

Valley population keeps growing despite outward migration

By Tim Sheehan

The Valley's changing face

Number of people that left each of the Valley counties in each year between 2010 and 2014:

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Fresno County	-3,503	-4,560	-3,764	-1,331
Kings County	-2,470	-2,860	-2,458	-2,504
Madera County	-587	-1,427	-1,408	939
Tulare County	-1,052	-1,850	-2,112	-1,916

Overall population change by county (includes births, deaths, domestic and international migration, etc.):

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Fresno County	8,618	6,980	7,862	9,872
Kings County	-355	-723	-478	-593
Madera County	994	96	-79	2,383
Tulare County	4,532	3,675	3,226	3,473

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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- Valley population changes

Populations of central San Joaquin Valley counties and California, 2010 and mid-2014:

Area	2010 population	2014 population	% change
Fresno County	930,450	965,974	3.8%
Kings County	152,982	150,862	-1.8%
Madera County	150,865	154,548	2.4%
Tulare County	442,179	458,198	3.6%
California	37,253,956	38,431,393	4.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Figures for April 1, 2010 and June 30, 2014.

The central San Joaquin Valley's population grew by about 52,000 between the 2010 U.S. Census and mid-2014. Of the region's four counties, only in Kings County did the population fall in the four-year period.

The farming county, where cows outnumber humans by better than 2-to-1, saw its people population fall from just under 153,000 in the April 2010 census to just over 150,000 as of July 1, 2014, according to estimates issued Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau. It's a decline of 2,700, or almost 2%. (There were about 345,000 head of cattle in the county at the end of 2013.)

Kings County administrator Larry Spikes is pretty sure he knows the reason: the restructuring of California's penal system that began in 2011.

"I think it's a direct function of prison realignment," Spikes said Wednesday. "We have three prisons in our county, two in Corcoran and one in Avenal, and all those inmates are in the census numbers." Since California began dealing with prison overcrowding and changing the way that felony offenders are sentenced, inmate ranks are shrinking, "and it's a big enough number to have an effect on our population."

Sure enough, the state is housing thousands fewer inmates at Avenal State Prison, Corcoran State Prison and the Substance Abuse Treatment Facility-Corcoran now than it did in 2010. The three prisons held more than 18,200 inmates back then. By mid-2014, that was down to just over 13,500 — a reduction of almost 26%.

Fresno County continues to be the population hub of the region, hovering tantalizingly close to the 1-million-people threshold. The Census Bureau estimated that almost 966,000 people resided in the county, an increase of more than 35,000 or 3.8% from 2010. Tulare County remained the second most populous county, growing by 3.6% to almost 460,000. And Madera County overtook sliding Kings in the region, growing by 2.4% to more than 154,500.

Lassen County was the only one of California's 58 counties to post a bigger population decline than Kings County, losing about 3,150 residents.

Statewide, California's population climbed by more than 1.7 million, or about 4.2%, to exceed 38.8 million last year.

The state's prison realignment plan, AB 109, made changes to where felons serve their sentences. Instead of being sent to state prisons, people convicted of less serious, nonviolent and nonsexual offenses now do their time in county jails. The Valley's six prisons — the three Kings County lockups, plus one in Coalinga and two in Chowchilla — saw their populations drop from a total of more than 30,000 in 2010 to about 23,500 in mid-2014. That's a decline of about 22%.

There is, however, more to population change than where inmates are housed.

There are births, and lots of them. The Census Bureau estimates that more than 122,600 babies were born in Fresno, Kings, Madera and Tulare counties from 2010 to 2014. Those babies easily outnumbered the 46,800 deaths that happened during that time period.

And there are people moving into or out of the region. Since 2010, in California and in the Valley, more people have been moving out than moving in.

Collectively, the net effect of such domestic migration in the four Valley counties was an exodus of almost 35,000 people in the four-year span. Fresno County saw the biggest change, with more than 13,800 people choosing to settle elsewhere. Kings County rang in with a net departure of more than 11,400 residents, followed by about 7,200 from Tulare County and almost 2,500 from Madera County.

Spikes said he thinks prison realignment also plays a role in Kings County's out-of-proportion migration figure. "I think it has to, because I'm not aware that we're that much different than anyplace else in the Valley," he said. "It may be that migrant farmworkers aren't around as much now as they were because of a lack of work, but that's going to be the case in the other counties as well."

No matter the reason for population growth or decline, the numbers can have significant consequences for local governments, particularly cities, because federal budget allocations are linked to census figures. "A lot of shares of revenue are based on population, and, of course, the cities have to provide services for those folks," Spikes said. "Especially in places like Corcoran, in times when we saw our population boosting up, prisons were a big part of that."

"Now," he added, "we're seeing it go the other way as the prison populations are reduced."

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