Florida's population grows again after first decline since mid-1940s

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After declining for the first time since the end of World War II, Florida's population grew once again last year, a hopeful yet tentative sign that the worst of the recession may have passed, according to the latest preliminary population estimates from the University of Florida.

The Sunshine State is estimated to have had the modest addition of more than 21,000 residents between 2009 and 2010 after its population fell by more than 56,000 between 2008 and 2009, said Stan Smith, director of UF's Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

"Even though the state turned it around, it still represents the smallest population increase since the 1940s and does not make up for last year's loss," Smith said. "Florida's population growth continues to be very, very slow by historical standards."

Florida grew by more than 125,000 residents in every year from 1950 to 2008, he said.

It is estimated that Florida added 21,285 residents during the past year, with its total population increasing from 18,750,483 on April 1, 2009, to 18,771,768 on April 1, 2010, Smith said. The previous year it lost an estimated 56,736 residents, he said.

"Two years ago, the economy was deteriorating rapidly, while over the past year there have been some signs that it is leveling off or even improving slightly," he said. "I think that's the reason we're seeing a

small increase in population.

"Although technically the [recession](#) has ended, the economy continues to be in bad shape, particularly in terms of its ability to create jobs," he said. "There have been some jobs added in the last few months, but unemployment is still very high and job growth is very weak."

Slightly more counties lost rather than added population, but the split was fairly even, Smith said. In percentage terms, both increases and decreases in counties' populations were generally very small, with no dramatic changes, he said.

"At the state level, foreign immigration continues to be relatively strong and the state also continues to have substantially more births than deaths, which are really the drivers of Florida's growth in the last year," he said.

The largest population gains were in some of the biggest counties. Miami-Dade led by adding an estimated 8,253 residents, followed by Hillsborough, 6,353, and Broward, 5,834, Smith said. "Because they're the largest counties, they have fairly sizeable numbers of births," he said. "They also receive a substantial number of foreign immigrants."

The county with the biggest percentage increase was Lafayette, which grew by 5.2 percent, but that change was largely attributed to the addition of state prison inmates, he said.

There was no pattern to which counties lost population, Smith said. They were spread throughout the state and included both large urban counties and small rural counties, he said.

The largest population decline was in Seminole County, which lost 3,659 residents, followed by Pinellas, 3,119, and Volusia, 2,055. In percentage terms, the county with the biggest decline was Glades, followed by

Jackson and Holmes.

With a quick economic turnaround unlikely at either the state or national level, Smith said he expects Florida's population to continue to grow slowly during the next year or two. Within the next 10 to 20 years, it is possible the state's annual population growth could be as high as 250,000, he said.

"From 2003 to 2006, Florida's population grew by more than 400,000 per year, and in the previous three decades increases averaged about 300,000 per year, although there were certainly ups and downs from year to year," he said.

Last year's population decline, a result of the economic slump, was the first since 1946, when military personnel left the state at the end of World War II.

"If the economy recovers sooner than people expect, we would expect faster growth," Smith said. "If it recovers less rapidly or even slips back into recession, we would expect that growth will continue to be very slow and possibly even be negative again."

Between 2000 and 2010, the counties that grew the most in absolute numbers were Miami-Dade, Orange and Hillsborough. Flagler had the highest growth rate, 90.4 percent, followed by Sumter, 82.6 percent, Osceola, 59.8 percent, St. Johns, 50.6 percent, and Wakulla, 41.7 percent.

The population figures are interim estimates that will be replaced by numbers from the 2010 census when they become available early next year, Smith said.