

California growth rate slows as 2020 census looms

May 1 2019, by Adam Beam



In this Nov. 15, 2016, file photo morning rush hour traffic moves along the southbound lanes along US 101 near downtown Los Angeles. New population estimates show California's births fell by 18,000 last year, prompting the slowest recorded growth rate in the country's most populous state. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel, File)

The country's most populous state picked a bad time for its slowest growth rate in history: The eve of the 2020 census.

California officials are spending millions preparing for the all-important head count that distributes federal tax dollars and influences congressional boundaries. But new estimates released Wednesday by state officials say California grew by 0.47% in 2018, the slowest rate on record dating back to 1900.

The sluggish growth rate comes as California and other states worry a new question on the census forms asking for people's citizenship status could make it harder to count the country's Hispanic population. It's a concern in California, which has the largest Hispanic population in the country.

California's population has been creeping toward 40 million people, viewed as a milestone for a state that began as a frontier outpost and now boasts the world's fifth largest economy. Texas at No. 2 is still shy of 30 million people. But state officials on Wednesday noted the latest estimates could temper expectations for robust growth as births decline, deaths rise and immigration slows.

"Three or four years ago we had a lot of questions during the peak of the drought years (about) can we sustain more population growth," said Ethan Sharygin, a demographer with the California Department of Finance. "Now everyone is worried (about) well, what does it mean if we get to zero population growth?"



In this July 8, 2017 file photo a lifeguard scans a crowded shoreline at Manhattan Beach, Calif. New population estimates show California's births fell by 18,000 last year, prompting the slowest recorded growth rate in the country's most populous state. (AP Photo/John Antczak,File)

State officials said Wednesday they expected the state's birth rate to decline, but they were surprised by how much: More than 18,000 fewer births than the previous year. Tina Daley, chief of California's Demographic Research Unit, noted teen pregnancy rates are declining and, in general, people are waiting longer to have children.

What has surprised them, Sharygin said, is that fewer people are coming to California from other countries, especially neighboring Mexico, where birth rates are higher. Now, he said, more people are coming from

places like China, where birth rates are lower.

State officials expect California to continue to grow, predicting the population could top 50 million by 2055. By 2051, officials project the state will join Japan and other European countries by having more deaths than births.

While the state slows down, the Northern California city of Chico added more than 19,000 people for a whopping 20% increase to more than 112,000. But that was prompted by tragedy, as the nearby town of Paradise lost 83% of its population after the most destructive wildfire in state history.



In this Nov. 16, 2018, file photo, Tera Hickerson, right, and Columbus Holt embrace as they look at a board with information for services at a makeshift

encampment outside a Walmart store for people displaced by the Camp Fire in Chico, Calif. The pair escaped the fire in Paradise, Calif. California officials Wednesday, May 1, 2019, announced the state's annual population estimates. The last estimate put the state on the cusp of 40 million residents. The devastating wildfires in 2018 destroyed more than 14,600 housing units, including 90% of the housing stock in Paradise. (AP Photo/John Locher, File)



In this Dec. 3, 2018, file photo, homes leveled by the Camp Fire line the Ridgewood Mobile Home Park retirement community in Paradise, Calif. California officials Wednesday, May 1, 2019, announced the state's annual population estimates. The last estimate put the state on the cusp of 40 million residents. The devastating wildfires in 2018 destroyed more than 14,600 housing units, including 90% of the housing stock in Paradise. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

"In a single word, it's been overwhelming," said Mark Orme, Chico's city manager, of the overnight population growth.

The college town, home to California State University-Chico, has been affected broadly, including increases in toilet flushes and trash. Orme also said traffic collisions are up 24%. Traffic is up about 25% on average, and as high as 77% in some places, he said.

Doriane Regalia, a real estate agent with Century 21 in Chico, said all her clients lost their homes in the fire. She said for some, the idea of going back to the town is too overwhelming. "There is a lot of PTSD in people who lost everything," Regalia said.

The fire destroyed more than 14,600 housing units. But Sharygin said most of those people stayed in California. Only about 400 left the state, according to initial estimates.

"People were just reacting immediately to the loss of a home and finding a short-term solution," he said. "I don't think we can make any claims right now about what happens in the first quarter of this year."

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