

Census: Texas remains country's fastest growing state

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FORT WORTH — Even the recession couldn't derail Texas' status as the fastest-growing state, according to U.S. census estimates released Wednesday.

Texas gained 478,000 people between July 1, 2008, and July 1, 2009, the Census Bureau said. The next-biggest gainers were California (378,000), North Carolina (134,000), Georgia (131,000) and Florida (114,000).

With 37 million residents, California remains the most populous state. Texas is second with 24.8 million, followed by New York (19.5 million), Florida (18.5 million) and Illinois (12.9 million).

The Lone Star State will likely pass the 25 million mark in the 2010 Census, said Steve Murdock, a Rice University professor and a former director of the U.S. Census.

"This has been a simply phenomenal decade of growth for Texas," he said

The new estimates didn't surprise state demographer Karl Eschbach, but the continued rapid inflow did catch his attention.

"What may be surprising is that domestic and international migration is basically estimated at the same levels as the last several years, even in spite of the recession," Eschbach said. And that growth rate is only rivaled by the heady days of the oil boom in the 1970s, he said.

Across the country, the faltering economy has put the brakes on migration, said census demographer Greg Harper, who said it was particularly noteworthy that Texas gained 143,000 people from other states.

"It's a huge gap between Texas and any other state in domestic migration," said Harper, who noted that the next-closest was North Carolina with a little over 59,000. "Most states have seen dramatic decreases," he said.

Murdock and Eschbach credit the latest influx to the recession's delayed arrival in Texas. The state's unemployment rate has stayed well below the national rate throughout the year, registering 8 percent in November compared with 10 percent for the U.S.

"I think it goes along with Texas' strong economy in the last year compared to the rest of the nation," Murdock said.

Another factor is that the national housing meltdown didn't hit Texas as hard, Eschbach said. While home values ballooned in other states earlier in the decade, homes remained affordable in Texas and then generally retained their value as prices collapsed elsewhere.

"In particular, Nevada, Arizona and Florida, which were really fast growers at the beginning of the decade, have completely disappeared as in-migration destinations because they have been among the hardest-hit states in respect to the housing market," Eschbach said.

"In some sense, there has been no other place to go except Texas," Eschbach said.

Growth in North Carolina and Georgia had been similar to that in Texas in recent years, but the recession hit those states "earlier and deeper," Eschbach said.

"So as you get into 2009, Texas is kind of the only large economy that has been left standing. Even as it entered the recession, the effects were a little more shallow than it was in those two states." Eschbach said.

Those factors and a low cost of living add to the perception that the Texas economy might bounce back first, he said.

"That makes it a more attractive place to go if you don't have a job," Eschbach said. "We've heard anecdotal evidence that people have been moving to Texas without jobs in anticipation that it is a good place to ride out the recession.

"If you lose your job in Michigan, you might look around and say, 'I've got to get out of here.' Here in Texas, if you lose your job you might think I'm glad I lost my job in Texas," he said.

Murdock says he has watched closely as Texas grew from about 14.2 million residents in 1970. Few people then would have predicted the state would multiply to 25 million in 2010, he said.

"Back then, I was told that you need to be prepared because we are not going to continue to have these decades of growth. I think that was right, but it hasn't happened yet. The dramatic growth has continued through the '80s, '90s and now 2009. It's phenomenal."

The latest growth spurt will surely lead to more political clout in Washington.

"If the estimates are correct, I've calculated that Texas would add three congressional seats to its delegations," Eschbach said. And if the growth rate for the first half of 2009 has continued through December, "we'll be in the hunt for that fourth seat."

But Eschbach isn't convinced the spectacular growth will continue.

"I'm not an economic forecaster, but as I look at the data it seems likely that economic recovery elsewhere is going to lead to a downward level of net migration to Texas," he said.

"As the economy rebounds elsewhere, Texans will leave for other opportunities. I just don't think it's likely that we can keep up the pace of the last three years. The pace we've been on is really quite extraordinary," Eschbach said.

But even if there's a slowdown in newcomers, the state's natural rate of increase (births minus deaths) will keep the population growing, Murdock said.

Of the 478,000 people gained last year, 143,000 came from other states and 90,000 migrated from other countries. The rest were born as native Texans, he said.

"With our growing Hispanic population, we have a high rate of natural increase which is a natural driver of growth. So I don't expect Texas to go negative any time in the foreseeable future," Murdock said.

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