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LEE MINORITY POPULATION YOUNG, SOARING

Reporter: Erin Gillespie

Laura Rubiano exemplifies a newcomer to Lee County.

At 27, Rubiano is young and Hispanic, a segment of Southwest Florida's population that is soaring primarily because of higher fertility rates and immigration.

According to U.S. Census figures, Rubiano is exactly the median age of Hispanics in Lee County.

Recently released census and demographic studies show a changing Lee County. It is home to more minorities and continues to get younger — at least until the expected surge when the baby boomers retire in large numbers in the coming years.

Lee County's 550,000 people still are overwhelmingly white, but minorities are growing at faster rates. There are about 77,000 Hispanics and less than 40,000 blacks. The median age for blacks is 27 and for whites it is 46, a number that skews older primarily as a result of retired snowbirds.

Minority populations — especially blacks and Hispanics — are much younger and have higher birth rates, and thus bigger families, the U.S. Census Bureau reports.

By 2030, according to the University of Florida's Bureau of Business and Economic Research, Lee will be less than 70 percent white and more than 21 percent Hispanic.

That same year, Florida will be about 55 percent white, 17 percent black and 25 percent Hispanic.

Stanley Smith, a demographer and director of the university's research bureau, said the center's estimates are based on the census, National Center for Health Statistics, birth and death rates, and migration numbers, including immigration to and emigration from the state.

The bureau, which looked at 10 counties in Southwest Florida, including Lee, predicts the area will see a higher percentage growth than other regions in the state, mainly because of baby boomer retirees seeking warmer climates.

Snowbird migration also has changed the face of Southwest Florida.

It already has the highest percentage of people ages 65 and older compared to the rest of the state — 27 percent.

It also has the lowest percentage of blacks — 6 percent.

"Migration into Florida has traditionally been a white phenomenon," Smith said.

That doesn't count immigration, which accounts for more than a quarter of the growth in Florida, which has a population of 17 million. Traditionally, Florida's immigrants have come primarily from Latin America and the Caribbean.

"That obviously changes the racial/ethnic makeup of the state," he said. "That's had a large impact and that's a part of the reason we expect the Hispanic population to increase."

Most newcomers to Florida are in their 20s and 30s, Smith said, but they are the largest group leaving the state as well.

"They're just a very mobile group," he said.

Of the newcomers who move to Florida and stay, almost 50 percent are older than 55.

Like Rubiano, many young people, and about half of the baby boom generation, are coming to and staying in Florida for job opportunities.

"When you have a good job, you think twice to start all over again in another place," said Rubiano, a Colombian immigrant and Spanish teacher at Gateway Charter.

For people older than 55, the climate is the big draw.

As baby boomers move out of the snow and into the sun, Florida's 65-plus population will also increase.

Estimates show that 230,000 people ages 65 to 79 will live in Lee County by 2030.

That's an increase of 20,000 for that age group alone.

"The first of the baby boomers start hitting 65 in 2011," Smith said. "That's why it's been pretty flat, but then it's expected to start increasing fairly rapidly."

Florida saw a net increase of 1.3 million people from 1995 to 2000, including people from other states and other countries.

By 2010, Florida will be the third most populous state in the country, overtaking New York and trailing only California and Texas.

Southwest Florida, like the rest of the state, is enjoying rapid growth and will continue to do so until about 2020, when growth will slow, according to the university research bureau's estimates.

By that time [2020], Lee County will have more than 800,000 people.

"The general expectation is that the annual increase will start to become smaller over time, starting probably not so much in this decade but in the next decade," Smith said.

That's good news for Joyce Tarnow, president of Floridians for a Sustainable Population, but she doesn't think it's enough.

"For any person who's concerned about quality of life issues, they've got to be appalled at our growth rate," she said. "What in the world are we going to do with 25 or 30 million?"

Tarnow said the state is overwhelmed. Hospitals are full, courts are crowded, water quality is poor.