



Everything New Orleans

Louisiana lags nation in growth, Census Bureau says

By Michelle Krupa, The Times-Picayune

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Louisiana's population appears to be continuing its trudge back from Hurricane Katrina but still lags several of its fast-growing Southern counterparts, state population estimates released Tuesday by the Census Bureau show.

Louisiana gained 37,486 residents in the year ending July 1, 2008, bringing the state's total population to just more than 4.4 million residents. The increase marks a bump of slightly less than 1 percent over the previous year.

However, Louisiana still had nearly 85,000 fewer residents this year compared with the year that ended July 1, 2005, less than two months before Katrina drained the state of an estimated 250,000 residents, bureau statistics show. Compared with trends around the country, those numbers make it increasingly clear that the state's congressional delegation will shrink from seven House seats to six following the 2010 census.

Losing a House seat

"Those of us who have been keeping up with this already were prepared for the loss of a seat," said state Rep. Rick Gallot, a Ruston Democrat who chairs the House committee that will redraw legislative and congressional district boundaries.

During the 12 months ending July 1 this year, Louisiana's rate of population growth trailed that of several other Southern states, the data show.

Texas, North Carolina, Georgia and South Carolina were among the 10 fastest-growing states during that period, as well as among the 10 states that gained the most total residents, according to the Census. Florida also made the latter list.

Greg Rigamer of the New Orleans' research firm of GCR & Associates said Louisiana's recent slow growth follows a trend that started more than four decades ago. He said the effect could mean a reduction in the number of members the state sends to Congress.

"Louisiana has lost its position of growth relative to other Southern states," Rigamer said. "It is going to have implications relative to our congressional districts."

That becomes clear with a cursory look at Louisiana's average residents per district compared with the rest of the country.

After the 2000 census, the 435 congressional districts averaged 646,952 residents. Louisiana, meanwhile, averaged 640,000 per district, a lower number that already reflected the state's lagging growth rate.

The latest national population estimate of about 306 million would yield an average of about 703,000 residents per House seat. Louisiana's losses over this decade, meanwhile, have dropped its average to about 630,000.

Distributing the same population among six districts, rather than seven, would mean an district average of about 735,000, which proportionally would be closer to the national average.

As a comparison, the state with the highest growth rate since 2000, Arizona, now boasts about 812,000 residents for each of its eight seats, a number sure to climb by the 2010 census, making that state's congressional roster certain to expand.

Louisiana's reality, Gallot said, is that the additional seats for states such as Arizona have to come from somewhere.

The Census estimates were reached by measuring births, deaths and migration into and out of each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

South, West lead in growth

As a region, the South added the largest number of people -- 1.4 million residents -- from 2007 to 2008, while states in the West showed the fastest rate of growth, with population jumping 1.4 percent during the period, according to the Census.

The data also show that six of the 10 fastest-growing states from 2007 to 2008 were in the Rocky Mountain region: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

The data released Tuesday did not include a parish-level breakdown, which typically is released in the spring. It is that round of statistics, last provided in April, that New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin has challenged, saying the Census low-balled the city's population in the 12-month period ending July 1, 2007.

Nagin claims the error could result in the loss of as much as \$56 million in federal assistance for the city.

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