

U.S. CENSUS

Nation's largest minority group heads to states with best prospects

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Violeta Merizald, a 15-year U.S. resident originally from Colombia, shops in San Francisco's Mission District.

Credit: Alex Washburn / The Chronicle

California still has more Hispanic residents than any other state, but new U.S. Census Bureau figures show that the rest of the country is trying hard to catch up.

Census demographers said Tuesday that while the Golden State's Hispanic population boomed 27.8 percent over the past decade, to 14 million, the number of Hispanics nationwide grew much faster - by 43 percent, to a total of 50.5 million.

The biggest growth was not in the West, where many might expect because of its long border with Mexico, but in the South and the Midwest.

"This shows that we are now in every corner of the country," said Mark Hugo Lopez, associate director of the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C. "Ten years ago, there was the beginning of the dispersion of the population, but not like today.

"It is only going to get even bigger in the next few decades."

What this all means, experts said, is that not just California, but the nation as a whole is becoming far more Hispanic-influenced, and the country should expect that to show up in more elected Hispanic leaders in the coming years.

Overall, Hispanics made up 16.3 percent of the U.S. population in the 2010 census and are the largest minority group in the country. That figure was 12.5 percent in 2000. In California, Hispanics now constitute 37.6 percent of the population, up from 32.4 percent 10 years ago.

Big gains in South

The fastest-growing Hispanic population in the nation over the past decade was in, of all places, South Carolina, at 147.9 percent. That was followed closely by Alabama, at 144.8 percent.

In the Midwest, Iowa saw an 83.7 percent increase in its Hispanic population, and Indiana's total grew by 81.7 percent.

"I was surprised at the growth across the nation, that it was so dramatic," said Belinda Reyes, director of the Cesar Chavez Institute at San Francisco State University. "There was a big campaign by many community groups to make sure the Census Bureau counted the population correctly, but these numbers came out bigger than I thought."

The raw numbers in the smaller states are still dwarfed by California's Hispanic population. In Alabama, for instance, the increase brought the state's Hispanic total to 185,602. Iowa's gain shoved that state's Hispanic count to 151,544.

Still, the breathtaking growth clip is probably only a preview of what the nation can expect in coming decades, demographers said.

Opportunities seen as draw

Lopez attributed the population spread to Hispanics simply going to where they can find more bang for the buck.

Housing in California, for example, is among the most expensive in the nation, and the unemployment rate is among the highest, Lopez noted. Considering that Hispanics in general are still striving for the top of the economic ladder - a Georgetown University study last month

showed Hispanic college graduates make less than their white or Asian counterparts - paying the bills in the lower-cost South or Midwest is more attractive.

"You go where the opportunities are," Lopez said.

Census Bureau demographer Merarys Rios-Vargas said in a news conference Tuesday that 63 percent of the nation's Hispanic population is of Mexican origin, up from 58 percent in 2000. The second-largest segment of the Hispanic population is Puerto Ricans at 9 percent, down from 10 percent in 2000.

"We do not know how many of the 50.5 million (Hispanic residents) are legal U.S. residents," she said. "We do not ask about legal status."

Political clout

How this all plays out in terms of political clout remains to be seen, Lopez said. But one certainty is that there will be more Hispanic voters in the coming years, and that will bring their concerns more to the forefront.

Only about 43 percent of Hispanics are old enough to vote now, Lopez said, compared with 78 percent of whites, 67 percent of African Americans and 53 percent of Asian Americans. That represents a coming swelling in the Hispanic youth vote, and so far that voice has been Democratic, with two-thirds of Hispanics backing President [Obama](#) in the 2008 election.

"Moving forward, this population is going to need to be included more in policy decisions and political activity," said Gloria Montano Greene, director of the Washington, D.C., office of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund. "We can no longer be ignored."

Greene pointed out that the numbers of Hispanics going to the polls has already been growing, with 2.2 more million Hispanic voters casting ballots in the 2008 general election than in 2004.

"This is a community that is committed and engaged," Greene said. "And we have a lot of the same values as everyone in America - to succeed and move forward in jobs, education, health care and the economy. We'll be looking at more representation everywhere, from city councils to the federal government."

Population on the move

Increases in Hispanics from 2000 to 2010.

Total U.S. Hispanic population: 50.5 million, up 43 percent.

Northeast: 7 million, up 33.1 percent.

Midwest: 4.7 million, up 49.2 percent.

South: 18.2 million, up 57.3 percent.

West: 20.6 million, up 34.3 percent.

California: 14 million, up 27.8 percent.

Texas: 9.5 million, 41.8 percent.

Iowa: 151,544, up 83.7 percent.

Nebraska: 167,405, up 77.3 percent.

Alabama: 185,602, up 144.8 percent.

Kentucky: 132,836, up 121.6 percent.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau