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HNS-TOP-demographics

Kansas lining up with national trends

By Chris Green

Harris News Service

TOPEKA - What's happening throughout America is occurring in Kansas, too.

Statistics released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau show that the Sunflower State, like nearly all others, is growing more diverse on the whole.

And, like most states, the growth appears to be largely driven by an increase in the state's Hispanic population, which numbers more than 224,000 or 8.4 percent of the population, according to estimates from the 2005 American Community Survey.

Hispanics numbered about 188,000 during the 2000 Census, or about 7 percent of the state's population.

Estimates suggest that more than 42 million in the U.S. identify themselves as Hispanic, a term that describes cultural descent from Spanish-speaking countries rather than a race. They constitute 14.5 percent of the nation's population, according to the survey.

More than 85 percent of the state's population is white, a category that can also include most Hispanics.

Laszlo J. Kulcsar, director of the Kansas Population Center at Kansas State University, said a continued increase in Hispanic residents could also prompt a shift in perceptions of what constitutes a typical Kansan.

"Demographic trends do not change overnight," Kulcsar said. "If we have an increase in the Hispanic population for another 10 years, that means the reaction could be a changing self-perception and different ideas about who should be incorporated into Kansas communities."

In fact, Hispanic immigration has already significantly changed the face of some parts of southwest Kansas.

Don Stull, a University of Kansas professor of anthropology, said the construction of beef packing plants in 1980s helped fuel waves of immigration by Hispanic job seekers.

The resulting influx has helped change the population composition of places such as Garden City, where Hispanics make up more than 40 percent of the population, and spread to smaller surrounding towns.

The state's larger metropolitan areas and mid-sized cities continue to see growth in the number of Hispanic residents as well.

"I don't think we're going to see it stop anytime soon," Stull said.

Kulcsar said the numbers of Hispanics living in Kansas could be even higher than the estimates suggest. He said he doesn't believe illegal or undocumented immigrants were counted by the survey.

At the same time, though other parts of the state are suffering from graying populations and prolonged population declines, Kulcsar said. However, Hispanic immigration has helped the state keep its median age, estimated at 36.1, slightly below the national average of 36.4, Kulcsar said.

But not everybody likes the changes that they're seeing.

Illegal immigration from Mexico and other Latin America countries continues to be a hot-button issue in national-level political elections slated for November.

Some critics, like Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington, have written that large-scale Hispanic immigration is a threat to the nation's cultural cohesiveness.

In Kansas, gubernatorial hopeful and state Senator Jim Barnett, R-Emporia, is trying to differentiate himself from Democratic Gov. Kathleen Sebelius this fall, in part, through his opposition to driver's licenses and in-state college tuition fees for illegal immigrants.

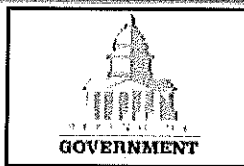
Barnett also supports making English the state's official language.

"It's clear that it's going to be a major campaign issue," Stull said of the backlash against illegal immigration.

Yet Kulcsar said Kansas communities should expect to changes over time as the state's Hispanic population continues to grow.

"They are going to change whether they like it or not," Kulcsar said. "For policy makers, the ultimate test is to make communities understand that change can be beneficial in some cases and help them be prepared for the future."

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