

# The Fresno Bee

## Valley's resources taxed by number of kids

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By Kurtis Alexander / The Fresno Bee

When you drive into the city of San Joaquin, it's hard to miss the new lights at the youth soccer fields -- "a spectacle," the mayor calls them.

They're also a sign of what else you'll find in this rural Fresno County community: more children per capita than in any other city in California, according to new data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Here, 41% of the population is younger than 18, compared to 25% statewide.

"We have a very family-oriented community," said Mayor Amarpreet Dhaliwal. "We have a skate park, a new sports park. We're getting a walking trail."

The city of San Joaquin is not alone. Across the San Joaquin Valley, cities big and small have more children per capita than most places in the state, the census data show, and that has created challenges as money for schools and other youth services has become sparse.

While the region has trended younger for years, today's economy has made it more difficult for communities to educate and provide the health and social programs that equip children for the future.

"There are going to be fewer resources, and I understand that tax dollars are scarce," said Walt Buster, co-director of the Central Valley Educational Leadership Institute at Fresno State, which seeks to expand youth learning opportunities. "But that can't be an excuse for lower achievement. These [children] are the people that are going to pay our pensions, manage our governments, run our farms, and we have to make sure we do a good job of supporting them."

The biggest obstacle to supporting children is cuts to education, say community leaders and educators.

Fresno County Superintendent of Schools Larry Powell says the toll has been felt not just in instruction but also in basic support services.

Over the past two years, the state has cut funding to local school districts by 19% with little promise of paying it back soon, according to the county Office of Education.

"Our medical care and our after-school programs are stretched more," said Powell. "When families don't have jobs, there is an increase in the cry for these services."

## ***Challenging demographics***

The high numbers of children in the Valley are driven by the region's growing number of Hispanics, population experts say.

Lured here by jobs in agriculture and a low cost of living, they bring a tradition of larger families, said John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University and director of the U.S. 2010 Census Project.

In the city of San Joaquin, the population is 96% Hispanic, according to census data. The state's second-highest concentration of children is in the Fresno County city of Orange Cove, where Hispanics make up 93% of residents.

Because the Valley's Hispanic population skews poorer, particularly in rural areas, past census data show, providing services to children can be all the more difficult.

The state generally provides funding for schools and social programs on a per-capita basis, which means more money for more populated areas.

But more affluent areas often can add to that pot with private contributions from entities like booster clubs.

"What happens in lower-income communities is you don't have the community resources to supplement the declines in funding in the same way," said Jean Ross, executive director of the California Budget Project, which advocates for the state's poor. "They can't afford the tutoring or the extra help."

Dhaliwal, who has been mayor of San Joaquin for eight years, isn't sure what to do about that.

"In our community, we don't have folks who have a lot of money. Sometimes putting together resources to have a recreational program can be a challenge," he said. "There are a lot of challenges here -- especially with the economy that we are all facing."

Still, Dhaliwal says, the city has made its children a priority, investing what it can in parks and recreational programs, including the lights at the sports complex, which debuted with this year's soccer season.

In neighboring Tulare County, which has more children per capita than any county in California, public money has been increasingly channeled to youth programs, said John Davis, the county's director of health and human services.

"Instead of an aging population, we're having more expense and more issues around children," he said.

## ***Meeting the challenge***

Many communities already are responding to the needs of the younger generation.

Though state funding has slipped, Davis said, local leaders have become more adept at providing child services -- for example, addressing health issues before a crisis emerges or supporting a struggling family before a problem escalates.

"What money we do have will be spent better," he said.

Several community nonprofits and collaboratives also are working on behalf of the younger population.

"You can't just expect the schools to do it. It's got to be parents, businesses, communities," said Mike Dozier, director of the Office of Community and Economic Development at Fresno State, which works to advance the region's prosperity.

The population boom among children, Dozier said, has put the Valley at a crossroads.

"There's opportunity, and there's potential crisis here," he said. "It's good if you can have a trained work force, and that gets back to education. We've got to make sure we don't have a bunch of kids that stay home with mom and dad and don't do anything -- or do worse."

Dowell Myers, a demographer at the University of Southern California, says the success of children in inland California is critical for the entire state.

While the San Joaquin Valley has seen the number of youths increase over the past decade, most communities in the Bay Area and Los Angeles area have lost children, according to census data.

"There's no way the state can survive if it's losing people," Myers said.

Of California's 10 largest cities, Fresno and Bakersfield had the most children per capita, at 30% and 32% of the population respectively, the census shows.

Myers said that without this young, inland population evolving into the state's future labor force, California's economy risks imploding.

The state needs "future workers, future taxpayers, future homeowners," he said. "The Central Valley is doing the state's business incubating its youth, and the whole state has a stake in this."