a demographic attribute that can be very illustrative in the study of the geographic patterns of population. The geographic breakdown of income in coastal counties and between coastal and noncoastal counties can be an important determinant of why certain geographic areas are chosen over others and what attributes are important to residency patterns. Figure 9 shows the median household income of coastal counties.

Counties that fall within the highest category (median household income greater than $58,000) appear to surround, are adjacent to, or are within commuting distance of large cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Counties exhibiting the lowest median household income category (less than $34,000) tend to be found in more rural areas, particularly in the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico regions.

Median household income for coastal counties is approximately 17% higher than noncoastal counties.

Baltimore and Montgomery Counties, MD; M. Crossett

On average, coastal counties have a higher median household income than noncoastal counties, differing by almost 17%. However, this difference decreases when coastal counties are compared to noncoastal counties within coastal states. The difference in average median household income is reduced to 14%.

Median household income within coastal and noncoastal counties also differs within regions (Figure 8) as the location of large cities and the cost of living may vary. For instance, in the Northeast region, the average median household income in coastal counties is almost $13,000 greater than noncoastal counties. The Pacific region shows a similar pattern with a difference of $8,600. In the Gulf of Mexico region, there is less than one percent difference between coastal and noncoastal counties. The Southeast region is the only region where the average of median household income of noncoastal counties exceeds coastal counties.

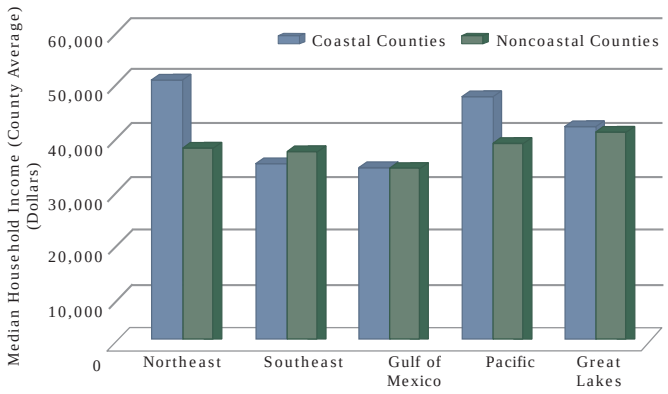


FIGURE 8. Coastal and noncoastal median household income (county average) by region in 2000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

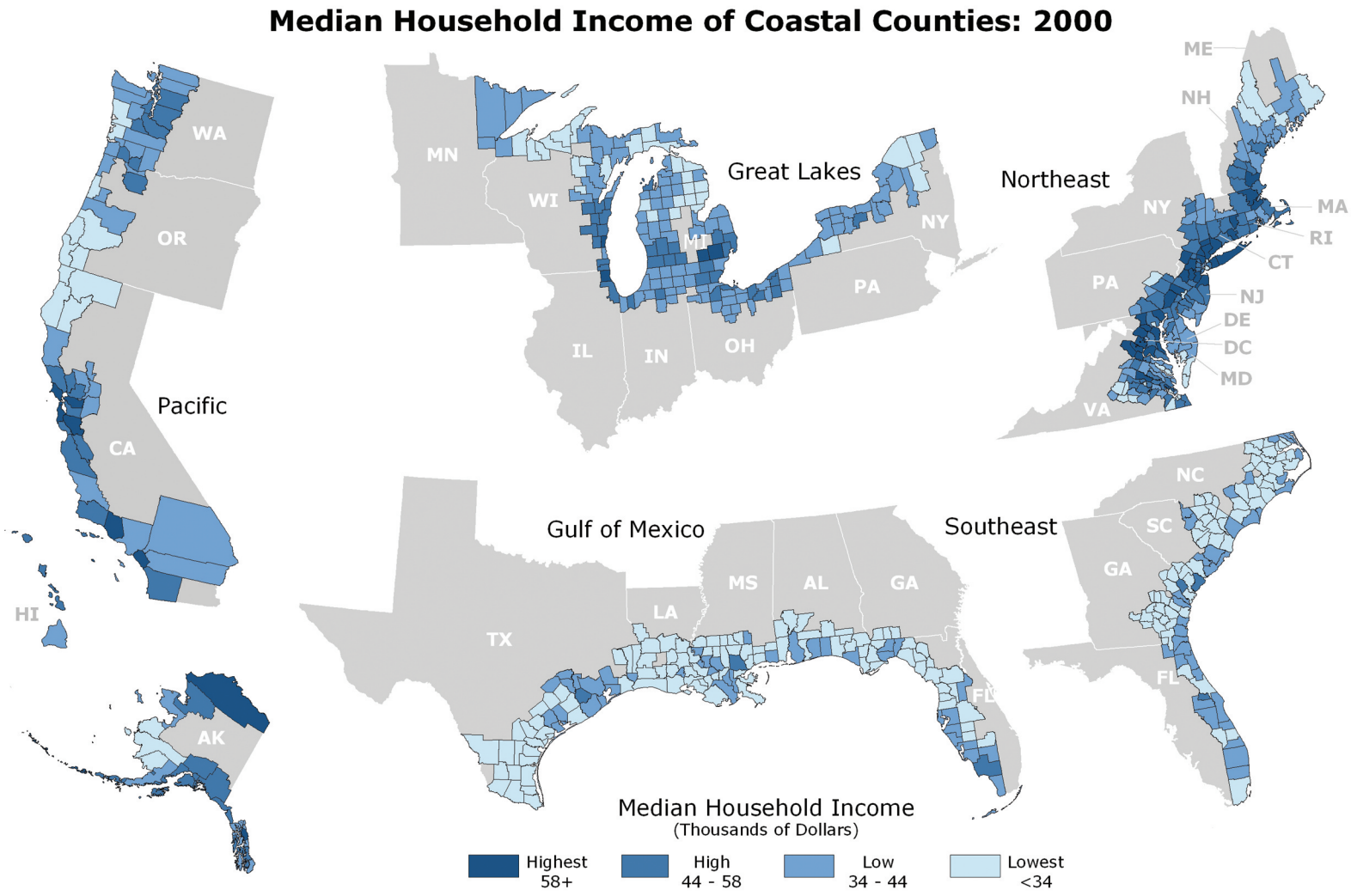


FIGURE 9. Median household income in 2000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Leading States in Median Household Income in 2000 (Dollars)

Connecticut	55,500	Maryland	51,300	California	48,700
New Jersey	55,200	Massachusetts	48,900	New Hampshire	48,700