

Research Note: Hutterite Population and Colonies, 2024, with a 15-Year Comparison of Colony Numbers

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Abstract: Hutterites are a communitarian Anabaptist group whose members live in collective, usually agriculturally based, “colonies” in the western United States and Canada. A 2024 Hutterite-published directory provides information for all 544 colonies then in existence and shows a total population of 58,392. The colony and population data are presented here both geographically and in terms of Hutterite affiliations. Using data on the number of colonies in 2009, a 15-year comparison reveals a 12.6% growth in colonies during that time, with variation among the affiliations. Declining Hutterite birthrates are among the factors that explain the lower rates of growth than found among some other Plain Anabaptist groups.

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The Hutterites are a communitarian Anabaptist group whose members eschew personal private property and live in collective, usually agriculturally based, “colonies” whose members share the means of production and contribute to colony life without receiving individual wages. Members dress in distinctive garb, speak a “Hutterisch” dialect of German (all are bilingual English speakers, as well), and are endogamous. Each colony is a single congregation, adhering to the Hutterite confession of faith (Riedemann, 2019) that includes Anabaptist distinctives, such as adult baptism and pacifist nonresistance, as well as “community of goods” in imitation of the early church in Acts 2:43–47. Unlike Plain Anabaptists known for limiting use of modern technology, the Hutterites are “technologically proficient” (Janzen & Stanton, 2010, p. 2) and often own highly advanced equipment in their farming and manufacturing pursuits. The collective ownership of technology is the key technological boundary the Hutterites observe.

Hutterites trace their origins to 1528 in Moravia. They moved eastward over the centuries and by the 1800s were located within the Russian Empire in what is now Ukraine. Imperial efforts at the “Russification” of minorities prompted the Hutterites to emigrate, and they moved to the United States in 1874–1877. Some 475 Hutterites reestablished communal living in three locations in southeastern South Dakota. Due to intense anti-German hostility from neighbors in South Dakota during World War I, many Hutterites migrated to Canada.

The three original colonies in South Dakota, formed in the 1870s, became the forerunners of three Hutterite branches (or *Leut*, meaning “people”): Schmiedeleut, Dariusleut, and Lehrerleut. Initially, the social identities of the three colonies were rather fluid, but “as time passed, each group



developed its own style of dress, decision-making, and organizational structure” (Janzen & Stanton, 2010, p. 42). In 1992, the Schmiedeleut experienced a division, and the two resulting groups have become known as Schmiedeleut I and II. The Lehrerleut are typically regarded as the most conservative Leut affiliation and “maintain the highest level of communal identity [and] have the tightest organizational structure” (Janzen & Stanton, 2010, p. 54). The Dariusleut are the most heterogeneous; their colonies enjoy considerable autonomy, leading to differences from one colony to another in things like dress, media access, and approach to education. The Schmiedeleut have a reputation for being the most progressive tradition, signaled by a greater openness to routine interaction with non-Hutterites and some allowance for higher education, within parameters, for members training to be teachers for Schmiedeleut colony schools. For idiosyncratic reasons, a small number of colonies have become unaffiliated with any group and are described as independent.

The *Hutterite Telephone and Address Directory, 2024*, lists all colonies and their populations on pp. 37–200. That data is summarized in Table 1. Janzen and Stanton (2010, pp. 74, 307–319) provided numbers of colonies in 2009. For consistency, colonies-in-information were excluded from the 2024 totals, as they were in the 2009 data. The data on colony numbers and Leut affiliation from these two sources are compared below.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, in 2024, there were 58,392 Hutterites in 544 colonies in North America. Some 391 of those colonies (71.9%) were located in Canada and were home to 41,821 (71.6%) of the group’s overall population. The Schmiedeleut constitute a majority (58.7%) of Hutterites in the United States. No group is a majority in Canada; a plurality are Dariusleut (38.2%). The 2024 colony and population figures reveal persistent patterns of concentration in four western Canadian provinces and seven northern plains and northwestern U.S. states (plus a small independent colony in Gallatin, Missouri).

The Schmiedeleut, which was the largest group in 2024 with more than 22,000 adults and children, remain the local face of the Hutterites in the group’s historic center of settlement in South Dakota, as well as in Manitoba. All Hutterites in those two places are Schmiedeleut (with the exception of two independent colonies in Manitoba). The Dariasleut are dominant in Alberta. While the Lehrerleut have their largest numbers in Alberta, they are also the largest affiliation in Montana.

Table 1*Number of Hutterite Colonies, 2024*

	Canada					United States							North America	
	AB	BC	MB	SK	Total	MN	MO	MT	ND	OR	SD	WA	Total	Total
Dariusleut	120	2		35	157			15	1	1		5	22	179
Lehrerleut	76			40	116			46					46	162
Schmiedeleut			113		113	7			8		67		82	195
Group 1			54		54	3			1		6		10	64
Group 2			59		59	4			7		61		72	131
Independent		1	2	2	5	2	1						3	8
Total	196	3	115	77	391	9	1	61	9	1	67	5	153	544

Note. Colonies outside North American are not included. Schmiedeleut Group 1 has a colony in Utu-Abak, Nigeria, and there is an independent colony in Paraguay (recently relocated from Australia). Beginning in 1971, a small communal group in Owa, Japan, was affiliated with the Dariusleut; it disbanded in 2019. Source of data: *Hutterite Telephone and Address Directory* (2024).

Table 2*Hutterite Populations, 2024*

	Canada					United States							North America	
	AB	BC	MB	SK	Total	MN	MO	MT	ND	OR	SD	WA	Total	Total
Dariusleut	12,093	258		3,609	15,960			738	23	77		648	1,486	17,446
Lehrerleut	8,906			4,045	12,951			4,968					4,968	17,919
Schmiedeleut			12,616		12,616	750			1,026		7,955		9,731	22,347
Group 1			5,864		5,864	210			43		692		945	6,809
Group 2			6,752		6,752	540			983		7,263		8,786	15,538
Independent		36	39	219	294	308	78						386	680
Total	20,999	294	12,655	7,873	41,821	1,058	78	5,706	1,049	77	7,955	648	16,571	58,392

Note. Source of data: *Hutterite Telephone and Address Directory* (2024)

Hutterite colonies have historically been home to 75 to 150 people (adults and children) each. Table 3 shows the average number of people per colony in each of the major Leut affiliations in 2024, numbers that fall within a range of 97.5 to 114.6.

Table 3

Mean Number of People per Colony, 2024

	<i>M</i>
Dariusleut	97.5
Lehrerleut	110.6
Schmiedeleut	114.6
Group 1	106.4
Group 2	120.4
Independent	85.0

Note. Source of data: *Hutterite Telephone and Address Directory* (2024).

As a colony's population grows, members begin planning to divide, or "branch" a new colony, with approximately half the members of the existing colony moving to a new one. The existing colony will purchase land elsewhere, construct buildings, and plan for the division of moveable assets. The decision of which households will move and which will remain was traditionally made via the casting of lots, as Hutterites believed this method placed the decision in God's hands. Today, the Lehrerleut often still use the lot for colony branching decisions, but among the other Leuts, the decision as to who will move to the new colony is made via discussion and "mutual consent" and through deliberative processes of the church council.

Given the branching patterns of all Hutterite colonies, the number of colonies serves as a proxy for Hutterite population growth, although mean colony populations have risen slightly over the course of the past 50 years, as Hostetler (1974, p. 295) reported an overall mean colony size of 94 people. As shown in Table 4, all Hutterite Leuts are growing, though the rate of growth for the past fifteen years is well below the rates of some other Plain Anabaptist groups, such as the Amish, for whom the increase in the number of church districts—also a proxy for population growth—over a 20-year period approaches 100% (Donnermeyer, 2021).

Table 4

Number of Colonies, 2009 and 2024

	2009	2024	Change	% change
Dariusleut	159	179	20	12.6
Lehrerleut	139	162	23	16.5
Schmiedeleut	179	195	16	8.9
Group 1	61	64	3	4.9
Group 2	118	131	13	11.0
Independent	6	8	2	33.3
Total	483	544	61	12.6

Note. Sources of data: Janzen & Stanton (2010); *Hutterite Telephone and Address Directory* (2024).

The overall number of colonies increased 12.6% over the 15-year period (2009–2024), with variation among the three Leuts, from a high of 16.5% for the Lehrerleut to 8.9% for the Schmiedeleut. The 1992 division among the Schmiedeleut reportedly produced considerable unrest and higher defection in the decade after the schism. This situation may have continued to have a medium-term impact on population and, thus, colony growth into the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

In the mid-twentieth century, Hutterite population studies revealed high birth rates (more than 10 live births per woman) and defection rates as low as 2%, resulting in rapid population growth (Hostetler, 1974, pp. 290–291). However, birth rates began declining in the 1960s and dropped sharply in the last decades of the twentieth century. The number of births per woman was 4.8 in 1990. Janzen and Stanton (2010) credit the slowing Hutterite population growth to “later marriages, fewer children...and higher defection rates” (pp. 235, 240).

Given the increase in the number of Hutterite colonies across all Leut affiliations, one would predict that this growth will continue into the near future and the number of colonies will top 600 by 2040. Indeed, the 2024 *Hutterite Telephone and Address Directory* included news of 39 colonies being planned: 10 Dariusleut, 18 Lehrerleut, and 11 Schmiedeleut. Two of the Schmiedeleut colonies-in-information were expected to be in Saskatchewan, which would be new territory for the Schmiedeleut. In contrast, all the new Dariusleut colonies were planned for Alberta and Saskatchewan, and those among the Lehrerleut in new colonies were planned for Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, all provinces and states where the Dariusleut and Lehrerleut are heavily represented already. It will be interesting to see if or when the Hutterites begin expanding their footprint, establishing colonies in new parts of North America.

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