

Opinion: Demography underlies big issues in California

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

The legislative session that reconvened this month faces no shortage of big issues, but underlying all of them is demographic change that is dramatically altering the face of California.

New data frame the change:

- Recent reports from the U.S. Census Bureau and the state Department of Finance agree that our historically high population growth has dropped to under 1 percent a year, a third of what it was in the 1980s.
- The slowdown stems from a virtual halt to foreign migration, a net outflow to other states and a rapidly decreasing birthrate – factors which, if continued, could see California's population start to decline in a few years.
- A new study by the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health says that due to the declining migration and birthrates, the number of California children under 10 years old dropped by nearly 200,000 between 2000 and 2010 and is expected to decline by another 100,000 during the current decade.

"These trends are not yet widely recognized, but they should be a wake-up call for policymakers," said report author Dowell Myers, a USC demographer.

"We will be increasingly dependent economically and socially on a smaller number of children. They are more important to the state's future success than ever before."

- Latinos now constitute more than half of the state's

children, and both the Packard Foundation and the Center for the Next Generation, in another new report, raise the specter of increasing child poverty. In fact, a recent Census Bureau study, measuring poverty by a new method, says California has the nation's highest rate.

"We can't honestly separate our state's economic future from current poverty rates among our kids," Ann O'Leary, co-author of the latter report, said. "Our ability to thrive as the world's ninth-largest economy depends on having an educated, healthy and stable next generation of workers. We're headed in the opposite direction."

- Meanwhile, the state's white population is declining (it will drop below 40 percent this year) and aging rapidly as the baby-boom generation moves from middle age (the youngest boomers are nearly 50) into retirement (the oldest will turn 67 this year).

- These California trends emulate states in the Northeast and upper Midwest, such as New York and Michigan, more than they do those in the South and Southwest. While California's under-10 population was declining by nearly 200,000 between 2000 and 2010, for instance, Texas was adding nearly 600,000.

Gov. Jerry Brown understands that California is being buffeted by a demographic storm and reflects that knowledge in his new budget. "This is an aging society, and inequality is growing," he said.

But do others in the Capitol grasp the stark challenge it presents?