



Demographic transformations in South Texas: Confronting inequality as Latinos forge the future

Rogelio Sáenz, Ph.D.

South Texas has long been a dynamic region.

It is the homeland of many of the state's Latinos, and the National Free Trade Agreement brought significant levels of business activity and the flow of goods and services, especially along the Texas-Mexico border area.

The region has also experienced significant population and employment growth, particularly in the more urbanized parts. Yet South Texas is often overlooked as eyes turn to the Texas Triangle that links the state's four most populous metropolitan areas — Austin, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio.

South Texas represents the gateway to Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean. Investors and business leaders see the great potential for the creation of business and cultural activities in South Texas and the northern part of Mexico. The binational region is increasingly seen as the South Texas Triangle comprising 47 Texas counties. The region extends north to Gillespie County, west to Val Verde County, east to Jackson County and south to Cameron County, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the Texas population.

What do we know about the demography of the South Texas region, and what implications can we draw from this knowledge?

Between 2011 and 2021, according to data from the American Community Survey, South Texas' population grew by 13% and its workforce rose by 19%. This change was a bit below the rest of Texas, which grew by 17% and 21%, respectively.

Urban growth, rural decline

Part of the reason for the slower population and job growth in South Texas is the relatively slow growth, or even decline, in smaller, more rural counties and the significant aging of the white population.

Further, births have fallen widely since the Great Recession. Based on births in Bexar, Cameron, Hidalgo, Nueces and Webb counties, the total fertility rate in South Texas fell from 2.28 in 2011 to 1.88 in 2021. The total fertility rate, according to the World Bank, is the number of births a woman would have if she lived through her childbearing years and bore children in accordance with age-specific fertility rates of the specified year.

This is an 18% drop in South Texas compared with a decline of 14% among women in the rest of Texas. With a total fertility rate of 1.88, South Texas is now below the replacement level of 2.1, as is the case with women in the remainder of the state, who have a total fertility rate of 1.74.

The number of births in the five metro counties of South Texas fell 9% between 2011 and 2021, while they rose slightly in the rest of Texas.

The fastest population growth in the South Texas Triangle occurred in Bexar County and five suburban counties that are part of the San Antonio metro area, and in Hidalgo County in the Rio Grande Valley.

Bexar County grew by 18% and Hidalgo County by 14%. But the growth was the greatest in Comal County, where the population soared by 47%, and in Kendall and Guadalupe counties, which grew by about 34%, with somewhat slower growth in Wilson and Medina counties.

Of the 18 rural counties in South Texas (defined as those neither a micropolitan area nor part of a metro area), 13 sustained a loss in population with five experiencing slow growth.

However, there is a clear divide between Latinos and whites. Between 2011 and 2021, the Latino population in the region rose by a little more than 500,000 people, a 16% increase, compared with a growth of 5,800 whites, a slight 0.5% bump. Latino growth was widespread, occurring in 36 of the 47 South Texas counties, while white population decline took place in 38 of the 47 counties.

This difference is due to variations in age between Latinos and whites in the region. The white median age in the South Texas region is 45 compared with 30.5 for Latinos. About 23% of whites in the region are 65 or older, compared with 10% of Latinos, while nearly 31% of Latinos are younger than 18, compared with 18% of whites.

Job growth between 2011 and 2021 was quite prevalent. Fifteen counties located primarily in the San Antonio metro area, the Valley, and Webb and Maverick counties had gains of more than 10% during this period.

Among metropolitan centers, Bexar County led the way with job growth of 25%, followed by Hidalgo County (21%), Cameron County (18%) and Webb County (12%). The most rapid growth in employment occurred in Willacy County (50%), Comal County (48%), Guadalupe County (32%) and Kendall County (31%). Willacy County is in the Rio Grande Valley, while the other three are part of the San Antonio metro area. Among the 15 counties that experienced employment decline, 13 are rural counties.

There also are vast differences between Latinos and whites in employment change between 2011 and 2021 in the region. Latinos had a growth of 316,000 jobs during this time, or 26%, while whites had a decline of 6,000 jobs, or 1%. Again, Latino employment increased in 37 of the 47 counties while whites suffered job losses in 35 of the 47 counties.

Pervasive inequality

Despite the important role Latinos have played in the region's population and job growth, they have extremely low socioeconomic status compared with whites. For example, only 17% of Latinos 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 38.5% of whites.

Latino families, with a poverty rate of 20%, are 3.5 times more likely than white families to be poor. The child poverty rate of Latinos is 31% in South Texas, three times the rate of white children.

Latino families, with a median income of less than \$57,000, earn 59 cents for every \$1 that white families make.

Finally, 25% of Latinos in South Texas do not have health insurance compared with 10% of whites. Indeed, there are wide gulfs between the socioeconomic standing of Latinos and whites in the region.

The South Texas region is undergoing significant demographic shifts.

The population and employment growth are largely concentrated in San Antonio and its surrounding suburban counties, as well as along the southwestern border. Rural areas, which account for approximately one-third of the 47 South Texas counties, generally are struggling with population and employment decline.

Driving demographics

Latinos are driving the region's population and employment growth, and they will do so even more in the coming decades.

With extremely limited socioeconomic resources, however, Latinos face significant challenges that impact the competitiveness of South Texas as it dreams of building economic bridges with its counterparts in Northern Mexico and beyond.

The current and future pace of Latino population growth today and in the near future is a shadow of what it was back in the 1990s. We are seeing glimpses of Latino aging in South Texas, propelled by a falling birth rate over the last 15 years or so. People 65 and older already make up more than 15 percent of the Latino populations in eight of the 47 counties in the region (Brooks, Dimmit, Duval, Edwards, Goliad, Kenedy, Kinney and Refugio), all but one of these are rural areas.

An important query: What will happen to the rural segments of South Texas? Will population and employment continue to decline? At present, it appears that these trends will continue.

In Mexico, too, major drops in fertility have contributed to an aging population. Mexican immigration to the U.S. has fallen tremendously. In an article I wrote for the Conversation, I show that the volume of Mexican immigration to the U.S. in the 2013-2017 period was less than half of what it was a decade earlier.

In South Texas, the number of Latinos migrating from abroad within the last year fell 5% between 2011 and 2021. This occurred in Bexar County, as well as in five border counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Webb and Willacy), although the number of people arriving from abroad rose somewhat in two other border counties, Maverick and Zapata.

The South Texas Triangle holds significant possibilities for collaborative efforts between South Texas political and business leaders, along with their counterparts in Northern Mexico. The demographic profile outlined here suggests that along with these possibilities are some challenges that need to be considered.

Rogelio Sáenz is professor in the Department of Sociology and Demography at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Note: This article was first published in the *San Antonio Express-News* on November 3, 2023.

The original article can be accessed at

https://www.expressnews.com/opinion/commentary/article/south-texas-triangle-demographics-18460087.php?utm_source=marketing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=article-share&hash=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZXhwcmVzc25ld3MuY29tL29waW5pb24vY29tbWVudGFyeS9hcnRpY2xlL3NvdXRoLXRleGFzLXRyaWFuZ2xlLWRlbW9ncmFwaGljcy0xODQ2MDA4Ny5waHA=&time=MTY5OTAxMzk1NjY5OA==&rid=NGUwZDMyYjMtMmUxYy00ZTIwLWFjNWQtNTQ4ZGIxM2Y1MzA0&sharecount=Mg==