

Census 2010: Bay Area slower-growing, more diverse

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In a volatile decade that began with the dot-com bust and ended with a recession, the Bay Area population grew at its slowest rate since California's statehood, according to 2010 census returns released Tuesday.

The nine-county region reached a population of 7.15 million, growing by 5.4 percent, or about 367,000 people, since the last census, in 2000. Not since the 1930s has the Bay Area, long a magnet for transplants, added so few people in a decade.

"This was a relatively slow-growing decade by California standards," said Hans Johnson, demographer for the Public Policy Institute of California. "Even the places that were growing rapidly were growing less rapidly than they were in the past."

Suburban development in Contra Costa County continued to expand the Bay Area at its eastern edge, but the region's fastest-growing county was an outlier. Oakland, the Bay Area's third biggest city, lost people. Solano County, once a fast-growing destination for new homeowners, slowed to a crawl.

The slowdown was a dramatic change from the booming 1990s, when the Bay Area grew by more than 12 percent.

The U.S. Census Bureau released the highly anticipated statistics Tuesday afternoon, allowing a new state redistricting commission to begin its work to redraw political boundaries. It is too early to tell if the Bay Area's slow growth will mean a loss of political influence in the coming redistricting battle. The bureau in December released the total population of each state, revealing that California -- with 10 percent population growth since 2000 -- will neither gain nor lose a seat in Congress.

Tuesday's data also give Californians a trove of information about how their cities, counties and neighborhoods have changed since the last decennial census. Much of the information confirmed suspected trends. Other data surprised local officials.

On the move

Oakland Mayor Jean Quan wondered if an undercount of immigrants and blacks contributed to her city's reported 2.2 percent population decline.

"The population decline could be partly due to the count, could be all the foreclosures, or it could just be a demographic shift," Quan said. "Older people are moving back to the cities and the younger, family-aged people are moving out."

The state continued its inward shift, with higher growth in the Central Valley and inland parts of Southern California. And it was the outer regions of the East Bay, along with parts of Silicon Valley, that accommodated most of the Bay Area's growth.

The fastest-growing cities in the Bay Area were Brentwood, which continued its two-decade transformation from a farm town to a large Contra Costa suburb, growing by 121 percent, or about 28,179 people; the Napa County city of American Canyon, which grew by 99 percent; and San Ramon, which grew by 61.3 percent.

"Everything has slowed down now, but we had about a five-year run of tremendous growth," Brentwood Mayor Bob Taylor said. "We have a lot of younger families moving in, and they set the tone as far as what they're looking for."

The city has erected new schools, put in larger roads, built a high-end shopping center and established a new water contract in the past decade to meet the needs of its new residents, he said.

"I think we're drawing from the entire county and other adjacent cities because we've pretty much done things right," Taylor said. "The city has learned to adjust to a more diversified population."

Mixing it up

One thing was clear from the figures: California continues a steady march toward becoming a more diverse place, and the East Bay is a leader in that diversity.

California hit a milestone when the 2000 census showed that the white population was no longer a majority. The Bay Area hit that milestone in 2010, according to the figures, with Latinos and Asian-Americans fueling the shift at nearly equal rates. Fremont became an Asian-majority city, San Pablo became a Latino-majority city, and many more cities, from Antioch to Alameda, became places where no group is a majority. In Richmond, for the first time, the Latino population surpassed the black population.

Contra Costa added more than 100,000 people in the past decade, more than any other Bay Area county, and like Alameda County, now lacks an ethnic majority. The Latino population grew by 88,000, while the Asian community added 46,000, according to the figures. The white population declined by about 48,000, while the African-American population rose by around 6,700 -- an exception in a state where the black population is declining overall.

Statewide, the non-Latino white population continues to be the largest ethnic group, but the Latino population is on the road to surpassing it if the demographic trends continue. The 2010

figures show the statewide population is now 40.1 percent white, 37.6 percent Latino, 12.8 percent Asian and 5.8 percent African-American.

The white and black populations are "clearly not keeping pace with the 10 percent growth overall, and Hispanics and Asians really are filling in the void," said John Logan, director of the U.S. 2010 Census Project and a sociology professor at Brown University.

He said Latinos and Asian-Americans, however, are also part of the statewide population slowdown.

"The growth rate of both Hispanics and Asians, while quite high, is still considerably less than it was in the 1990s. It's starting to slow down," Logan said. "My guess is that means more Hispanics and Asians are moving out of California and are being replaced by new immigrants, but not to the same extent it was occurring before."

In other states, both in the West and throughout the country, the Latino and Asian populations are growing much faster. Some of that may be because of immigrant families moving out of California, he said.

"Many people start in California and then move on, or maybe the next generation moves on. California is still a magnet for immigration, but it's not holding these groups in the same way it used to," Logan said.

Boom then bust

John Malson, acting chief of the state Department of Finance's demographic research unit, said Tuesday that the new census figures show the state's total residential vacancy rate increased by more than 2 percent since 2000, meaning there are about 300,000 more vacant units out there than what the Finance Department had expected.

It's "a statewide phenomenon," he said, although it is more marked in areas such as the Inland Empire and parts of the Central Valley, where housing booms occurred in the early part of the decade.

Also, Malson said, "there's been more domestic migration out of California than we have been tracking," a diaspora to other states "that's also no doubt an indication of what's happened with the economy in California." And, he said, a decline in birthrates over the past four or five years also slowed California's growth, something that's typical in a down economy.

"I think the unemployment rate in California was high and people during this recession -- considering how deep it was -- people were probably looking for work in other states," said Ezra Rapport, director of the Association of Bay Area Governments.

The slowdown was more significant than many city planners had expected, but not a cause for concern, he said.

"The state could probably use a breather from its very heated growth patterns over the last few decades," Rapport said. "The loss of a minor amount of population does not really reduce the trends of the state."

The domestic migration may help settle the question of why the state Finance Department counted 38.8 million people living in California in 2010, while the national 2010 census counted only 37.3 million, Malson said. Thousands of people who moved away in the past two years may not have updated their driver's license address and other important data, so the state's numbers lag by a few years.

The census count, however, might still be too low because of the difficulty in counting urban populations, he said. "It's very likely the truth is somewhere in between."

The state and federal bureau use different methods to count California's population. The once-a-decade census seeks to count every American, mailing them 10-question forms and knocking on their doors to make sure they send it back. The state figures, however, are an estimate based on administrative records the Census Bureau does not have, such as driver's license address changes, birth and death certificates and tax returns.

Bay Area News Group staff writers Josh Richman, Hannah Dreier, Joe Rodriguez, Lisa Vorderbrueggen, Cecily Burt and Daniel Willis contributed to this report.

East Bay At a Glance

The East Bay grew more moderately than it has in previous decades. Alameda County grew by 4.6 percent and remains California's seventh largest county, with 1,510,271 people.

Contra Costa County grew by 10.6 percent, the fastest rate in the Bay Area, and remains the ninth largest county, with 1,049,025 people.

The population of Oakland declined by 2.2 percent, to 390,724, from 399,484 in 2000, according to the figures. It was one of only two of the state's 20 biggest cities -- the other was Santa Ana -- to experience a population decline, according to the 2010 census.