

Latinos projected to be ethnic majority by 2042

• **Whites will make up just 26 percent of population by 2050, analysts say; 'racial generation gap' predicted**

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Latinos will become the state's majority ethnic group by 2042, according to new population projections that portray a future California whose fortunes will increasingly depend on the skills of a predominantly non-white work force.

Population numbers released Monday by the state Department of Finance predict that 52 percent of all Californians will be Latino by 2050, when whites will be just 26 percent of the population.

Even in Santa Clara County -- where Asians made up a larger share of the population than any other California county in 2000 -- Latinos will outnumber Asians by 2020 and whites by 2040, although they will not be a majority.

The forecast, likely the last until after the 2010 Census, "implies a younger nonwhite work force supporting an older, white retirement-age population," said Mary Heim, the state demographer, who helped produce the projections.

Some question whether a state that has a growing mismatch between the general population and a voting population dominated by whites will make the right decisions now to ensure its future success.

"There's going to be a racial generation gap occurring," said Bill Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. He worries that white voters and corporate leaders in future decades will be "not as connected to the younger part of California, just simply because it's not their own children or their neighbors' children."

That Latinos are on a clear path to becoming the state's majority ethnic group is not new information for demographers. The state's last set of projections, in 2004, predicted it would happen by 2038, but the Finance Department adjusted its predictions to account for longer life expectancies that should keep more elderly whites around in future decades.

The latest view into the state's demographic future, however, underlines the degree to which California's quality of life -- everything from Silicon Valley's robust housing values to its well-paying jobs -- will ride on how well the state educates its native Latino children.

A crucial concern, experts said, is boosting the share of Latinos who go on to college and graduate.

"It's a big chunk of our future," said Dowell Myers, a professor of policy and planning at the University of Southern California. "These are basically the children of California. We're responsible for them, and we'd better make the most of them."

About 84 percent of the state's total population growth in the decade of the 2030s will be Latino, the new projections say. That dramatic growth will be driven not by immigration but by native children born to people who have immigrated here, demographers said.

"Immigrants get a lot of attention because they are the newcomers, but the babies outweigh the immigrants by a substantial margin. In the future years, it looks to me like the number of Latino immigrants is really going to be leveling off," said Myers, author of the 2007 book "Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America."

With a population of about 38 million, California will steadily add about 5 million people each decade -- passing the 40 million mark in 2012 and topping 50 million by 2032, the Finance Department projections say.

Los Angeles will continue to be California's largest county, passing 13 million denizens by 2050. Santa Clara will grow much more slowly than inland counties such as Riverside, Kern and San Joaquin, but it will still add more than 930,000 people, the Bay Area's largest numeric growth.

By mid-century, whites will be the majority population in just 23 California counties, while Latinos will be the majority group in 22, the Finance Department projections show.

"I think the important thing here is that Latinos are Californians; I think it's really important to talk about it in that perspective," said Nora Vargas, executive director of the San Francisco-based Latino Issues Forum. "They are born here, and they are raised here. We need to make sure these communities have the resources they need to be able to compete."

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