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Columbus metro area surpasses 2 million mark in population

By [Rick Rouan](#) & [Encarnacion Pyle](#)



Columbus is the 15th-fastest-growing city in the country and the only Midwestern city to show significant growth.

The number of people who call the Columbus metro area home grew to more than 2 million in 2015, a milestone that experts predicted it would achieve last year.

But what exactly does it mean in a region that is expected to add hundreds of thousands of people over the next few decades?

“The number 2,000,000 only means something because it’s a round number,” said Ned Hill, an economics professor at Ohio State University. “It’s a pretty big round number, but it’s a round number.”

The Columbus metro area continued its steady growth as its population hit 2,021,632 in 2015, up about 1.2 percent from 1,997,308 a year earlier, according to estimates released on Thursday by the Census Bureau.

Columbus remains the state’s third-largest metropolitan area, but it could be climbing the list. Cleveland’s population dropped slightly to 2,060,810; Cincinnati’s ticked up to 2,157,719.

“The Columbus region is responsible for the state’s growth,” said Steve Schoeny, Columbus’ economic-development director. “It’s a key indicator of how desirable the region is.”

The steady growth is a testament to the city’s economic prosperity, he said. The city’s corporate base and higher-education system draw people to Columbus, he said. The city of Columbus is 15th largest in the country; the metro area is 32nd.

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission’s insight2050 report, released last year, predicted that the region — Franklin County plus the six surrounding counties — would add 500,000 people by 2050 as more people migrate to central Ohio.

“How you grow matters. What insight2050 really showed us is population growth can be added to the region in a way that improves our quality of life and improves our environments,” said William Murdock, MORPC’s executive director.

The region has to be prepared for the growth, with a stock of available housing and a transportation network that can handle hundreds of thousands of additional commuters, he said.

Though not unexpected, the growth is "really quite exciting," said Lynnette Cook, executive director of Community Research Partners, a data-gathering nonprofit group that examines community conditions, resources and needs.

Cook suspects that some of the growth might be driven by an increase in the number of young professionals lured to the area. Attracting more people to Columbus also could jump-start small-business development, something local leaders have dreamed about for some time, she said.

In Delaware County, which has been among the fastest-growing counties in the nation over the past 30 years, population increased nearly 2 percent, from 189,237 in 2014 to 193,013 in 2015.

Although Franklin County isn't growing as quickly, it saw a 1.4 percent bump, to 1.25 million people. Cuyahoga County, meanwhile, dropped 0.4 percent to just over 1.25 million people.

"The difference between Franklin and Cuyahoga is, to me, the difference between a future of growth and a future of struggle," Cook said.

Unlike the rest of the nation, where most of the growth is in the suburbs, and despite Delaware County's fast growth, Franklin County continues to grow more quickly than the surrounding suburban counties combined, said Doug Kridler, president and CEO of the Columbus Foundation. And as local leaders would hope, the county saw increases in births, as well as in the number of people moving to the area, he said.

Central Ohio’s growth will depend on improving economic conditions in other parts of the state, Kenneth Wilson, county administrator, said in a statement. “Shared prosperity is in the interest of everybody in the state,” he said. “There’s a shared destiny that’s tied by more than I-71.”