

Appendix E: County Demographics & Evacuation Planning

Age/Distribution: In Colorado, the median age was approximately 38.5 years of age. In Custer County, the average age is **58.6 years (as of 2023-2024 est. data)**

Key Median Age Data Points for Custer County, CO

- 2023/2024: ~58.6 years (ACS estimates)
- 2020 Census: 58.3 years
- 2019 Estimate: 59.7 years (Census Tract 9701)

The people who are residents aged 65 and older, is the fastest-growing age group, increasing by 87% between 2010 and 2022. As of the 2020 census, 33.8% of residents were 65 years of age or older. Current ACS 2023 estimates are that the population could be 47% of the population age 60 and above.

Population: The data suggests that Custer County is one of the counties in Colorado with the oldest population.

The 2020 Census lists 4,074 people in Custer County. The estimated population in 2024 (Census ACS est) was over 5,000 (5,073) people. The population has been growing, increasing by over 24% between 2010 and 2022.

Race/Ethnicity: The population is predominantly White (Non-Hispanic), making up about 93.1% in 2023 estimates.

Housing: A significant portion of housing units are owner-occupied (82.4% in 2020), **but nearly half (46.9%) were vacant, suggesting many are seasonal or second homes.**

Poverty: The poverty level indicates in the ACS 2023 estimates, that there are 500 people over age 60 that were living in poverty in

the last 12 months.

Disability: The number of people who have a disability at or over age 65 in the ACS 2023 estimates, that there are 232 people that reported they had a disability.

Evacuation Planning for Rural, Dispersed, Wildfire-Prone Mountain Towns

1. Map Structures by *Driveway Access*, Not Just Address

Dispersed homes often have:

- long private driveways
- unmarked or shared access
- locked gates
- vegetation close to the driveway

In wildfire conditions, responders need **driveway-level mapping** showing:

- structure location
- driveway length/width
- turnarounds for engines
- gates/bridges/culverts load limits

- occupancy probability (seasonal/long-term/unknown)

Use GIS layers + fire district field verification.

2. Use a “Vacant-Home Profile” to Prioritize Checking

Because nearly half may be unoccupied:

- Cross-reference utility data (power/water), mail holds, rental calendars, and caretaker lists.
- Tag structures as:
 - **Likely vacant**
 - **Likely occupied**
 - **Short-term rental (occupancy varies daily)**
- Direct limited resources first to *likely occupied or unknown* houses, especially those with only one egress path.

3. Establish Neighborhood Refuge/Protection Areas

Rural roads can become cut off by fire, fallen trees, or traffic jams. Create:

- small, defensible **neighborhood refuge areas** (ballfields, gravel pits, wide turnouts, community centers)

- clearly signed routes
- protocols for when residents must shelter in place because **evacuation is unsafe**

These are not full “fire shelters,” but they buy time for crews to clear roads or protect a pocket.

4. Strengthen Notification in Low-Cell Coverage Zones

Mountain towns often have patchy cellular service. Use **multiple overlapping systems**:

- Sirens or air-raid–style “hi-lo” tones from patrol vehicles
- Stationed runners or door-to-door teams assigned per zone
- Satellite-based alert texts (if available locally)
- NOAA radios with local programming
- Community radio networks or ham operators

Encourage residents and short-term renters to **opt into county alert systems** during the time they’re in town.