

Region's population growth lagging that of nation

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ST. LOUIS • The population in the city of St. Louis continues to slide while St. Charles County leads the area in growth, based on new numbers released today by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Overall, the region is growing but at a much slower rate than the country as a whole based on the first glimpse at population changes since the 2010 Census. The region's core, St. Louis County, lost a few hundred people, still hovering just below 1 million.

Nationwide, the population has increased by 0.9 percent, compared with 0.2 percent in the St. Louis area.

As a result, the region has fallen one notch, to 19th, as the most populated metropolitan area in the country, swapping places with Tampa-St. Petersburg.

The 10 largest numeric increases in population were all in Texas, California, Arizona and Florida, fueled by populations of immigrants and retirees.

Population numbers are about more than pride. About \$400 billion in government funding is divvied up each year throughout the country based on population.

The latest numbers are the first population estimates since the release of the decennial census taken April 1, 2010. Today's population estimates, from July 1, are determined by taking 2010 Census numbers, adding births, subtracting deaths and tracking migration both from within the country and internationally, said Ben Bolender, a statistician with the Census Bureau.

The new numbers are a continued reflection of the 2010 Census, when St. Louis County fell below 1 million residents and the city of St. Louis continued a 60-year drop. At its peak in 1950, St. Louis had 856,796 residents and was one of the 10 largest cities in the country. Today's estimates have the population at 318,069, down from 319,294.

"This is not good news or bad news. It just is," said Jeff Rainford, chief of staff for St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay. Obviously the city wants to grow, he said, but it will not until there is a better choice of quality schools.

Improvements have been made, "but we're not getting better fast enough," Rainford said.

Of the 29,000 people who left the city between 2000 and 2010, about two-thirds of them were school-age children, showing that families were leaving, he said. But there are indicators that the decline in population could be coming to an end, Rainford said.

He cited a report from the Brookings Institution last year showing that in each of the years from 2008 to 2010, on average, 870 more people ages 25-34 came to the St. Louis area than left it.

He's convinced that once the housing market gets back on its feet, the influx of empty nesters who were making their way into the city from the suburbs will begin again, also help driving up the numbers.

The city has no plans to challenge the population estimates as it has in years past. Those challenged estimates ended up being well off the actual mark when the 2010 Census numbers came out last year.

"I have no reason to believe that this isn't what we're experiencing," Rainford said of the latest numbers.

In St. Louis County, the drop in population was nominal. The population estimate of 998,692 is 262 people fewer than what the 2010 Census counted. Still, county planners say changes need to be made, primarily in the housing stock.

"For a long time, our growth motored along based on our growth outward, the sprawl farther into the county," said St. Louis County planning director Glenn Powers. "Really, that chapter kind of ended, and now we have to look inward to our older areas to refresh them, redevelop them, to make them attractive living environments for old and new homebuyers."

Added Lori Fiegel, the county's comprehensive planning manager: "If we continue to keep everything the same, what is the trajectory? Well, we're not going to grow."

St. Charles County has been riding a wave of growth for about half a century. A county that had 25,562 people in the 1940 census has risen to 365,151 based on today's estimates.

The growth from 2000 to 2010 was 27 percent. The new population estimate reflects 1.3 percent growth in 15 months, well above the national average and higher than any other county in the region, followed by Monroe and Lincoln counties.

"This is what we anticipated," said O'Fallon spokesman Tom Drabelle. "It is nothing to what it was 10 years ago, but considering the economy, it's very consistent with what we expected."

He said job growth in the last few years has kept people moving to St. Charles County. In O'Fallon, the county's largest city, Fireman's Fund insurance company has moved in 550 jobs, and Centene Corp. and BJC have both added data centers there. Mercy Hospital plans to expand its presence in the county and an additional shift at the General Motors plant in Wentzville also will help fuel growth, he said.

For the region to grow on par with the rest of the country, its center — St. Louis County and the city — is going to need to reverse the population decline.

"Overall, it may have already reached its bottom point," said John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University. "The question is whether it will stay at the bottom."

New immigrants, especially Hispanics, are driving growth in other parts of the country, and that's a group that remains small in the St. Louis region. The region also needs to work on job training programs and emphasize vocational training at community college to have a workforce ready to go, he said.

William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, said urban renewal is ongoing nationwide.

"Traditionally, one of the motivations to move to the suburbs is there are better schools and the perception it is safer to raise children there," Frey said. "But we're seeing couples putting off decisions about having kids, and that can go hand in hand with sticking with it in the city and inner suburbs."