

Census: D-FW adds more residents than any other U.S. metro area

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By ELIZABETH LANGTON / The Dallas Morning News

elangton@dallasnews.com

North Texas' late entry to the economic slowdown allowed it to keep adding people last year – fewer than before, but still more than any other metro area for the second straight year, new census figures show.

The figures, to be released today, show that the Dallas-Fort Worth area added 146,532 people in 2007-08, even as the region grew at a slower pace than 23 other metropolitan areas.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates, which run from July 2007 to July 2008, reflect a period of transition, as Texas went from weathering the housing crash and subsequent economic meltdown to feeling its effects.

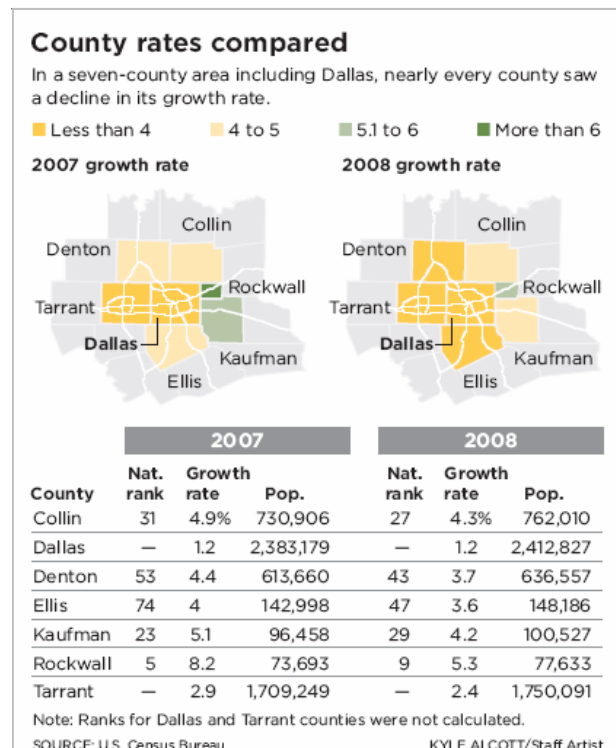
"Most of the Texas metro areas were creating jobs when even states like North Carolina and Georgia, who had been job creators, cooled off," Texas state demographer Karl Eschbach said. "That's finally caught up to Texas."

The data showed similar patterns for North Texas' swelling counties. Rockwall, once the nation's fastest-growing county, slipped from fifth to ninth. In Texas, it was second to Williamson County.

Kaufman, Collin, Ellis and Denton, while among the nation's top 50 fastest-growing counties, also saw their growth rates drop. But the latter three each moved up in the rankings, a telling sign that other areas of the country are seeing steeper drops in growth.

Rockwall County Judge Chris Florance said he has no worries about the slowdown.

"Ninth-fastest in the country is still pretty good," he said. "We have never been busier than we are now. We're just forging ahead."



Economy a factor

Demographers and economists say the faltering economy is the key factor for slowed growth in the nation's former boomtowns.

Even among areas with the largest population increases, communities including Boston, San Antonio, Denver and Raleigh, N.C., followed Dallas' pattern of continued growth at a slower or unchanged rate.

Like Dallas, three other metro areas – Houston, Phoenix and Atlanta – added more than 100,000 people. Only Houston grew in greater numbers than the previous year. Austin was the second-fastest-growing metro area in the country, behind Raleigh.

For the second straight year, St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana was the nation's fastest-growing county, at 12.8 percent. Another New Orleans-area parish, Orleans Parish, ranked third. Experts say those figures reflect a continuing influx of residents into areas ravaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Although growth is slowing, Dallas-Fort Worth, the nation's fourth-largest metro area, with 6.3 million people, has no reason to worry, said Lyssa Jenkins, chief economist of the Dallas Regional Chamber.

Despite dropping from 2.7 percent to 2.4 percent growth, the region is still adding about 400 people per day. That's 100 more than predicted trends, Jenkins said.

"It's a small pullback from an extreme level of growth," she said.

How it's calculated

Still, that doesn't mean the trend has run its course. The census numbers reflect conditions as of July 1, 2008 – before Texas experienced job losses and economic woes.

Eschbach said he expects the data to get worse before it gets better.

"This is all as of July," Eschbach said. "All bets are off now."

Today's data release includes two sets of population estimates, one of counties and the other of metropolitan statistical areas, previously released separately. The overall population is estimated by combining natural growth, births minus deaths, with population increases by international immigrants and residents from other areas of the U.S. International immigration especially affects Dallas-Fort Worth, where it accounts for about 50 percent of growth, said Pia Orrenius, an economist at the Dallas Federal Reserve. The approximately 32,000 new immigrants equated to a roughly 18 percent drop from 2007.

But considering that Texas has entered a recession, Orrenius said, an immigration drop-off should be considered positive.

"That is exactly what you want. This is the perfect time for people to not come here," she said. "There really aren't any jobs for anybody."

Strong, enviable

Planners say the decelerated growth will have little impact on long-term strategies concerning transportation, infrastructure and water supply. They say growth rates in North Texas are still strong and enviable.

"We're doing better than most of the country," said Duane Dankesreiter, research manager for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "Each year it may be different, but we're going to get there."

Texas' prospects remain unchanged, Orrenius said.

"This is a business cycle," she said of the growth drop-offs. "This does not change the long-term growth for Texas."

John Kessel, development director for McKinney, one of the nation's fastest-growing cities, said reduced growth is far different than negative growth.

"I think two to three years from now, we'll be right back in it," he said.

CENSUS NUMBERS: BIG GAINERS

Three Texas metro areas ranked among the 10 with the highest population growth nationally, according to figures released today by the U.S. Census Bureau:

Rank	Metropolitan area	2008 population*	Population increase from 2007	Percentage growth
* Population as of July 1 SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau				
1	Dallas	6,300,006	146,532	2.4
2	Houston	5,728,143	130,185	2.3
3	Phoenix	4,281,899	115,978	2.8
4	Atlanta	5,376,285	114,989	2.2
5	Los Angeles	12,872,808	88,196	0.7
6	New York	19,006,798	84,227	0.4
7	Chicago	9,569,624	72,771	0.8
8	Austin	1,652,602	60,012	3.8
9	San Francisco	4,274,531	58,406	1.4
10	Washington, D.C.	5,358,130	55,835	1.1