

Alabama facing elder explosion

Yanyi K. Djamba

Montgomery Advertiser

Jan 2, 2014

According to the last Census, the total population of the state of Alabama was 4,779,736 on April 1, 2010. That figure represents just 1.55 percent of the U.S. population. Compared to the other 49 states and the District of Columbia, Alabama ranked 23rd in population size in 2010.

California was on the top of the list with 12.07 percent of the national population living there, whereas Wyoming had the smallest population, accounting for only 0.18 percent of the U.S. population.

What is the demographic future of our state? How many people will be residing in Alabama 30 years from now? How many senior citizens? How many children? What will the racial composition of our state look like in the coming decades? These questions are answered here in order to help decision-makers understand what population they will be dealing with in the next three decades.

Using the recent population projections released by our colleagues at Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, we can say with confidence that the population of Alabama will be very different in 2040 as compared to what it is now. More specifically our state's total population will grow by 758,419 to 5,538,155 by 2040. Compared to the other 49 states and the District of Columbia, Alabama will have only 1.45 percent of the U.S. population and will be the 24th state in population size in 2040.

Compared to its 2010 population, Alabama's 2040 national demographic contribution will be smaller (1.55 percent in 2010 and 1.45 percent in 2040). With the exception of Mississippi, whose demographic contribution to the national population will be reduced from 0.96 percent in 2010 to 0.87 in 2040, Alabama's other neighboring states will register an increase in their national percent of population. Georgia's population will increase from 3.14 to 3.56 percent of the national population between 2010 and 2040; Florida from 6.09 to 7.13; and Tennessee from 2.06 to 2.07 during the same period.

By 2040, the age structure of Alabama will shift to higher proportions of older people relative to young people. The percent of population 65 years and older will increase from about 13.76 in 2010 to 19.19 in 2040. This increase in older population will be observed even at older ages. For example, persons 70 and older made up 9.38 percent of the state population in 2010. This number is expected to increase to 13.86 percent in 2040.

In contrast, the percent of population below age 20 is expected to decrease in the next three decades.

For example, 26.70 percent of Alabama population was in the age group 0-19 in 2010. By the year 2040, that number will go down to 25.13 percent. Such a change in age composition is

primarily due to a rise in life expectancy, which results in increased aging, and to the continued below-replacement birth rates, which lead to a lower percentage of children in the total state population.

There will also be significant racial shifts. As of now, about 68.53 percent of the state population is white, 26.18 percent is black or African-American, 1.12 percent Asian, and 4.17 percent other races. By 2040, Alabama's racial composition will be 62.66 percent white, 28.55 percent black, 1.80 percent Asian, and 6.99 percent other races.

This change in racial composition among white and black populations reflects their differences in birth rates. Although birth rates are dropping for both races, the pace of the decline is sharper for whites than blacks. For Asians, the increase from 1.12 to 1.80 percent in 30 years will mostly be due to immigration, whereas the change from 4.17 to 6.99 percent among "other races" may be the result of immigration (e.g., Hispanic population) and racial intermarriages, which lead to multiracial births.

In short, Alabama population in 2040 will be slightly higher than its current population, but its age distribution will reveal an aging and a more racially diverse population. These trends will have many implications including: more people spending more time in retirement and more needs for older age housing and assisted-living facilities; more pressure on family caregivers and caregiver agencies; and smaller number of children, with unintended consequences on schooling and teaching.

Researchers at the Auburn Montgomery Center for Demographic Research are currently preparing a comprehensive report on aging in Alabama to help organizations working with the older population to understand the changing patterns of population in Alabama. This report, which will be released in 2014, will examine current and future socio-demographic characteristics of persons 65 and older, the impact of the baby boomers on the state's aging, as well as health and sources of information on services available to the senior population in Alabama.

Caring for the older population will be the most serious demographic challenge of our time. Therefore, understanding the trends and changing demographic characteristics of current and future generations is an important step toward better aging for all.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and professor of sociology at Auburn Montgomery.