

Reversing trend, more are coming to Mass. than leaving it

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Analysts cite economic resilience, housing dip, lack of jobs elsewhere

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | December 25, 2009

For the first time in at least two decades, more US residents are moving to Massachusetts than moving out, a dramatic turnaround that has helped fuel the state's sharpest population growth since 2001, according to new estimates from the US Census Bureau.

The increase, which was recorded from July 2008 to July 2009, stunned demographers accustomed to a yearly exodus of residents packing up and moving to warmer climes. Taking into account the number of people who left the state and the number who entered, the net gain was only 3,600, but it was the first time that number has been positive in 20 years.

The relative resilience of the Massachusetts economy, coupled with a softer housing market in the state, helped attract and retain residents, demographers said. At the same time, high unemployment and tumbling housing prices forced residents who might have left the state in better times to stay put.

"Massachusetts has stopped bleeding people to other parts of the country for the first time in years," said Susan Strate, who manages the Population Estimates Program at the UMass Donahue Institute.

Throughout the past decade, the state lost thousands of residents to other parts of the country, raising deep concerns over its economic health, high housing costs, and overall quality of life.

But this week's estimate, a well-timed reversal that comes just months before the decennial census begins, raised hopes that Massachusetts will fare better than previously expected in the official count, which determines the number of congressional seats and can result in political redistricting and affect federal funding.

"It's terribly encouraging," said Secretary of State William Galvin.

Most demographers predicted that Massachusetts will still lose a seat in Congress because other states have grown faster, but Galvin said that is no longer a foregone conclusion.

In total, the estimates show that Massachusetts gained 50,000 people between July 2008 and July 2009, bringing its population to nearly 6.6 million. It is now the 15th most populous state. New births and immigration drove the bulk of the increase, the fifth consecutive year the state's population has grown since it last declined in 2004. This year also marked the first time since 2001 that Massachusetts had gained population from outside the state, including immigrants.

Nationally, the government's latest state population estimates illustrate the vast scope of demographic change caused by nearly three years of economic turmoil. The steady flow to the Sun Belt slowed, while California and Nevada, states hit hard by the housing market collapse, saw more people leave than arrive. Even Florida, the country's most reliable destination, shed a net of 31,000 people.

"I've studied demographic trends for 30 years, and I've never seen domestic migration change as dramatically as it has in the past two years," said Kenneth Johnson, senior demographer at the Carsey Institute and a professor at the University of New Hampshire. "It's stunning."

And the recession, analysts said, is driving the shifts.

"Clearly the biggest change has been the economy," said Holly St. Clair, director of data services for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, a regional planning agency. "It's much harder for people to get jobs and move out of state."

Nationally, the migration rate reached its lowest point since World War II last year, according to the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

"The credit crisis and Great Recession that followed left Americans flat-footed, as would-be movers were unable to find financing to buy a new home, buyers for their existing homes, or a new job in more desirable areas," William H. Frey, a Brookings demographer, wrote in a new report titled "The Great American Migration Slowdown."

The growth in Massachusetts defied the regional trend. Maine and Rhode Island joined Michigan as the only three states to lose population, and New Hampshire and Vermont grew only slightly. Despite the slowdown, the South and West still grew far faster than the Northeast and Midwest, continuing a decade-plus trend.

From 2001 through 2008, Massachusetts lost 278,000 residents to other parts of the country. In 2005 alone, it shed a balance of 55,000 residents.

Nationally, Texas gained more people than any other state, followed by California, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Wyoming showed the largest percentage growth, followed by Utah, Texas, and Colorado.

The US population rose by 2.6 million, or .9 percent, to 307 million. Immigration accounted for 854,000 of the increase.

In Massachusetts, immigration held steady. The number of people leaving, however, dropped about 25,000 from 2005 to 2008, Johnson said.

"People are frozen in place," he said.

He predicted that migration trends will resume, although probably on a more subdued scale, when the economy picks up.

Galvin said it is critical that residents take part in the official count next year. His office will be awarding small grants to neighborhood groups, religious groups, and civic groups to persuade immigrants to participate.

"The statistical indicators are encouraging," he said. "But the challenge is to persuade people, particularly immigrants, to be counted. You're up against a lot of reluctance." ■