

Older, Slower: Weak Growth, Aging Mark State's Demographics

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The population of Alabama is going through a demographic transition that will have serious economic and social implications. Overall, the state's population is growing too slowly and aging quickly.

Between 2000 and 2010, the population of Alabama grew by an average annual rate of 0.62 percent, which is slower than the average national annual growth rate of 0.95 percent. With the exception of Mississippi, whose average annual population growth rate during the period of 2000-2010 was 0.39 percent, all other states that share borders with Alabama registered higher annual population growth rates ranging from 1.11 percent in Tennessee to 2.04 percent in Georgia. While slower population growth may be good during periods of economic recession, it can have negative effects on economic development in the long term.

Two important factors contributed to Alabama's slower population growth: the declining birth rate and aging. Alabama's birth rate is on the decline. In the last decade, the average number of children per woman has been consistently below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. The combination of low fertility with increased longevity is rapidly changing the age structure of the population.

Between 2000 and 2008, the number of Alabama residents who were below age 18 declined from 1,123,422 to 1,092,184, representing a reduction of 2.8 percent. During the same period, the number of persons age 65 and older increased from 579,798 to 648,889, or an increase of 11.9 percent. One direct consequence of this change in age structure is the shift of the burden of dependency from the young to the old.

The old age dependency situation will be one of the main demographic challenges of our time. Whether this will lead to economic disaster is an open question.

One thing is certain. This age transformation will require: rethinking the health care system for elderly; developing new and appropriate housing units; considering alternative living

arrangement where different generations can live together; and of course adaptive technologies for seniors and their caregivers.

Therefore, senior service agencies, physicians, law enforcement agencies, caregivers, developers and decision-makers should work closely with gerontologists and demographers for a smooth demographic transition.

Another cause of the slower population growth is lower immigration. In 2000, 73.4 percent of Alabama residents were born in Alabama, compared to 32.7, 57.6, and 64.7, respectively for Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee. Mississippi was the only neighboring state whose percent of native residents (74.3 percent) was higher than Alabama. It will be interesting to check these figures when the comparable data will be released from the 2010 census.

Demographically, immigration is beneficial for aging states like Alabama, as migrants tend to be younger and of working and childbearing age. In the past decade (2000-2010) Alabama's Hispanic population has grown very fast, at an average annual rate of 14.5 percent. While Hispanic women do have higher average fertility rates than women of other ethnic groups, the total number of Hispanics in Alabama is still relatively small (3.9 percent in 2010). As a result, the impact of Hispanics' fertility on the state's population growth rate remains marginal.

The current demographic transition characterized by lower fertility and higher longevity is a reality. Nonetheless, there are substantial variations across the state. Thirty-four counties have lost population in the past decade (2000-2010). The top five were: Sumter (13.4 percent), Greene (13.3 percent), Choctaw (12.9 percent), Lamar (12.1 percent) and Coosa (10.1 percent). These are among the most economically disadvantaged counties in the state. Such population declines mean further losses of revenue for local governments and businesses.

In contrast, some counties registered significant population growth rates during the last ten years. The top five fast growing counties were Shelby (35 percent), Baldwin (29.9 percent), St. Clair (27 percent), Limestone (21.5 percent), and Elmore (20.8 percent). Of the five most populous counties in 2010 (Jefferson, Mobile, Madison, Montgomery, and Shelby), only two (Shelby and Madison) had two-digit average annual growth rates during the period of 2000-2010.

These changes are critical and must be seriously examined as county and state governments look for strategies to emerge from the economic recession.

As the demographer John Caldwell noted, "The present is unexpectedly a critical time for population change and policy." Governments, businesses and other agencies should find new ways to manage their demographic transitions. Otherwise, the socio-economic and health conditions of various communities may have disastrous consequences for all.

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