

# Policy, Politics and Population

Lawmakers can track trends and gain valuable insight from the census.

BY EDWARD P. SMITH

**A**ging baby boomers heading for retirement, a growing Latino population, swelling ranks of the poor, and a steady flight to cities and suburbs from rural areas all are trends evident from the 2010 census that will have political and policy implications for state lawmakers.

Some are obvious. Both political parties have been concerned for years about attracting the growing ranks of Latino voters. Others may not be so obvious, such as how the burgeoning numbers of older voters will respond to cutbacks in public spending.

And there are policy implications, some of which are still coming into focus as lawmakers digest the 2010 numbers and consider how they may affect their state.

## Older Boomers

An aging population means an aging state workforce. That translates into a growing demand on state pension funds; more workers retiring, many of whom may be supervisors; and a need to recruit top-notch younger workers to take their places.

As well, public employees are, on average, older than the general population, and many have the opportunity to retire with pensions by age 60 or 65. This varies widely from state to state. California, for example, reported in March 2011 that 23 percent of the permanent civil service workforce was 55 or older, and another 17 percent was between 50 and 55. In New York, officials say by 2015, 44.5 percent of current state employees will be 55 or older. Even in Utah, the state with the youngest median age, 21 percent of state workers were 55 or older in 2010.

Older workers may be inclined to stay on the job a few more years if national trends hold true. People over 65 who were still

working hit a low point at 12 percent in 1998, but now it's above 16 percent.

There are other reasons, however, that an aging population can put a strain on states. Medicaid, the joint state-federal health plan, costs nearly \$400 billion a year; 67 percent of that money goes to provide long-term care for the severely disabled and the elderly. Buried in the census data is this germane piece of information: Those age 80 and over represent 10 percent of the older

population and will more than triple from 5.7 million in 2010 to more than 19 million by 2050. These are the folks most likely to end up receiving help from Medicaid for long-term care.

## Children

The census found there was a decline of 4.3 million Anglo children over the past 10 years. Those under age 18 grew only 2.6 percent over the decade, and declined in 23 states. In the 27 states that gained children, almost all the increase was among minorities, especially Latinos. The most remarkable demonstration of that may be in Texas, which gained nearly 1 million children; Latinos accounted for 95 percent of the gain.

A growing number of those Latino children are living in poverty. There are 6.1 million poor Latino children in the nation today, compared with 5 million Anglo children and 4.4 million African-American children living in poverty, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

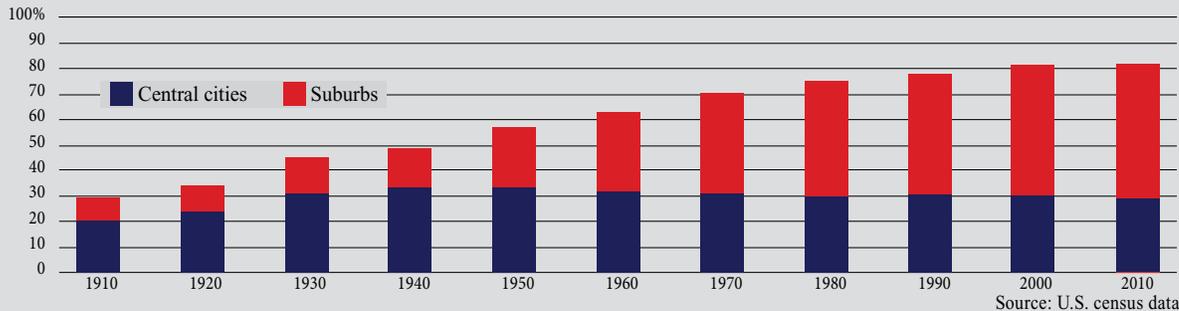
The data have policy implications, including what sort of programs to support for new parents and preschool children. Research indicates preschool programs are particularly helpful for children from lower-income households who may be at risk for doing poorly in school. They also are at greater risk of mental health problems and illnesses such as asthma, hypertension, heart disease and diabetes.

Some believe states need to support programs for parents, such as home visiting and participation in child care and preschool classrooms. Such programs may help address the achieve-

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## Percent of Americans in Metro Areas



ment gap and prepare these young learners for school and a strong academic future.

### Poverty

The Census Bureau reports an additional 2.6 million people slipped into poverty last year, bringing the number of Americans living below the official poverty line to 46.2 million, or 15.1 percent, the highest level since 1993. (The poverty line in 2010 for a family of four was \$22,314.)

Medicaid is under particular pressure because of the rising level of poverty. Medicaid enrollees increased by 7.6 million people or 17.8 percent since the start of the recession, but the growth rate shows signs of slowing. Enrollment growth peaked in the period from June 2008 to June 2009, according to the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. Despite this slowdown, Medicaid exceeded 50 million people for the first time in the program's history in 2010.

The increased demand for Medicaid is accompanied by the rising number of Americans without health coverage—up from 49 million in 2009 to 49.9 million last year. The huge number of people without health insurance is largely attributable to the loss of jobs, a decline in employer provided coverage and cutbacks in benefits as health costs rose. The percentage of the nonelderly who had health insurance through their employers fell from 69.3 percent in 2000 to 58.7 percent in 2010, according to the Employee Benefit Research Institute.

### Education

As the growing numbers of young Latinos enter school, state policymakers recognize their educational success is critical to providing states with a well-educated workforce and ensuring economic vitality. Improving college graduation rates has become a national and state focus to meet future workforce demands and stimulate the economy. And college graduation rates of Latinos—the largest and fastest growing minority group in the nation—is a specific focus. While the aging boomer population is largely Anglo, the rapidly growing younger population is largely Latino. Support for Social Security and Medicare for the older population will rely on a well-educated, competitive Latino workforce.

More than one in five K-12 students is now Latino. The number of Latinos enrolling in college is increasing rapidly—24 percent within the last year. This is good news, since Latino adults have the lowest educational attainment of any U.S. population group. Only 19 percent of Latinos have a degree, compared with 26 percent of African Americans and 42 percent of Anglos.

Simply enrolling in college, however, does not guarantee graduation. Only 36 percent of first-time, full-time Latino students earn a degree within six years, compared with 49 percent of Anglos.

For the United States to rise to the top of the world in the percentage of college graduates, the nation needs to graduate an additional 13.4 million students, including 3.3 million Latinos, by 2020.

Increasing the number of Latino college graduates requires a coordinated effort, including providing more preschool, middle and high school college counseling. Dropout prevention programs, simplifying college admission and transfer, and improving college affordability will also help Latino kids achieve a college education.

### Rural vs. Metro

One of the most dramatic demographic shifts of the past century has been the transformation of the country from largely rural to largely urban. In 1910, 72 percent of the country lived in rural areas. Today, only 18 percent do. Everyone else lives in a city or suburb. The population in rural counties, in fact, is growing at less than half the rate of metro counties, and the most isolated rural counties—those farthest from metro areas—are not growing at all; they have declined by 1.4 percent since 2000.

This decline means less clout for rural issues in statehouses. The laws and issues that most affect rural areas—agriculture, water, natural resources and rural infrastructure development—have fewer voices to advocate for them. Laws that uphold the freedom to farm, the right to hunt and fish, and water allocation and transportation, and those that provide money to preserve rural schools and maintain country highways may lose support as fewer legislators are elected from outside metropolitan areas.

Former Arizona Senator Jake Flake once said the reason he formed a rural caucus was to educate urban legislators about rural needs. “We don’t have enough caucus members to force anything, but we can enlighten our colleagues as to what is needed for the rural parts of the state.” More statehouses may need such caucuses to understand rural needs.

State lawmakers will clearly face serious challenges in the next decade as they grapple with the national demographic changes revealed by the census. The growing number of elderly people and the poor will strain state pensions and Medicaid budgets. Education policy at every level will need to meet the needs of Latino students, and a population increasingly concentrated in cities and suburbs will likely be at odds with the dwindling number of people in rural areas.