Houston is second fastest-growing metro in U.S., census data shows, with post-COVID population surge

By Yilun Cheng

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Houston is the second fastest-growing major metro area in the U.S., seeing its largest population increase in the past six years, a recent census analysis shows.

Between July 2021 and July 2022, the nine-county Houston metro area, which includes The Woodlands and Sugar Land, added 125,000 residents to its population. The region's population now totals 7.34 million, according to the analysis by the Greater Houston Partnership, based on U.S. Census data. Dallas-Fort Worth was the fastest-growing major metro area in the same period.

The new figure, exceeding the 20-year average of 119,000 residents per year, signals a recovery from the pandemic-induced growth slowdown, a Greater Houston Partnership report said. During 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic hindered population rises in the Houston area, leading to the lowest growth rates in the past two decades, with only about 75,000 people added each year.

"There was a sizeable uptick in population growth last year compared to the prior year's historically low increase," Kristie Wilder, a demographer in the Population Division at the Census Bureau, previously told the Chronicle. "A rebound in net international migration, coupled with the largest year-over-year increase in total births since 2007, is behind this increase."

Two-thirds of Houston's population gains in 2022 resulted from new residents moving to the area, while the rest came from births surpassing deaths. The steady influx of foreign-born residents remains crucial for the region's growth, analysts at the Greater Houston Partnership found, with international migration contributing to more than one-third of the region's overall population rise.

A high net increase in migration typically signals a region's economic prosperity, the report said. In this regard, Houston stands out as an exception, as 12 of the nation's 20 largest metros saw more people moving out than in during 2022, exacerbating their population declines.

"Houston performed exceptionally well last year," the Greater Houston Partnership report said. "Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and St. Louis lost a combined 600,000 residents to outmigration last year. If not for births exceeding deaths in these metros, their overall population losses would have been even greater."

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According to the report, the strong population upswing could help explain Houston's surge in jobs, housing demand, and traffic. In the 12 months ending July 1, 2022, the city saw an additional 176,000 jobs, 108,000 single-family homes, 21,000 apartment units and 280,000 vehicles, according to census data.

Houston now solidifies its position as the fifth most populated metro in the nation, trailing behind New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Dallas-Fort Worth. Analysts said that Houston is unlikely to surpass Dallas-Fort Worth in the near future, as the latter experienced the largest population increase last year, and might face pressure from Washington, D.C., which currently ranks sixth.

"At current growth rates, the rankings of the 10 most populous metros are unlikely to shift anytime soon," the report said.

Mayor Sylvester Turner's office did not immediately respond to a request for comments.

Meanwhile, Texas, with six of the nation's top 10 fastest-growing counties, saw the highest population increase of any state, with about 471,000 new residents in 2020. It has now joined California as the only two states in the nation with a population of more than 30 million.