

Slow Growth Not Bad

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July 11 was World Population Day. This date was chosen by the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Program in 1989 as a way to focus attention on the importance of population issues. Nations, states, local entities and citizens are encouraged to examine their population information in order to understand its implications on economic development, environment, poverty and gender relations.

This year's World Population Day theme, "Everyone Counts," is very important for the United States, as it coincides with the 2010 Census operation. "Counting everyone is an integral part of ensuring that we take everyone into account," according to the United Nations Population Fund. The U.S. Census Bureau's slogan, "Be Counted," is an excellent way to further celebrate this year's observation.

As a member of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 Partnership Support Program, Auburn University Montgomery's Center for Demographic Research plays a key role in explaining the importance of achieving a complete census count in Alabama. To echo the Census Bureau itself, "We can't move forward until you give your answers back."

What is the state of Alabama's population following this year's World Population Day? Recent population data released by the Census Bureau shows that Alabama's latest population estimate was 4,708,708 on July 1, 2009. This is an annual increase of 0.68 percent compared to the 2008 estimate.

This rate is higher than those found in Mississippi (0.40 percent) and Florida (0.62 percent), but lower than in Tennessee (0.89 percent) and Georgia (1.35 percent) during that period.

The Center for Demographic Research's own projections show that Alabama's population will continue to grow at a low rate (about 0.64 percent per year) in the next 10 years, if current trends remain unchanged. We projected our state's population to reach 4,738,168 on July 1, 2010, and 5,043,099 by July 1, 2020. This low population growth rate is not bad for a state like Alabama, because it allows time for more effective planning if efforts are made to allocate resources appropriately.

However, with shifting population between places, such a slow growth rate can have detrimental consequences for some geographic entities. In fact, the Census estimates show a declining population in the state's two largest cities.

Birmingham's population declined from 230,228 in 2008 to 230,130 in 2009, a negative 0.04 percent change between the two years. The city of Montgomery suffered more population loss from 202,601 in 2008 to 202,124 in 2009, a negative 0.24 percent decline. In contrast, the cities of Mobile and Huntsville both had positive growth rates of 0.23 and 1.76 percent respectively. At that rate, Huntsville could become the third largest city in five to 10 years.

Tuscaloosa, the fifth largest city, had even a higher growth rate of 1.93 percent, with a total population of 93,215 in 2009, from 91,454 in 2008.

Of the 460 Alabama incorporated places for which the Census Bureau released total population estimates, 245 (53.2 percent) registered positive population growth rates between the years 2008 and 2009; 43 (9.4 percent) had no growth at all; and 172 (37.4 percent) had negative growth rates or declining population. The highest rate of population decline (-2.8 percent) was found in the town of Oak Hill, whereas the highest growth rate came from the city of Spanish Fort (29.8 percent).

We look forward to the results of the 2010 Census to determine more accurate trends in terms of population size and composition. Until then, current differences in population growth can be said to mirror spatial differences in economic opportunities across the state. For example, last December the city of Montgomery had a 10.1 percent unemployment rate, whereas Huntsville had only 7.8 percent unemployed. Other factors such as the growing number of residents moving to suburban areas of the capital city also contributed to uneven population growth.

The reduction in military contracts in the Huntsville area and heightened unemployment in cities like Montgomery mean that major shifts are under way across incorporated places in the state. With a low rate of in-migration, the majority of population changes results from internal migration. People will continue to follow employment opportunities and relocate accordingly.

As such, less economically prosperous places will lose population to more promising ones. Overall, the state of Alabama has a slow-growing population that can help the development efforts, if adequate mechanisms and measures are put in place to improve the quality of life.

Everyone counts and the participation in the census operation is essential. Good demographic data are very helpful for planning schools, health systems, public transportation, designing policies, and more.

I am pleased to report that the state of Alabama's population is good from a demographic perspective.

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