

Recent Population Change in North Carolina

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In recent years, North Carolina's population has grown rapidly and become more ethnically diverse and more urban. For example, estimates prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau show that between 2000 and 2005, the state had the ninth-highest growth rate (7.88 percent) among the fifty states and the District of Columbia, reaching a population of 8,683,242. In fact, it appears almost certain that North Carolina will soon pass New Jersey to become the nation's tenth most populous state.

A major factor in this growth has been the role of net migration. This statistic expresses the difference between the number of people who moved into the state and the number who left. North Carolina experienced a net loss of population through out-migration for most of the 1900s. The 1980 census was the first to record net in-migration in the twentieth century, and this influx has continued. Census estimates show that between 2000 and 2005, this net in-migration totaled 390,672 people, accounting for almost two-thirds of the state's total gain of 636,751 people during that period. The other gains came through natural increase, or the excess of the number of births over deaths.

North Carolina's recent growth has focused on its metropolitan areas. By federal definition, the state's official Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) are urban regions composed of one or more counties that typically contain a city of 50,000 or more people. MSAs are used in numerous statistical reports. Thirty-nine of the state's one hundred counties are included in its fifteen MSAs. In 2004 these MSAs accounted for over two-thirds of North Carolina's total population. Between 2000 and 2004, they attracted 83 percent of the state's growth, increasing their collective share of the state's population to nearly 70 percent.

In addition to the metro areas, which often are anchored by major job hubs such as Research Triangle Park as well as universities, growth has happened in and around some quasi-rural counties that can be characterized as recreational and retirement areas. One example is the counties that contain popular beaches, such as Dare, Brunswick, and New Hanover. Wilmington has benefited as the primary trade area for these surfside communities, which attract not only vacationers but a host of the many retirees drawn to the state. A similar example of growth is found in golf communities such as the area around Moore County's city of Pinehurst. The Mountains also attract retirees. Henderson and Watauga are two examples of counties that have seen the development of a number of retirement communities for the relatively active and affluent. The town of Blowing Rock, in Watauga County, offers a prime example of such growth.

Future Growth

Projections of population growth between 2000 and 2030 were prepared by the state demographer. The state total is expected to reach about 12 million by 2030. The U.S. Census Bureau has projected that North Carolina will become the seventh most populous state by 2030, with more than 12.2 million residents. This move up from the current eleventh place is expected to happen as the state passes New Jersey, Michigan, Ohio, and Georgia in total population. If these projections are realized, the state's share of the national total will rise from 2.86 percent in 2000 to 3.36 percent in 2030, even as the national figure jumps by over 29 percent.

As in recent years, most of this growth is expected to focus on the state's metro areas. For example, the state's two most populous counties, Mecklenburg (Charlotte) and Wake (Raleigh), together are expected to account for fully 30 percent of the state's growth between 2000 and 2030. Wake's net addition of 706,254 people would be greater than its total population in 2000, and it would replace Mecklenburg as the most populous county in the state. Mecklenburg and Wake are expected to become the first counties in North Carolina to have over 1 million residents each. This certainly seems to indicate that North Carolina is steadily moving away from its past as a small-town, rural state and becoming more urban like the rest of the country. Another indication of this change is that five rural counties in northeastern North Carolina are expected to lose population during this era of strong statewide growth.

Ethnic Diversity

North Carolina's population once was composed almost entirely of Anglo-Saxon whites and African Americans. This fact has changed dramatically in recent years, however (see Figure 2). Between 1990 and 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau has estimated that the Asian population grew by over 125 percent and the Hispanic total surged by an astonishing 574 percent. The American Indian and African American components also grew at higher rates than did the state as a whole. (The state has the largest American Indian population east of the Mississippi River.) Only the non-Hispanic white component grew more slowly (17.8 percent) than did the state as a whole (28.8 percent). The non-Hispanic white population fell from 75 percent of the state total to less than 69 percent. During the same period, the proportion of Hispanics increased from less than 1.2 percent of the state total to more than 6.1 percent. The growth rates may actually understate the reality of the situation. It appears that many newcomers, especially undocumented, or illegal, immigrants, were not located by census takers and thus went uncounted.

Initially, most of the Hispanic growth occurred in rural counties that attracted numerous seasonal farmworkers. In more recent years, this aspect has changed as Hispanics have been attracted by the entire state's robust economy, especially to urban jobs in construction, lawn and garden care, and food service and restaurants. By 2004 over 71 percent of the state's Hispanics resided in a metro area. Asians have been attracted even more strongly to larger urban areas. Many of them have found jobs in high-tech businesses and in computer-related fields. In recent years, about one-third of the state's

Hispanic population and about half of its Asian population were found in the four counties that contain the four largest cities (Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, and Winston-Salem).

It should be noted that Hispanic, or Latino, is not a race but a cultural category. In fact, about 87 percent of North Carolina's Latinos are white, and most of the rest are black. The remaining handful are Asian. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanics as those primarily of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, or other Central American or South American (Spanish-speaking countries) origins. A recent study by the Kenan Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (*The Economic Impact of the Hispanic Population on the State of North Carolina*, January 2006, www.Kenan-flagler.unc.edu) reports that about 21 percent of the state's Latinos were born in North Carolina, 38 percent moved here from abroad, and the rest entered another U.S. state before moving to North Carolina. Of those Latinos who moved to North Carolina from abroad, 73 percent came from Mexico, and virtually all of the rest came from elsewhere in Latin America, according to the report. Those who relocated from elsewhere in the nation came mostly from six metro areas that are major ports of entry for Latinos: Los Angeles, Miami, Houston, New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

The growth of the Latino population has become a major political issue in recent years, especially in terms of those crossing the border from Mexico. The Kenan Institute study found that 45 percent of the Hispanics in North Carolina are undocumented immigrants. The UNC study estimated that Hispanics contributed \$9.2 billion to the state's economy but cost the state more than they pay for public schools, health care, and corrections. The difference between what Hispanics pay in state taxes and what they cost the state amounts to a deficit of \$102 per Hispanic resident, the report states. The large number of immigrants—especially those who have entered the country outside the regular legal system—has sparked debates. Are the newcomers taking jobs from natives and driving down wages, or serving as critical, hardworking employees in industries with a labor shortage? Are they draining state resources, or living out the American dream of building better lives for their families? Is there a need for immigration reform, better border security in light of terrorism, or safeguards against exploitation of immigrants? What about the language barrier?

The Asian population in North Carolina is quite diverse. The majority of Asian residents have six national origins: India (23 percent of all Asians), China (16.7 percent), Vietnam (13.7 percent), Korea (11.1 percent), Philippines (8.4 percent), and Japan (5 percent).

North Carolina's increasing diversity is reflected in many ways. Numerous restaurants, for example, have opened in recent years to offer the cuisines of various cultures, in addition to those featuring more traditional southern fare like barbecue.

Conclusions

It seems clear that North Carolina is experiencing an era of change of historic proportions. Not only has it become one of the nation's fastest-growing states, but with

that growth, it is becoming more urban and ethnically diverse. These changes are literally reshaping the face of the state, requiring elected officials to develop new perspectives and policies for handling issues such as economic development, public education, environmental quality, and transportation, to name a few. How do North Carolina immigration and migration today compare and contrast with trends of the past?

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To learn more about the changing face of North Carolina, go to *The North Carolina Atlas: Portrait for a New Century* (UNC Press, 2000) or to its more current Internet companion, at www.ncatlasrevisited.org.

To see maps of the state's fifteen Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), access that site and click on "Urbanization" in the chapter on population.