Population and Demographics

Northern Alberta

Northern Alberta

Fort McMurray

Grande Prairie

Cold Lake

Edmonton

Overview

The northern Alberta region (the region) was home to 374,572 people in 2022, a moderate increase from five years ago and a slight increase from 2021.[1] The natural increase (births minus deaths) has been outweighed by the net loss in people leaving the region for other parts of Alberta or other provinces. The region is relatively young compared to the rest of Alberta, but like Alberta, is getting older on average. The region is becoming increasingly diverse with an increase in the share of visible minorities.

The northern region

This report uses the Northern Alberta Development Council definition of Northern Alberta, which encompasses 60% of Alberta's total area. For a listing of municipalities included in the region and additional statistics, please see the [Alberta Regional Dashboard](#).
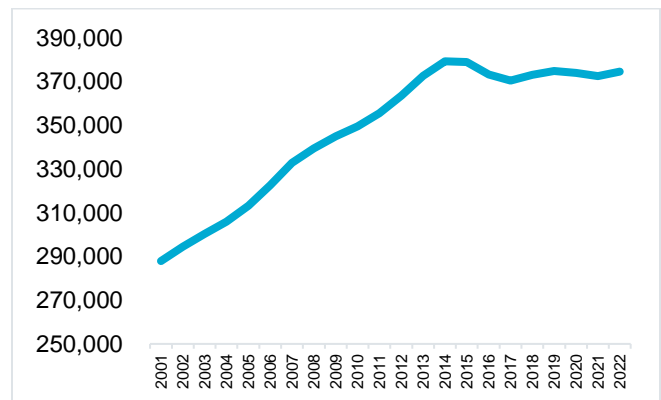
Population

In 2022, the region's population was 374,572, up 0.6% (2,098 people) from 2021 and down from a peak of 379,200 people in 2014. The region's population growth was significantly impacted by the economic impact of low oil prices in 2015, seeing negative growth in that year for the first time in at least two decades. Additionally, the Fort McMurray wildfire in May 2016 and the 2011 Slave Lake wildfire had a large impact on the respective communities, destroying many homes and buildings and an estimated $10 billion in damages.

The region experienced growth in 2018 and 2019; however, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trend, as population growth turned negative in 2020 and 2021, before improving in 2022. The region's share of Alberta's population has been slowly declining, from 9.4% in 2001 to 8.2% in 2022.

CHART 1: NORTHERN ALBERTA POPULATION

Source: Alberta Treasury Board and Finance, Alberta Jobs Economy and Northern Development

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[1] Population and migration figures are based on census year (i.e., July 1st – June 30th)

Municipalities

TABLE 1: TOP 10 MUNICIPALITIES IN NORTHERN ALBERTA

Geographic area	Population 2022	Growth Rate 2017-22
Alberta	4,543,111	**7%**
Northern Region	374,572	**1%**
Wood Buffalo (Specialized Municipality)	74,532	**4%**
Grande Prairie (City)	67,669	**4%**
Grande Prairie Count No. 1 (MD)	25,928	**11%**
Cold Lake (City)	15,546	**1%**
Bonnyville No. 87 (MD)	13,085	0%
Mackenzie County (MD)	13,204	**12%**
Whitecourt (Town)	9,586	**-7%**
Lac la Biche County (Specialized Municipality)	8,187	**-3%**
Athabasca County (MD)	7,663	**-4%**
Peace River (Town)	6,662	**-3%**

Source: Statistics Canada, Alberta Jobs, Economy and Northern Development

Most municipalities in the region have had lower five-year growth rates than the Alberta average, though of more populous municipalities, Grande Prairie County No. 1 and Mackenzie County are notable exceptions.
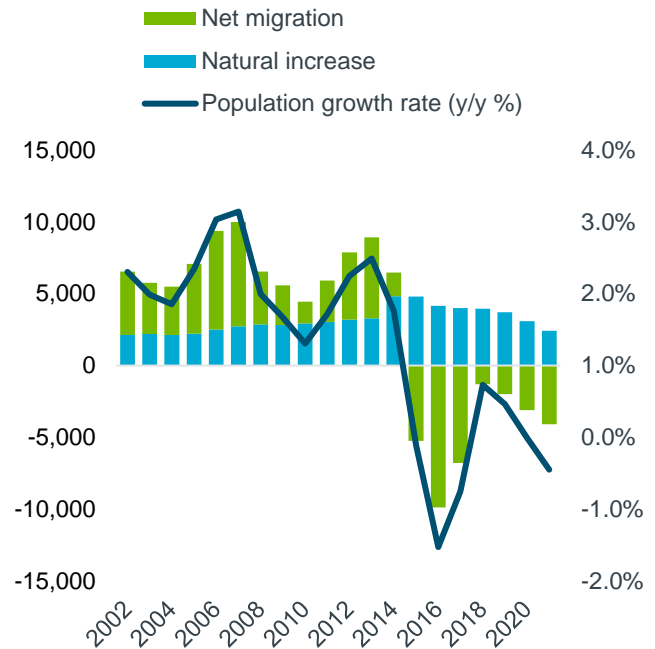
Population density

At 0.9 people per square kilometer, the region has a far lower population density than the rest of Alberta at 6.9 people per square kilometer. The region accounts for 60.3% of Alberta's land mass and only 8.2% of its population.

Components of population change

A change in population is comprised of (1) the natural increase (i.e., births minus deaths) and (2) net migration (i.e., in-migration minus out-migration). In 2021, the loss of 1,700 residents from 2020 in the region resulted from a loss of 4,100 people from net outmigration and a slight natural increase of 2,400.

CHART 2: NORTHERN ALBERTA COMPONENTS OF POPULATION CHANGE

Source: Statistics Canada, Alberta Jobs, Economy, and Northern Development

Natural increase

The region's natural increase has been trending downward in recent years. During 2001-2013, the natural increase gradually rose each year, peaking in 2014 and 2015 to 4,800, before declining steadily to 2,400 in 2021.

Migration

The number of immigrants moving into the region has been declining steadily, from 3,490 in 2015 to 1,985 in 2022. The region's share of permanent residents moving to Alberta was 4.6% in 2022, down from 7.4% in 2015. The lower admission of immigrants during 2020-2022 is partly the result of COVID-19 restrictions on travelling.

More detailed data on the migration components of population change in the region are not available; however, they are available for select Census Agglomeration Areas (CA) within the region.[i] The chart below shows that people have been moving out of the Cold Lake, Wood Buffalo, and Grande Prairie CAs.

CHART 4: AGE PYRAMID – NADC REGION VS ALBERTA
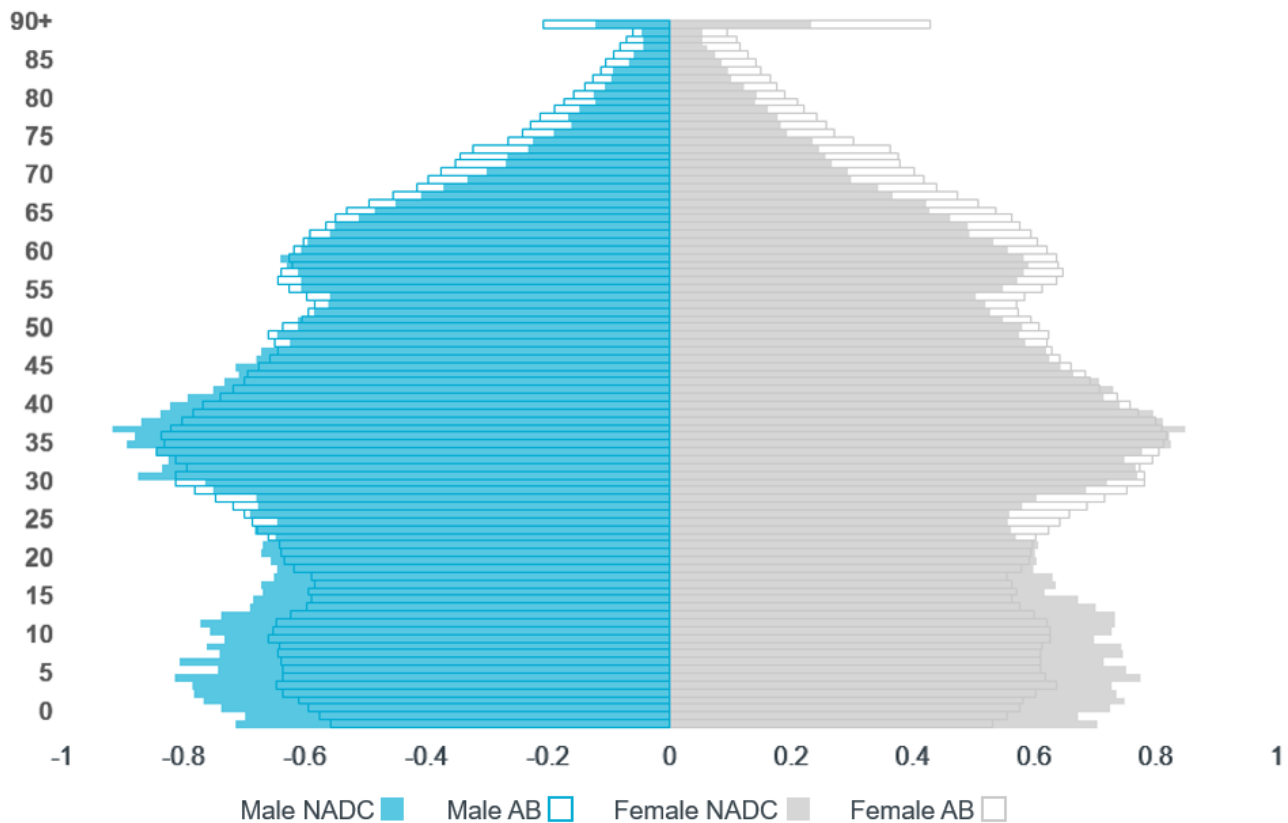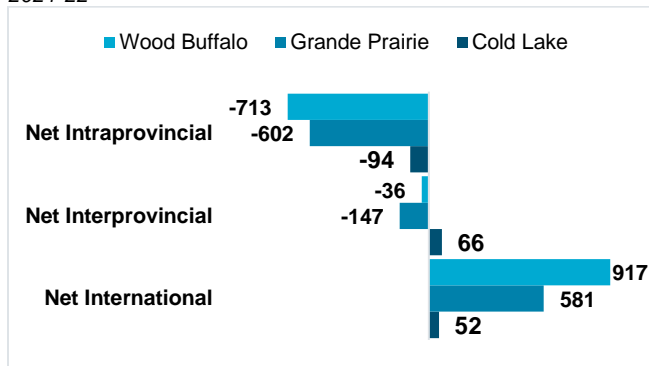*2022*

Male NADC ▪ Male AB ☐ Female NADC ▪ Female AB ☐

CHART 3: NET MIGRATION BY CA
2021-22

■ Wood Buffalo ■ Grande Prairie ■ Cold Lake

Net Intraprovincial: -713, -602, -94
Net Interprovincial: -36, -147, 66
Net International: 917, 581, 52

Source: Statistics Canada, Alberta Jobs, Economy, and Northern Development.

Population loss for these CAs is mainly driven by people leaving the region for other Canadian provinces and other areas of Alberta (net interprovincial and net intra-provincial migrants).

Over the past 5 years, these three CAs have seen a net 2,600 people leave for other parts of Canada and a net 7,200 people leave for other parts of the province. Note that this accounts for new people moving into the region. People leaving the Wood Buffalo and Grande Prairie CAs were more likely to leave for other parts of the province than the Cold Lake CA.

Indigenous population

The Indigenous population in the region has grown from 65,200 in 2016 to 68,400 in 2021, an increase of 5.7%. In 2021, Indigenous people made up 18.3% of the region's population compared to 6.4% province-wide.

Visible minorities

The region is becoming increasingly diverse. Visible minorities[ii] accounted for 12.1% of the region's population in 2021, up 1.6 percentage points from 2016. Approximately one out of five people in Wood Buffalo, Cold Lake and Grande Prairie was a visible minority in 2021. The Philippines, as a top origin country, accounted for

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approximately one-third the total visible minority population. In the past five years, Wood Buffalo, ranked as a top destination in the region, attracting 5,825 immigrants, followed by Grande Prairie with 3,110 immigrants.

Francophone population

The region has many Francophone communities. In 2021, 0.9% of people in the region primarily spoke French at home, compared to 0.5% people across Alberta. Additionally, 2.7%, or 9,770 people, list French as their mother tongue, compared with 1.5% for all of Alberta.

Age

The region is young, but aging. In 2022, its median age was 35 years, compared to 38 years for all of Alberta. The median age of females in the region increased from 30 in 2001 to 35 in 2022, while males' median age increased from 31 to 35.

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[i] Statistics Canada defines Census Agglomeration Areas as a collection of municipalities that include a population centre (a core) of between 10,000 and 50,000 people and one or more adjacent municipalities.

The workforce-aged population (15-64) accounted for approximately two-thirds of the region's population. One out of ten people in the region is a senior (65 and over), while one out of five are children (0-14).

Compared to Alberta as a whole, the region has a younger population. There is a relatively higher population of children and teenagers in the region, with a slightly higher working-age population (particularly males), though fewer seniors.

Dependency ratio

The dependency ratio measures the number of dependents aged 0 to 14 and over 65, compared with the working-age population, from 15 to 64, who most often provide support. At 49%, the region's dependency ratio equals Alberta's, with both ratios increasing over the years. However, the region's youth ratio (ages 0-14) is higher (33% vs. 27% for Alberta), while its elderly ratio (ages 65+) is lower (16% vs. 22% for Alberta), reflecting its different demographic characteristics.

[ii] Statistics Canada defines visible minorities as people who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour and who do not report being Indigenous.