

Virginia Population Projections FAQs

What are the Weldon Cooper Population Projections?

The Weldon Cooper Center produced these population projections for Virginia under contract with the Virginia Employment Commission. These are the first set of post-2010 projections for Virginia and its counties and cities.

Why are projections developed?

Population projections are critical and widely used in state revenue forecasts, in localities' comprehensive plans, in creating urban development areas, and in statewide transportation planning. They are also often employed in assessing the demand for education, healthcare, housing, and many other goods and services.

What's the difference between population estimates and population projections?

Population estimates reflect the present or the recent past. Population projections suggest the future. Population estimates are typically based on a variety of observed administrative record data (such as births, deaths, school enrollment, and residential housing construction) to detect population changes since the most recent decennial census. Estimates are based on *known* population data. While there is uncertainty with estimates, they are highly accurate: Cooper Center estimates for Virginia's localities in 2010 were, on average, less than 3 percent off of the 2010 census counts.

Population projections, on the other hand, predict future population change based on prior patterns. Due to unknown future natural, social, economic, and political events, population projections have higher levels of uncertainty than estimates.

What types of population data do you project?

We projected population for 2020, 2030, and 2040 for Virginia and its localities for the following:

- Total population
- By age, sex, and race
- By age, sex, and Hispanic origin

In addition –and for the first time – total population projections were produced for Virginia's large towns, those with populations greater than 5,000 in the 2010 census.

How far into the future do the projections go?

Projections are available for 2020, 2030, and 2040.

What levels of geography are included?

Detailed population projections are available for 2020, 2030, and 2040 for Virginia, its 134 localities, and its 22 Planning District Commissions (PDCs). Total population only was projected for towns with populations of 5,000 or more in the 2010 Census.

How are the projections developed?

The Weldon Cooper population projections are based on a multi-layered methodological approach developed through extensive research, careful and thoughtful evaluation of options, and creative and practical applications of demographic and statistical theories. The methods produced consistent results with past trends and retain locality population characteristics.

Do you consider community-specific growth/development plans?

No. The methodologies were developed to produce projections for all localities. However, we are able to develop locality-specific scenario projections under contract.

Why do the projections not provide the same level of detail (age, sex, race, ethnicity) for towns?

Detailed projections, especially for small areas over a long time period, are prone to much larger errors.

How accurate/reliable are these projections?

Due to the unknown nature of the future, all projections are uncertain. Nationwide studies of population projections for counties find that the average 10-year projection of total population differs from its census count by about twelve percent. Projections made for further into the future (20 or 30 years) have larger errors.

We evaluated our methodology by projecting total population for localities for 2000 and 2010 and comparing these projections to census counts. Both projections had error levels that were well below the average error of twelve percent.

What if I need a more detailed analysis for my community?

There are many community factors that might cause future population to change substantially from their past patterns. For example, the completion of a major roadway; the relocation of large, local employers; and the nature of local zoning ordinances all may influence future patterns. Weldon Cooper Center researchers can assist your community in producing projections that account for local planning and development. Please contact Qian Cai, Director of the Demographics & Workforce Group, at qian.cai@virginia.edu or (434) 982-5581 if you are interested in our contract services.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the projections, please contact Qian Cai at (434) 982-5581 or qian.cai@virginia.edu