Immigrants could take up slack for aging Alabama

by Tim Lockette

Alabama has a real immigrant problem, says Yanyi Djamba.

The problem is that there aren't enough immigrants.

"If anything, we need more of them," said Djamba, director of the Center for Demographic Research at Auburn University at Montgomery. "In Alabama — especially in Alabama — if we look at the population of people who are over 65, it's going to increase dramatically. At some point, we will face a shortage of skills and workers."

Djamba is one of a handful of experts who keep track of Alabama's population and make predictions about where it's headed. He — and others in the field — see a state that is aging rapidly, with a senior population set to double, and too few working-age residents to take care of them.

Immigrants and Hispanics — two sometimes-overlapping groups that often bear the brunt of harsh political rhetoric — could become the very groups who turn that trend around, demographers say.

An aging population

State and local governments have to do population projections in order to predict future needs for services, but those projections often turn out to be wide of the mark. Moreover, current events — such as Alabama's immigration law and the struggling economy — have created headaches for demographers trying to update the state's years-old growth projections.

Carolyn Trent, who does population predictions for the Center for Economic and Business Research at the University of Alabama, said the center will likely be a couple of months behind schedule in issuing new official numbers.

"I'd like to get in touch with schools and other agencies to see how much the immigration law affected their numbers," she said. "Making projections this year has been tricky."

But by and large, the demographers agree on a few significant trends.

One is that Alabama's population is aging quickly.

The first people born in America's 20-year post-World War II baby boom are just now hitting retirement age — which means the over-65 population will nearly double between now and 2030. The Census Bureau and various state agencies offer slightly different numbers, but all predict the number of seniors in Alabama will top 1 million, rising from 13 percent of the population now to about 20 percent in 2030.

Another trend is a decline in the birth rate. Alabama couples are producing fewer children than

they used to and as the median population gets older, the birth rate will get even lower.

“We are already below the replacement rate,” Djamba said. To see what that will lead to, he said, look at Europe, where childbirth has been below replacement rate for years.

“You see churches and schools being closed,” Djamba said.

A homegrown state

The aging population means a child born today — one who turns 18 in 2030 —would enter a work force in which each working-age person is supporting more non-working people. Some of that support would come in the form of Social Security and Medicare, which are federal programs. But the state budget could also pick up some of the tab in the form of Medicaid.

According to Trent’s most recent numbers, for every 100 Alabama workers, there are 68 people who are either too old or too young for the work force. Nearly two-thirds of those non-workers are kids.

But by 2030, in Trent’s projection, that number grows to 85 dependents for every 100 workers. Nearly half of those dependents will be over 65.

The biggest variable in this scenario is in-migration — the number of people moving into the state, whether from other states or other countries. If people come into Alabama, particularly people of child-bearing age, the working-age population will grow, demographers say.

Lately, that isn’t happening much. The 2010 Census numbers show about 100,000 people leaving the state, and nearly the same number coming in. Those numbers count only the people who filed tax returns in Alabama — most of them likely legal residents. The numbers of illegal immigrants could be much higher, though it’s hard to tell.

But demographers say Alabama lags behind neighboring Southern states in the number of people moving in. Census numbers, as compiled by Governing Magazine last year, indicate that just less than three-fourths of Alabama residents were born here. That places the state in the top 10 for residents born in-state.

Why Latinos matter

For many Alabamians, a small, homegrown population may be just the ticket.

“People here are very place-oriented,” said Bobby Wilson, a geographer at the University of Alabama.

But that same approach can pose a challenge for economic growth.

Nationwide, the states with the lowest homegrown population — Nevada and Florida — were the ones that flamed and fizzled in the past 10 years. But the most-homegrown included Rust

Belt basket-cases like Ohio and Michigan, as well as Alabama's usual companions on the bottom socioeconomic tier — Kentucky, West Virginia, Louisiana and Mississippi.

"You don't necessarily want to be one of the fastest-growth states," Trent said. "That may mean you're headed for a crash. But you do want to have some growth. Right now, we're way below the average for Southern states."

Migration from other states, if it starts to happen, could fill the gaps in the state's working-age population.

But demographers say immigrant populations — particularly Hispanic immigrants — could fill those gaps faster.

Immigrants tend to be young, the demographers say. And immigrants from Latin America tend to value large families.

"The fertility rate for Hispanic women is much higher than in the larger population," Djamba said. He said much of the nation's recent population growth has come from immigration and a growing Hispanic population.

Growing by design

Djamba said the coming shifts in population have been on the minds of some of the nation's leaders for years. That's one reason, he said, why the United States instituted a visa lottery in 1995, allowing randomly selected skilled workers into the country at the rate of about 50,000 per year.

"Unfortunately, Alabama hasn't seen a lot of them," he said. Most, he said, have moved to more economically robust states. The best way to attract more working-age residents, immigrant or American-born, is to generate more jobs, he said.

Wilson, the geographer, agreed.

"People follow the capital," he said.

Djamba said he didn't expect Alabama's immigration law to have a huge impact on the state's overall in-migration numbers. But he does see the law as a problem.

"It's a concern when we hear about immigrants pulling their children out of school," he said. Those kids, he said, could become tomorrow's work force — if they stay in Alabama.

How did one of America's most "homegrown" states wind up with one of the nation's toughest immigration laws?

Djamba said the recession played a major role.

“When the economy is bad, you start looking for what’s wrong,” he said. He compared Alabama voters to a penny-pinching father, making sure his kids turn out the light when they leave the room.

“You look for anything you can change,” he said. “And even though there are not that many immigrants here, it was something to change.”

Djamba predicts that when the economy comes back, anti-immigrant sentiment will largely disappear.

“When your business is growing, you need someone to work for you,” he said. “You aren’t going to care where that person is from.”

http://annistonstar.com/bookmark/17735894-Immigrants-could-take-up-slack-for-aging-Alabama