

Declining immigration slows Asian, Hispanic growth

WASHINGTON—Deterred by immigration laws and the lackluster economy, the population growth of Hispanics and Asians in the US has slowed unexpectedly, causing the government to push back estimates on when minorities will become the majority by as much as a decade.

Census data released May 14 also showed that fewer Hispanics were migrating to suburbs and newly emerging immigrant areas in the Southeast, including Arkansas, Tennessee and Georgia, staying put instead in traditional gateway locations such as California.

The nation's overall minority population continues to rise steadily, adding 2.3 percent in 2008 to 104.6 million, or 34 percent of the total population. But the slowdown among Hispanics and Asians continues to shift conventional notions on when the tipping point in US diversity will come—estimated to occur more than three decades from now. Black growth rates remain somewhat flat.

Thirty-six states had lower Hispanic growth in 2008 compared with the year before. The declines were in places

where the housing bubble burst, such as Nevada and Arizona, which lost construction jobs that tend to attract immigrants.

Other decreases were seen in new immigrant destinations in the Southeast, previously seen as offering good manufacturing jobs in lower-cost cities compared to the pricier Northeast. In contrast, cities in California, Illinois and New Jersey showed gains.

In Arkansas, manufacturing and poultry companies have cut hours and workers, leaving a growing number of Hispanics unable to cover their mortgage payments, said Maribel Tapia, a housing counselor in Fayetteville, Ark. Fathers are moving out of state, where other relatives have lines on menial jobs that support the families they leave behind, she said. Police in northwest Arkansas created an immigration task force with the help of US immigration agents.

"I don't think it's more likely they're going back to Mexico or El Salvador or wherever they're from," she said. "They're just calling different family members in different states and asking around about work. They just pack up and move."

The political effects can be high. Minorities turned out in record numbers last November to vote, largely for Democrat Barack Obama, and Hispanic groups are now flexing their growing clout in future elections as they push immigration reform.

More than a dozen states also stand to gain or lose House seats after the 2010 census depending on last-minute shifts in population.

"Not just whites are staying put, but minorities are staying put and immigrants are staying put," said Mark Mather, associate vice president of the nonprofit Population Reference Bureau, citing in part a declining economy that has locked the US population largely in place.

The Census Bureau projected last August that white children will become the minority in 2023 and the overall white population will follow in 2042. The agency now says it will recalculate those figures, typically updated every three to four years, because they don't fully take into account anti-immigration policies after the September 2001 terror attacks and the current economic crisis.

The new projections, expected to be

released later this year, could delay the tipping point for minorities by 10 years, given the current low rates of immigration, David Waddington, the Census Bureau's chief of projections, said in a telephone interview.

"Policies changed," he said, in explaining why the scientific estimates were no longer valid.

According to the latest data, the percentage growth of Hispanics slowed from 4.0 percent in 2001 to 3.2 percent last year; their slowed population growth would have been greater if it weren't for their high fertility — nearly 10 births for every death.

Asians also slowed their population increases from 3.7 percent in 2001 to about 2.5 percent. Hispanics and Asians still are the two fastest-growing minority groups, making up about 15 percent and 4.4 percent of the US population, respectively.

Blacks, who comprise about 12.2 percent of the population, have increased at a rate of about 1 percent each year. Whites, with a median age of 41, have increased very little in recent years due to low birth rates and an aging boomer population.

The migration shift could continue for a while, said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, citing the bursting of an unprecedented housing bubble in 2005-2006 that is helping reshape the economy.

"What this means is that the idea of creating new Asian and Hispanic enclaves in different parts of the United States will undergo a bit of a wall," said Frey. "Those staying in these enclaves will be competing for jobs with long-term residents, while others will return to social support systems in major gateways."

Six US counties saw their minority populations become the majority, including Orange County, Fla., the nation's 35th most populous county that is home to Orlando. Webster County in Georgia was majority-minority in 2007 but reverted back to white majority in 2008.

In all, about 309 of the nation's 3,142 counties, or one in 10, have minority populations greater than 50 percent. Other counties that became majority-minority in 2008 were Stanislaus in California; Finney in Kansas; Warren in Mississippi; and Edwards and Schleicher counties in Texas. (AP)

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