



Census shows growth in Texas isn't slowing

By MIKE SNYDER HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Texas counties and metropolitan areas continued to attract strong population growth last year as the state added jobs while most of the country was shedding them, the Census Bureau reported today.

The Houston metropolitan area added more than 130,000 residents between July 1, 2007 and July 1, 2008, the second-highest number in the country after Dallas-Fort Worth, the bureau said. Among counties, Harris County added more than 72,000 people, trailing only Maricopa County, Ariz., in growth in sheer numbers.

In percentage terms, the Austin-Round Rock metropolitan area posted 3.8 percent growth, the nation's second-highest behind Raleigh-Cary, N.C., with 4.3 percent.

Four Texas counties, all in the Austin or Dallas-Fort Worth areas, were among the top 10 in growth rates. Fort Bend County ranked 14th with 4.8 percent growth.

Jobs were the key to the Texas population gains, said Karl Eschbach, the state demographer.

"The particular edge that metro Texas had is that places like Houston were adding jobs at the beginning of the year when most of the rest of the country had slowed or stopped job creation, so Texas employers had a window where they were hiring while others elsewhere were laying off," Eschbach said.

In 2008, Eschbach said, Texas was one of only six U.S. states, along with the District of Columbia, that experienced job growth. The other states that added jobs were far less populous.

But Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that jobs in Texas have begun to contract this year, making expected population trends for Texas metropolitan areas less clear, he said. While natural increase — births minus deaths — likely will remain stable, it's possible that migration into Texas from other countries and states will decline as the state's attraction as a job center diminishes, Eschbach said.

"Population movement occurs because of job creation; that's not the only thing, but it's the big thing," he said. "When there are no jobs available anywhere, why move?"

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett said he expects the county to continue to show significant growth, since even a flat job picture locally is preferable to shrinking job opportunities elsewhere.

"We're certainly not going to have any fewer people," Emmett said.

Migration patterns are harder to detect in tough economic times, Eschbach said, because younger people tend to move to wherever their parents happen to live and older people move closer to their children. Throughout the country, the Census Bureau said, metropolitan areas with 2008 populations of 1 million or more were home to nine of the 10 fastest-growing counties in the country. And 47 of the 50 fastest-growing metropolitan areas were located entirely in the South or West.