

Alabama's slow growth a concern

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Alabama's slow population growth is a concern for demographers. Between 1990 and 2000, only 406,513 people were added to Alabama's population, representing an average annual growth rate of 1 percent. During the same period, all states sharing borders with Alabama registered higher population growth rates: Florida and Georgia grew by more than 2 percent per year, whereas Mississippi and Tennessee grew by more than 1 percent per year.

Between 2000 and 2010, Alabama's population grew even slower, adding only 332,636 people, or 0.7 percent per year. By contrast, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee each had an average annual population growth of more than 1 percent. Only Mississippi fell below Alabama, with an average annual population growth rate of 0.4 percent.

According to Census Bureau estimates, Alabama's annual population growth rate decreased further to 0.4 percent between 2011 and 2012. This ranks Alabama 31st among states in terms of population growth. North Dakota is on top of the list with an annual population growth rate of 2.2 percent, whereas Vermont is at the bottom of the scale with a negative growth rate of -0.1 percent.

What are the components of Alabama's slower population growth? What are the potential demographic impacts? In its simplest form, the demographic equation measures the change in the size of a population as a function of the number of births, deaths, in-migration and out-migration.

The difference between the number of births and deaths represents the natural increase. The value of the natural increase will be higher when there are more births than deaths. Likewise, the difference between the number of people who move in (in-migration) and those who move out (out-migration) is an important demographic measure called net migration. Net migration will be higher if the number of people who come to live in a state is larger than the number of those who move out.

In the case of Alabama, the natural increase remains the most important contributor to population growth. In other words, there are more babies being born as compared with the number of people who die. Between 2011 and 2012, there were about 60,990 births and 48,719 deaths, or a natural increase of 12,271 people.

In terms of migration, Alabama gained from foreign in-migrants but lost in domestic migration. Between 2011 and 2012, the net international in-migration figure was 6,005. In contrast, the net domestic in-migration was negative at -133. This means that more U.S. residents left the state than there were newcomers from other states. The overall net migration number is 5,872.

Overall, Alabama's population growth is primarily driven by the natural increase. The impact of migration is minimum, but notable. In statistical terms, natural increase counts for three-fourths of the state's population growth rate, whereas migration counts for one-fourth. Under these conditions, fertility remains the key determinant of Alabama's population growth. Yet the analysis of the state's birth rates shows a declining pattern in recent decades.

The effect of slower population growth is already evident in many Alabama counties. For example, 39 counties lost population in the last two years. The top 5 are Montgomery (-1,761), Macon (-678), Calhoun (-519), Walker (-444) and Clarke (-439). Among the 28 counties that gained population in 2011-2012, Baldwin (3,960), Lee (3,677), Madison (3,407), Shelby (2,818) and Russell (2,785) were on top of the list.

One important pattern is that nearly all counties with declining populations have also negative net migration figures. By contrast, counties that registered positive population increases have higher positive migration numbers. Such a finding suggests that migration is already playing an important role in population growth in many Alabama counties.

Slower population growth has many demographic consequences, including population aging and depopulation. As the number of children per woman has reached below replacement levels in many parts of the state, state and local governments will face the challenges of aging or graying of the population. More resources will be needed to help senior citizens maintain decent lives.

The other key demographic consequence of slower population is depopulation. Based on the 2000 census data, projections to 2030 show that Alabama's population will grow slowly, but will remain below 5 million persons. This is a rather optimistic perspective, because given the slower pace in fertility and migration observed in recent years, it is very likely that new projections may show a declining population in the next decades.

Population is the most important asset of humanity. The demographic winter that is on the horizon requires in-depth analysis of population factors in order to maintain a great society for ourselves and our children.

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