

## Chapter 1

# A Look at Sonoma County

Located about 50 miles north of San Francisco, Sonoma County encompasses over one million acres of land and water. In addition to its 9 incorporated cities, the county has a large rural area, with about 65% of its acreage set aside for agricultural or open space purposes. Sonoma County is renowned for its scenic beauty, with redwood forests, rolling hills and valleys, more than 200 parks, and 64 miles of rugged cliffs and sandy coastal beaches on the Pacific Ocean. The climate is mild throughout the year, with cooler coastal areas and mild-to-warm days inland.

This chapter provides an overview of demographic factors – population, race/ethnicity, education and socioeconomic status – and highlights current trends and predictions for Sonoma County’s future. These demographic factors have important implications for disease patterns, demand for health services, risk factors and health behaviors.

Highlights of this chapter include:

- ◆ The Hispanic population is expected to be the fastest-growing ethnic group in Sonoma County, increasing by 73% from 2000 to 2020.
- ◆ Sonoma County was the 5th least affordable area among 192 nationwide locations surveyed during the last quarter of 1999.
- ◆ In 2004, an estimated 13% of Sonoma County residents could afford to buy a median-priced home.



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**Table 1.1**  
**Sonoma County Population by City, 2000 and 2004**

	2000	2004	% change
Santa Rosa	147,595	154,400	4.6%
Petaluma	54,548	55,900	2.3%
Rohnert Park	42,236	42,150	-0.2%
Windsor	22,744	24,800	9.0%
Healdsburg	10,722	11,600	8.2%
Sonoma	9,128	9,675	6.0%
Sebastopol	7,774	7,750	-0.3%
Cloverdale	6,831	7,925	16.0%
Cotati	6,471	7,025	8.6%
Unincorporated Area	150,565	151,600	0.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>458,614</b>	<b>472,700</b>	<b>3.1%</b>

Source: California Department of Finance, population estimates May 2004.

## Population

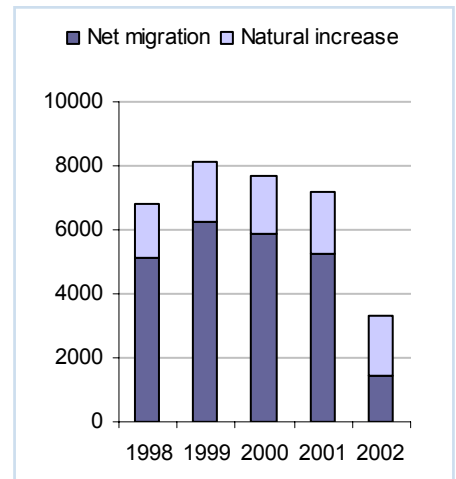
In 2004, Sonoma County had the 17th largest county population of the 58 counties in California.<sup>1</sup> Its largest city and the county seat, Santa Rosa, is located near the center of the county and ranks 30th largest in the state.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Cloverdale was ranked the 20th fastest growing city in the state during the 2003-2004 period.<sup>3</sup>

Sonoma County has a population rapidly approaching one-half million residents (Table 1.1).<sup>4</sup> County officials are challenged to address issues related to both urban areas, such as traffic congestion or personal safety concerns, and rural areas, such as access to health services or pesticide use in agricultural settings.

The population of Sonoma County has seen consistent growth in the last decade. Three factors make up the components of this population change: the number of births, the number of deaths, and the total change in population from the previous year. These numbers are used to determine the natural increase and the net migration of a particular area. Natural increase is the difference between the number of births and the number of deaths. Net migration is the total change in population, minus the natural increase.<sup>5</sup>

From 1998 to 2001, approximately 75% of the total population change in Sonoma County was due to net migration and 25% to natural increase. In 2002, total population change decreased by more than half from the previous year. This was

**Figure 1.1**  
**Components of Population Change, Sonoma County 1998-2002**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder Page.

due primarily to a sharp decrease in net migration—fewer people moving into the county or more people leaving the county (Figure 1.1).

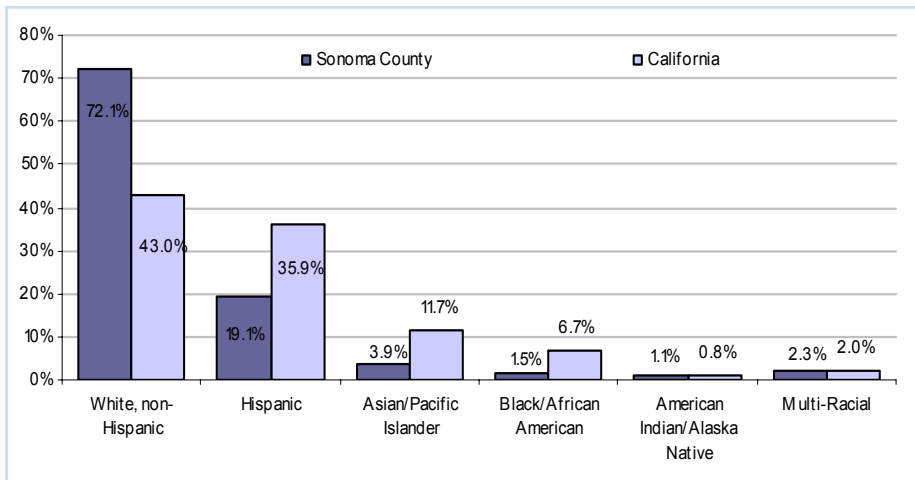
In general, Sonoma County residents are older than residents of California as a whole (median age 38.4 years compared to 35.4 years).<sup>6</sup>

In the next 50 years, the fastest growing age group in Sonoma County is projected to be age 65-84, growing from 50,040 in 2000 to 127,256 in 2050, an increase of 154%.<sup>7</sup>

People age 85+ will be the second fastest growing population group in the county, growing from 8,686 in 2000 to 21,030 in 2050, an increase of 140%. California will see similar increases with the 65-84 age group projected to increase by 61%,



**Figure 1.2**  
Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity, Sonoma County and California 2005



Source: California Department of Finance, population estimates May 2004.

and the 85+ age group expected to increase by 123% from 2000 to 2050.<sup>8</sup>

Although its racial/ethnic composition is changing, Sonoma County is still substantially less diverse than the state as a whole (Figure 1.2). The county's racial/ethnic composition is expected to remain predominantly white (53% of the population) through 2050, the last year for which population projections have been calculated. In contrast, as of the year 2000 California no longer has a predominant racial/ethnic group.<sup>9</sup>

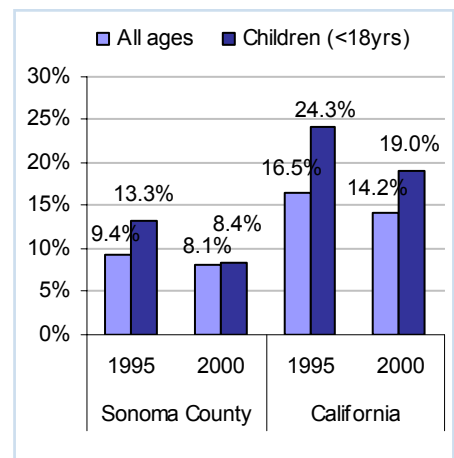
The number of Hispanics in the county increased by 15% from 2000 to 2005. The Hispanic population is expected to be the fastest-growing ethnic group in Sonoma County, projected to increase by 300%, from 80,742 in 2000 to 250,692 in 2050.<sup>10</sup>

### Socioeconomic Factors

Sonoma County is one of the wealthiest counties in California with a higher median household income in 1999 (\$53,076) than for the state overall (\$47,493). However in 2001, one in five (21.7%) White, non-Hispanic households and almost half (48.7%) of Hispanic households in Sonoma County had annual incomes less than \$30,000.<sup>11</sup>

While Sonoma County residents were significantly less likely to have incomes at or below the Federal Poverty Level (typically used to determine economic well-being) than Californian residents (Figure 1.3), a 2005 study by the California Budget Project stated that the Federal Poverty Level, as a national standard, does not reflect a region's high cost of living.<sup>12</sup> For example, the estimated minimum cost to "make ends meet" for a family liv-

**Figure 1.3**  
Percent at or below Federal Poverty Level\*, Sonoma County and California 1995 and 2000



\*The Federal Poverty Level is determined by a set of income thresholds that vary by family size and composition. In 2004 a family of four was considered to be in poverty if their income was less than \$19,157.

Source: United States Census Bureau, American Factfinder 2000.

ing in Sonoma County (two working parents and two children) was \$70,708, compared to \$63,921 state-wide.<sup>13</sup> This is 3.5 times higher than the Federal Poverty Level for a family of four.

### Employment

When the state of California recovered from a recession in the early 1990s, the unemployment rate in Sonoma County fell to 2.6% in 2000. From 2001 to 2003, however, unemployment rates steadily increased. Sonoma County unemployment rates remain consistently lower than California rates (Figure 1.4).<sup>14</sup>

In 2002, trade, transportation and utilities industries made up the largest employment sector in the county, with government (federal, state and local) the second largest sector (Table 1.2). The majority (63%) of Sonoma County employees worked for firms with less than 99 employees (Figure 1.5).<sup>15</sup>

The County of Sonoma Economic Development Board predicts that from 2001 to 2008, employment will climb in Sonoma County from 189,700 jobs to 219,400 jobs, an increase of 15.7%. Over three-fourths of these jobs are expected to be in services, government and retail trade.<sup>16</sup>

## Housing

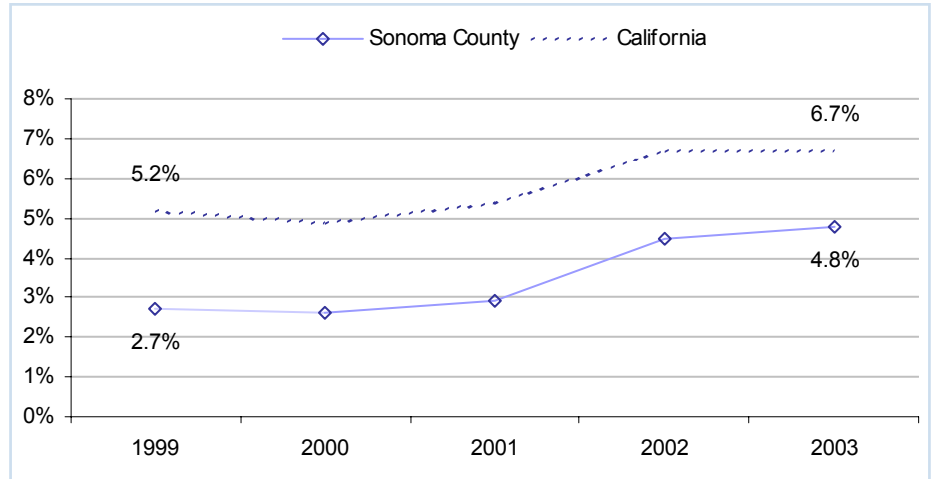
The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines affordable housing as housing where renters pay 30% or less of their income on rent.

Low availability of affordable housing may lead to crowded living conditions, health and safety risks, and limited money for food and medical care.<sup>17</sup>

Sonoma County ranks as one of the least affordable communities in the nation. For example, almost 50% of the county's renters pay more than 30% of their income on housing.<sup>18</sup>

Rent prices were higher than any other county in northern California in 2003. Average rent for an apart-

**Figure 1.4**  
Unemployment Rates by Year, Sonoma County and California 1999-2003



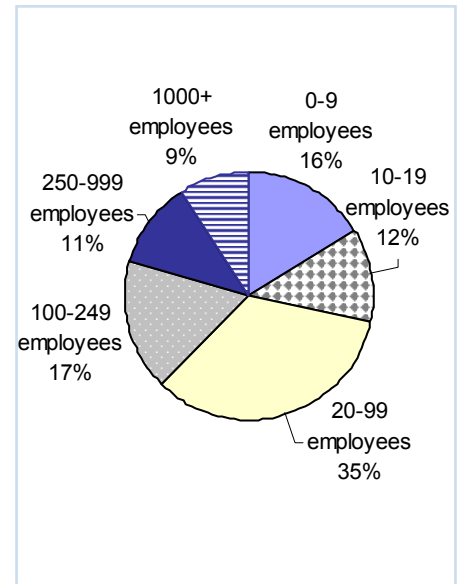
Source: California County Department of Finance, 1999-2003.

**Table 1.2**  
Sonoma County Employment by Industry, 2002

Industry	Percentage
Trade, transportation and utilities	19%
Government	15%
Manufacturing	14%
Education & health services	12%
Leisure/hospitality	10%
Professional/business services	10%
Construction	7%
Financial activities	7%
Agriculture	3%
Other services	3%
Natural resources/mining	<1%

Source: State of California Labor Market Information, county snapshots 2002.

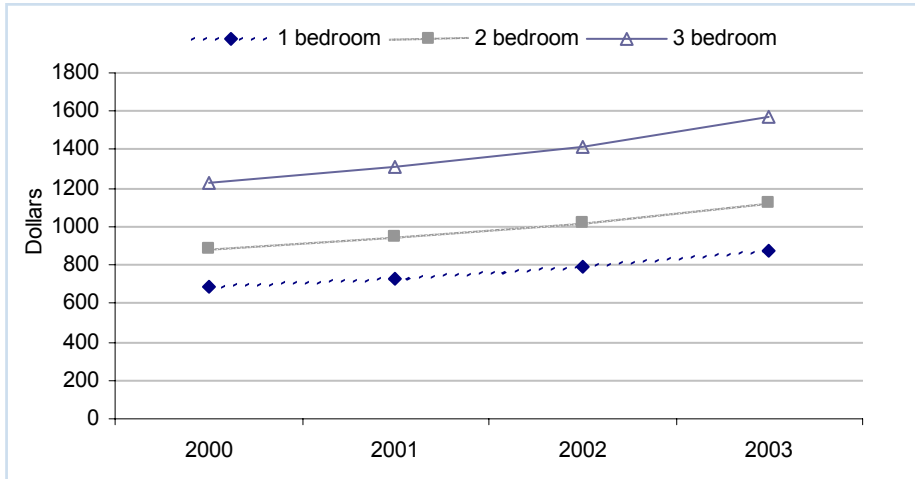
**Figure 1.5**  
Employment by Size of Firm, Sonoma County 2002



Source: State of California Labor Market Information, county snapshots 2002.



**Figure 1.6**  
Fair Market Rent by Size of Housing Unit, Sonoma County 2000-2003



Source: Sonoma County Community Development Commission, 2003.

ment (one bedroom, one bath) grew from \$739 in March 1999 to \$897 in October 2003, an increase of 21.3% (Figure 1.6).<sup>19</sup>

A report published in September 2002 by the National Low Income Housing Coalition in Washington, D.C., identified Sonoma County as the 10th least affordable area for renters in the nation.<sup>20</sup>

In July 2004, the median home price in Sonoma County was \$465,000, a 21.4% increase from the previous year.<sup>21</sup>

According to a report of the California Association of Realtors (June 2004) the percentage of California households that could afford to purchase a median-priced home (the affordability index) fell to its lowest level since November 1989. According to this index only 13% of Sonoma County residents could

afford to buy a median-priced home, compared to 18% of Californians and 52% of Americans.<sup>22</sup>

A 2005 report by the Sonoma County Task Force for the Homeless estimated the number of homeless individuals living in Sonoma County to be 2,232, approximately 21% of whom were children age 0-18. Thirty-four percent of these individuals had been homeless for less than one year and 31% were chronically homeless (homeless for at least one year, or four times in the last three years).<sup>23</sup>

### Child Care

In 2003, almost 40% of Sonoma County children age 0-11 were in regular child care. During this time about 8% of Sonoma County families had a problem finding child care for one week or longer.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 1.3**  
Sonoma County School Enrollment, 1998-1999 and 2003-2004

	1998-1999	2003-2004
Total enrollment in Sonoma County schools (K-12)	71,000	72,964
Percent of high school students who graduated, Sonoma County	87.1%	90%
Percent of high school students who graduated, State of California	88%	87%
Lowest graduation rate	82%	77%
Highest graduation rate	92%	100%

Source: California Department of Education, 2003-2004.

According to a 2003 report from the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, the lack of affordable housing in Sonoma County has created a supply gap. These gaps are most visible in areas with low-income and Spanish-speaking families where need for subsidized child care far outweighs available funds. Other areas where supply gaps exist are: care for infants, toddlers and children with special needs, and care during evening and weekend hours.<sup>25</sup>

### Education

Approximately 72,964 students (K-12) were enrolled in Sonoma County public schools in 2002-2003 (Table 1.3). This number is projected to remain stable over the next

10 years.<sup>26</sup>

For 2003-2004 school year, 9,365 students were enrolled in special education in Sonoma County.<sup>27</sup>

In general, Sonoma County's results on the 2004 California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) test show overall test scores remained stable compared to the previous year. In English-language arts, an average of 43% of students performed at advanced or proficient levels, which is about 7.5% higher than the state overall. In mathematics, an average of 44% of students performed at these levels, about 3% higher than the state.<sup>28</sup>

The California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) results for Sonoma County were higher than the statewide results. In the English-language portion of the test, 83% of Sonoma County students passed, compared to 75% statewide, and 81% of students passed the mathematics portion of the test, compared to 74% statewide.<sup>29</sup>

For the 2003-2004 school year, the overall high school drop out rate for Sonoma County was lower than the California rate (Table 1.4). Additionally, drop out rates for both African American and Asian/Pacific Islander students were lower in Sonoma County than in California.<sup>30</sup>

The 2000 census indicates that 84.9% of all Sonoma County residents have a high school diploma

**Table 1.4**  
**High School Drop Out Rates\*, Sonoma County and California 2003-2004**

	Sonoma	CA
White	2.0%	1.9%
Hispanic	4.4%	4.3%
African American	2.5%	5.7%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.3%	6.2%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	4.1%	4.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>

\*One year average rate.  
Source: California Department of Education, 2003-2004.

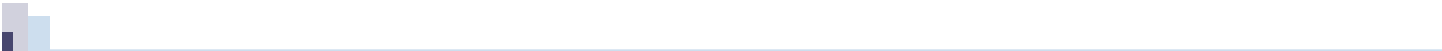
or better, and 28.5% have a bachelors degree or higher. These rates exceed both California (76.8% and 26.6%, respectively) and national rates (80.4% and 24.4%, respectively).<sup>31</sup>



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## Chapter 1 References

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