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W.Va. Lags Nation in Diversity

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Officials site state's rural nature as one of the reasons minorities may not be attracted to area.

Story by Beth Gorczyca Ryan

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West Virginia may be becoming a little more diverse, but the state still is one of the least diverse places in America, according to recently released statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

In 2000, the Mountain State's population was 95.3 percent white with the remaining 4.7 percent of people being either black, Asian, American Indian, native Hawaiian or two or more races. By 2006, the percentage of minorities in West Virginia increased slightly to 5.1 percent.

That is a lot different from the rest of the nation, which showed a much larger percentage of minority population. In fact, the newly released census numbers show nearly one out of 10 American counties has a majority of minority residents.

"We are still one of the least diverse states in the nation," said Kent Sowards, director of data and survey services with the Center for Business and Economic Research at Marshall University.

In fact, of West Virginia's 55 counties, three are more than 99 percent white. Tyler County has the least diversity with 99.23 percent white residents, about one tenth percent Asian and less than a tenth of a percent of black or American Indian. That county is followed closely by Webster County, which is 99.08 percent white, and Lincoln County, which is 99.07 percent white.

The most diverse county in the state is in the southern coalfields. According to the census, McDowell County is 88.3 percent white, 10.7 percent black, seven-tenths of a percent two or more races and two-tenths of a percent American Indian. The county has less than a tenth of a percent of Asian and native Hawaiian residents.

McDowell County is followed by Kanawha County, which is 89.8 percent white and 7.43 percent black, and Raleigh County, which is 89.9 percent white and 8.1 percent black.

The recently released census information does not take into account whether a respondent is Hispanic. According to the census, the federal government "treats Hispanic origin and race as separate and distinct concepts" because a person who is Spanish, Latino or Hispanic can be any race. As a result, the census tracks Hispanic populations in states and counties in a different survey.

Sowards said while he wasn't surprised that West Virginia was one of the five least diverse states in the nation, what stood out to him was that it was the least diverse state in the Southeastern and mid-Atlantic regions. The only state that has somewhat similar racial demographics in the region was Kentucky. That state is home to one of the least diverse counties in the United States -- Magoffin County, which was 98.9 percent non-Hispanic white. It is joined by Mitchell County, Iowa, which also is 98.9 percent white.

Sowards said some other interesting nuggets of information popped out at him when he was looking at the racial makeup of individual counties within West Virginia. One of those was the dramatic increase in minorities in Summers County. Between 2000 and 2006, that county experienced a 200 percent increase in minority population. Another county that caught his attention was Gilmer County.

"Gilmer County is losing population, but it seems to be gaining minority population," he said.

In 2000, Gilmer had 7,160 residents. Of those residents, 6,982 were white, 65 were black, 16 were American Indian, 41 were Asian, 55 were two or more races and one was native Hawaiian. By 2006, the population of Gilmer County dropped to 6,965, of which 6,710 were white. But the number of black and Asian residents increased to 74 and 106, respectively. The numbers of residents that described themselves as American Indians, native Hawaiians and of two or more races remained relatively the same at 16, 3 and 56 respectively.

He said one of the reasons why West Virginia may not be attracting as many minorities to its counties may be because of its rural nature.

Another big reason, he said, is because the state doesn't have any large metropolitan areas in need of workers like other states.

"Without a big population center and a lot of manufacturing, we don't see a lot of draw," he said. "Traditionally, the big economic driver that brought people into West Virginia was mining. But that isn't as much of a draw now."

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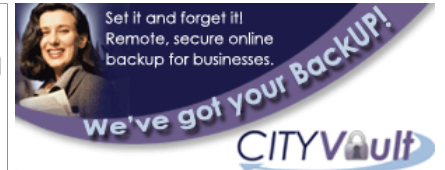
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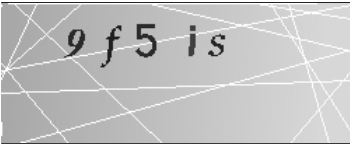
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