Census reveals layers of data

Initial reports find integration, poverty on rise

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Researchers from around the country began studying the 11 billion pieces of data released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau, looking for clues about how the nation is changing.

The early news was mixed.

Residential segregation between whites and African-Americans in the Houston metro area dropped slightly over the past decade, but Hispanics and Asians are more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods.

Other data indicates that poverty and low education levels remain serious problems across Texas, especially along the border.

Researchers said the statistics on neighborhood segregation were surprising given the growing diversity of the population.

"We have seen increasing diversity across the entire United States. Houston is not different in that regard," said Brian Stults, a sociology professor at Florida State University and associate director of the US2010 Census Project. "I think what I would have expected would be a continuing gradual decline in black-white segregation, and in Houston, that's what you're seeing."

But new Hispanic and Asian residents here appear to be moving into neighborhoods with people of a similar background, increasing segregation overall.

Research on that and an almost endless array of other issues detailed in the American Community Survey will continue for the next few years.

"These are very important socioeconomic indicators," Census Bureau director Robert Groves said in announcing the release of the information. But he cautioned that it shouldn't be confused with the 2010 Census.

Gaining Texas clout

The first results from the census, offering updated state population counts, will come out next week and will determine which states gain clout in Congress — Texas is expected to gain three or four members - and which states lose.

The American Community Survey data was gathered between 2005 and 2009, reaching about one in 10 households.

It replaces the long-form census questionnaire, which was dropped after the 2000 Census.

Neighborhood level

Tuesday's release offers information down to the neighborhood level, as well as by larger geographical areas.

Until now, that level of detail was available only once every 10 years, and it quickly became outdated. The American Community Survey will be updated every year.

Bala Balachandran, chief demographer for the city of Houston, said the city will use the data to make decisions about resurfacing city streets, building new parks and other priorities.

Private companies produce estimates of much of the data, but he said that's not the same. "This is more realistic," he said.

But it also has limitations.

"It's useless for my own city of Galveston," said Karl Eschbach, principal investigator for the Center for Population Health and Health Disparities at the University of Texas Medical Branch and a former state demographer.

That's because Hurricane Ike came in the middle of the five-year period.

"Whole housing projects have disappeared, but they'll still be there in the data," he said.

And the five-year data can't show how people have been affected by the recession, because it fell squarely in the middle, Eschbach said.

The bureau released 2009 data for states and larger metropolitan areas earlier this fall, showing household income was down and unemployment was up in Texas and elsewhere, offering proof of what most people already knew.

But Eschbach said the new data will provide information on changing economic conditions, as well as the impact of economic and other factors on health status, he said.

"I think around the country today, a lot of health researchers are updating their files," he said.

It also will be helpful for state policy makers, offering new data for the first time in almost a decade on sparsely populated counties in West Texas, said Lloyd Potter, director of the Texas State Data Center.

The foreign-born

Potter will digest the information over the next few months. But he said he was initially struck by statistics showing high poverty levels and high numbers of foreign-born residents in the state.

About 3.7 million Texans, or 16 percent of the population, were born outside the United States. The figures are even higher in other states: 26.8 percent in California and 21.3 percent in New York.

Almost 17 percent of Texans live below the poverty level, compared with a national average of 13.5 percent. Willacy County, in South Texas, is one of just five U.S. counties where poverty rates top 39 percent; it is the only county on the list that did not include an American Indian reservation.

No Texas counties ranked among those with the highest percentage of high school or college graduates. But four of the five counties where fewer than 60 percent of people 25 and older have completed high school are in Texas: Maverick, Presidio, Starr and Willacy. The fifth is in Ohio.

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