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California's population growth to slow in coming decades

The state will benefit from the slower but still-healthy growth rate of about 1% annually, a USC report says. The decline will mainly stem from a sharp drop in immigration to California.

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By Rebecca Trounson, Los Angeles Times

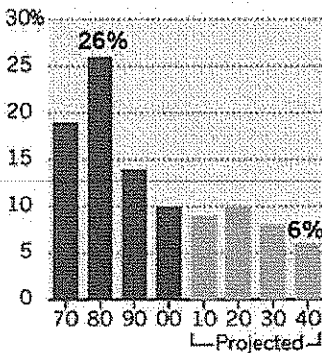
California's population will grow more slowly in the next few decades than it has in the past — and that is good for the state's still-struggling economy, according to a new USC report.

The study projects that the state's population, now 37.3 million, will continue to increase at a healthy clip — about 1% annually — for years to come. But at least through 2050, we are unlikely to see the boom rates of recent decades, especially the 1980s.

Easing up

A new study projects that California's population will grow more slowly in coming decades.

Percent growth for decades beginning with these years



Source: USC

PAUL DUGINSKI Los Angeles Times

"This is more manageable growth and that's good news for California," said Dowell Myers, a USC demography and urban planning professor who co-wrote the report with colleague John Pitkin. "We're returning to a more normal rate of growth."

The cooling pace means the state, city and county governments and other entities will have more time to prepare for a bigger population than they did in years past, allowing for more effective planning, Myers and other experts said. That could ensure that new roads and parks, for example, are put in areas where they are most needed and where growth is likely to be sustained, they said.

The researchers said the slowdown will mainly stem from a sharp drop in immigration to California, part of a nationwide trend detailed in other recent studies.

Although the slower pace of growth may be a net positive for California, it will require revisions to an array of public and private plans, including for schools, water projects,

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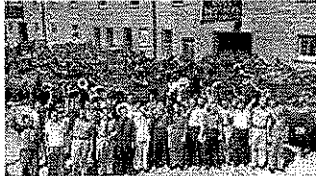
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he says will be lower than its previous estimates. Schooling's office is racing to produce the new estimates ahead of its regularly scheduled report because demographic changes are so profound that state agencies urgently need fresh data to update their planning.

The USC analysis also predicts that as California's growth slows, its population will change in various ways. The state in coming decades is expected to have more senior citizens, fewer children and more young adults. The state's immigrant population will be more settled, with a larger share that has lived in the U.S. at least 20 years.

Each change has implications, the experts said.

The average age of the state's population, as in the nation, is rising, partly driven by the aging of the huge baby boom generation, whose oldest members were born in 1946 and are of retirement age. The USC researchers say the number of Californians of retirement age compared with people of prime working age (25- to 64-year-olds) will rise to 36 seniors per 100 working-age adults in 2030. It stood at 22 to 100 in 2010.

As the boomers age, they will require more state services and that will create budget challenges, Johnson noted. Also significant is the loss of their workforce skills to the state, he said. Baby

transportation, hospitals, highways and other infrastructure.

"Those of us who've been here for a while think of California as a place that's grow, grow, grow — and go, go, go — but this shows that we're not that anymore," Hans Johnson, a demographer with the Public Policy Institute of California, said of the USC study released Tuesday. "We're now more typical of the rest of the nation."

Johnson noted that the brakes on California's growth were evident in the 2010 census, after which, for the first time, the state failed to gain a new seat in Congress.

The report, the third in a series of projections by USC's Population Dynamics Research Group, predicts that California's population will grow at less than 10% per decade for the next several decades.

In the 1980s, the state's population surged nearly 26%, adding about 6 million residents. The increases were fueled primarily by the booming aerospace industry and economic problems elsewhere in the country, which made the Golden State a powerful magnet for job seekers.

In the 1990s, the state's growth rate fell to 14% but remained strong. It slowed further, to 10%, in the decade just ended, the USC report shows. Myers said the continuing falloff from 2000 to 2010 may have been partly due to the recession that began in 2008. Growth was slow even in 2005, when the economy was still strong.

The new predictions differ significantly from California's official population projections. Those show that the state's population by 2020 would reach 44 million, a level USC's researchers now say will not be attained until 2028.

Bill Schooling, chief of demographics research for the state department of finance, praised the USC report and said his staff, too, is working on a new set of population figures, which



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boomers are California's most highly educated generation, he said, with a greater share having graduated from college than younger or older age groups.


A smaller population of children in years to come means savings for the state, mainly in education costs. It could lead to higher per capita spending for the education of those who remain, Johnson said.

The rising share of young adults age 25 to 34 in the next 20 years is good news for the state, which experienced negative growth for that age group from 1990 to 2010, Myers said. Young adults are crucial for the state's economic growth. They are most likely to become new workers, rent their first apartment, buy a home, have children and be first-time voters, he said.

California's increasingly settled immigrant population means that its members are more likely than before to have learned English, have children born in the U.S. and remain in the state, Johnson said.

"It's important for us as a state to make sure immigrants and their families are integrated into our society and are successful, so it's really important to look to their education," he said. "The biggest challenge California faces long term is to ensure that enough of our residents go to college, and to make sure they graduate."

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