

Demography and Sustainability of the Urban Southwest

The American Southwest is America's fastest growing region, and the most urbanized one. Between 2000 and 2007, the nation's most rapidly growing states were Nevada (28.4%), Arizona (23.5%), and Utah (18.5%). Its four fastest growing large (>1 million) metropolitan areas were Las Vegas (22.5%), Phoenix (28.5%), Austin (27.9%), and Riverside-San Bernardino (25.4%).

Rapid growth raises profound sustainability questions, including how the benefits and costs of growth are distributed across social groups and generations, whether economies based on land development and housing construction can grow indefinitely, and whether there is enough water to support future growth in the face of climate change. Demographic conditions can both facilitate and impede meaningful individual and collective action to grow in ways that meet today's needs without compromising those of future generations.

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Fountains and built waterfalls have recently become common features of the local landscape in Las Vegas, Nevada, where rapid development is raising questions of resource usage and sustainable growth. Las Vegas is the site of the 2009 AAG Annual Meeting.

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Like the rest of the West, the economy of the urban Southwest has shifted dramatically from one grounded on large-scale resource extraction to one based on building homes for newcomers. One out of every three dollars in the Phoenix economy, for example, comes from some aspect of the home building industry, including builders, construction workers, architects, landscapers, real estate agents, mortgage loan officers, and title companies. The importance of growth and of the housing industry has rendered many of the region's cities vulnerable to the recent housing downturn and mortgage crisis. Foreclosures between 2006 and 2007 skyrocketed in Las Vegas (22,928), Riverside-San Bernardino (41,351), and Phoenix (21,378), while Austin, with a more diverse, high-tech economy, was relatively untouched. Growth rates are down from their peaks in mid-decade, but still are much faster than metropolitan averages nationwide (Figure 1).

Deconstructing Growth

Demographers often deconstruct population change into three components: domestic migration, immigration, and natural increase (births minus deaths) to understand the sources of growth (Figure 2). Migration from other parts of the country is the main source of growth in the urban Southwest, although this has changed somewhat in recent years

because people tend to stay put during dire economic times (the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know). The recent increase in gas prices and commuting costs, not yet reflected in Census statistics, could further dampen domestic migration and growth.

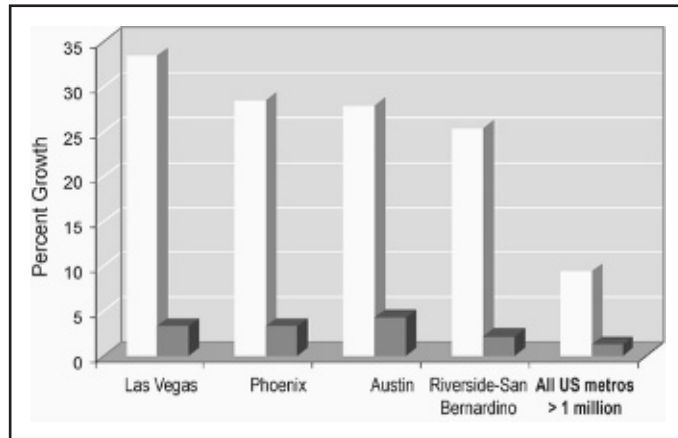


Figure 1. Estimates of population change from April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007 and from July 1, 2006 to July 1, 2007. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of migration for cities like Las Vegas and Phoenix from both a demographic and a cultural perspective. Being from somewhere else is the norm in these cities, not the exception. Only 21.0% of Las Vegas' metropolitan population and 33.9% of Phoenix's were born in their respective states. This dominance of migrants produces cultural values that tend to be unencumbered by the past and focused on the future. This contrasts sharply with attitudes in more established metropolitan areas with higher native-born populations, such as Pittsburgh (83.6%), Cleveland (74.5%), Chicago (66.2%), and Baltimore (61.7%) where family ties run deep, regional loyalties are strong, and established traditions are deeply felt.

Rapid growth fueled by large numbers of

labor-force-age migrants keeps the populations of the urban Southwestern young. Contrary to the popular myth that migration flows to the region are fueled by retirees, rapidly growing Southwestern cities house populations that are relatively young by national standards. The median age in metropolitan Riverside-San Bernardino is 31; in Austin 32, in Phoenix 34, and in Las Vegas 35, compared to the national average of 36 years. The abundance of migrants in their 20s and 30s having children of their own contributes to high natural increase and reinforces the tendency for high-growth, migrant cities to have a youthful air.

Immigration and Growth Social Diversity

The youth and vitality of the urban Southwest also stems from increasing immigration from abroad, as international migrants tend to be in their 20s and 30s. Immigration to the region's cities accelerated during the past 15 years as new legal and illegal immigrants settled outside the traditional gateway cities of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami, attracted by job growth and affordable housing. Before the recent wave of immigration, Las Vegas and Phoenix had relatively few foreign-born residents and little history of accommodating new immigrants. Between 1990 and 2006, the foreign-born population increased across the board in the urban Southwest: from 6.8% to 14.5% in Austin, from 7.3% to 16.9% in Phoenix, from 11.2% to 21.8% in Las Vegas, and from 13.9% to 22.4% in Riverside-San Bernardino.

Accompanying the rapid growth in the foreign-born population was the ethnic transformation of these metropolitan regions. Hispanics in 2006 comprised 27.3% of metropolitan Las Vegas, 29.3% of Austin, 30.0% of Phoenix, and 44.1%

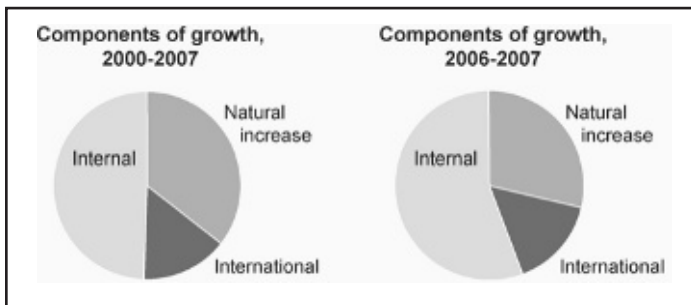


Figure 2. Components of growth for Southwestern cities. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates.

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of Riverside-San Bernardino. These totals disguise the fact that the urban cores or central cities of these metropolitan regions are now "minority majority" cities. Non-Hispanic whites now account for less than half of the total population in the cities of Las Vegas (49.9%), Austin (48.6%), Phoenix (48.2%), Riverside (37.7%), and San Bernardino (21.2%). Cities that were once thought of as destinations for middle-class white migrants from the East, Midwest, and California are now ethnically diverse, international, and cosmopolitan in their demographic make-ups and cultural outlooks.

Large-scale immigration has transformed the cultural landscape of these cities as well. In Phoenix, vibrant neighborhood shopping centers featuring Mexican music, food markets, bakeries, beauty shops, and bridal centers have replaced derelict strip malls (Figure 3). Young Hispanic families are repopulating declining older neighborhoods, and inner-city schools are reemerging as the focus of neighborhood and community life. Low naturalization rates among many of the foreign born (only 26.8% in Austin, 27.3% in Phoenix, 35.9% in Las Vegas, and 37.1% in Riverside-San Bernardino) hampers political participation in many new immigrant communities, and it is not uncommon for school district elec-

tions to be dominated by older white Anglo voters even where the school-aged population is heavily Hispanic. These disparities are exacerbated by substantial differences of the age structure of Hispanics and white Anglos. The median age of non-Hispanic whites in metro Phoenix is 35.5 years,



Figure 3. Immigrant businesses are changing the cultural and commercial landscape of central Phoenix.

compared to 25.3 for Hispanics. Comparable figures for Las Vegas are 36.5 and 26.6 years.

Demographics of Sustainability

Rapid growth puts enormous pressure on social, economic, and environmental systems prompting residents and outsiders increasingly to ask whether these rates of growth are sustainable. Although the

answer to this question is beyond the scope of this short essay, it is possible to speculate about what the demographic character of these cities means for the long-term challenges of growth. The sheer magnitude of growth, while not historically unprecedented, raises questions about how long it will be possible to support populations with the lifestyles and growth rates described above. The traditional model of growth as new land development on the urban fringe is deeply ingrained in the vision and identity of the urban Southwest and will need to be reexamined if the region is to add millions of new residents. Recent migrants can, on the one hand, complicate the search for the long-term, forward-looking solutions because they tend not to be as deeply invested in places as natives or long-term residents. On the other hand, they are more free from the conforming expectations of their origins and can think more

creatively and synergistically about the public policies and individual behaviors necessary to build prosperous, just, and environmentally sustainable cities, in the face of rapid growth, continued immigration, and greater social diversity. ■

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Transportation to the 2009 AAG Annual Meeting

Las Vegas is easily accessible by air, car, rail, or bus. The AAG is pleased to offer discounts from United Airlines and Amtrak. Information on discounts is available at www.aag.org/annualmeetings.

Major airlines provide hundreds of accessible and economical flights each day from points around the world to Las Vegas. A major transportation hub in the Southwest, Las Vegas offers nonstop service to 135 domestic and international destinations, including Canada, Germany, Mexico, the Philippines, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Currently, more than 34 airlines and 1,100 daily scheduled flights operate through McCarran International Airport, which is conveniently located just 4½ miles from the conference hotel.

Taxicabs, for-hire limousines, and shuttle services are all readily available. Amtrak has stops at the airport and downtown.