

Census numbers show R.I.'s soul

More numbers have been released by the government from the 1990 census on population and housing. The results tell us something of the uniqueness of this smallest state.

It is useful to determine trends from the past and the present in order to plan for the future, a common method of analysis. But it is also helpful to realize that we are a part of a region and a country, and much can be learned by making comparisons between ourselves and others for the same period of time.

The Census Bureau divides the country into four regions; the Northeast, Midwest, South and West. Rhode Island is one of the nine states in the Northeast region. In addition to the other five New England states, New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey comprise the Northeast.

Rhode Island reached the landmark population figure of 1,003,464 in 1990. But our small state, at 43rd in population, is ahead of only seven other states in rank and is only behind Vermont in the Northeast. But at the same time, one of every five Americans lives in the Northeast.

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Our slow rate of population increase between 1980 and 1990 is not unusual; in 17 out of the 20 censuses since 1790, our rate of growth has been below the national average. But five of the nine Northeast states had growth rates less than Rhode Island's, so the region's rate of growth was only about one-third that of the nation. New Hampshire, a regional exception, was one of only six states in the country whose growth rate exceeded 20 percent.

With 15 percent of Rhode Island's population 65 and older, we are now tied with West Virginia as the fourth oldest state in the nation; only Florida, Pennsylvania and Iowa are higher. High median ages in Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania help make the Northeast the oldest of the four regions in the country.

It is in our ethnic and racial makeup that we are quite different from the rest of the Northeast and the nation. With 30 ethnic groups recognized by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and other groups that are not formally organized, there is little doubt that ours is a unique state. To further illustrate our uniqueness, Rhode Island led the nation over the past decade in percentage increase of Asians (245.6 percent) and Hispanics (132.2 percent). Nearly one in every 20 Rhode Islanders is Hispanic, our largest minority group.

It must be recognized that these large percentage increases are built upon a small population base, so a small numerical increase may show a large percentage increase, as it did in both cases here. Further, the chart shows that Rhode Island's Asian population is only 1.8 percent—18,325 people—and Hispanics comprise 4.6 percent with 45,752 people. Both these percentages are just more than one-half the national figures.

The black population, now our second-largest minority group at 3.9 percent—38,861 people—increased by 40.9 percent in the past 10 years, compared with a national increase of 13.2 percent. But it should be noted from the chart that Rhode Island's black proportion of the population is less than one-third that of the nation.

Given the ethnic and racial diversity in the state, Rhode Island's white population, at 91.4 percent, is among the highest in the region and the nation. So it is important to note that even though there is a large number of racial and ethnic groups in the state, the racial minorities make up a smaller proportion of the total population than that found in only 16 other states.

Hispanics, now the second largest minority group in the country after blacks, grew at a 53 percent rate in the past 10 years, well above that of the 13.2 percent for blacks. The growing importance of the Hispanic population has caused the Census Bureau to list this ethnic group separately. It must be remembered that Hispanics normally class themselves as white, but some are found in all of the various racial groups.

The noteworthy numbers on housing, obtained from a 17 percent sample of the population that answered the census long form, reveal that on April 1, 1990, Rhode Island had the most expensive houses, the smallest proportion of owner-occupied housing and the fewest people per house-

hold when compared with the region and the nation.

The Northeast remains one of the highest-priced housing areas of the country, with current prices moderating only slightly from 1990. It must be remembered also that these 1990 prices came from the values placed on them by the owners, not by an objective appraisal.

Being part of a heavily urbanized area helps explain our lower owner-occupied rate and the relatively low rate of detached houses. In urban areas, there are normally more renters, and land is expensive, so housing tends to be in multiple units rather than detached. Fewer people live in these units, so we have small household size.

The difference between total housing units and households determines the vacancy rate which, in Rhode Island in 1990, was 9.4 percent. But it must be remembered that one-third of these vacant units are seasonal, recreational or occasional in their use.

As more detailed data is released by the Census Bureau over time, it is likely that this smallest of states will again stand out in other aspects relating to population and housing. Fortunately, releasing these numbers slowly allows us to absorb them in a meaningful fashion.

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