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Diversity, Bulging Suburbs Fuel Lehigh Valley Growth

The Lehigh Valley is growing in population and diversity, as people flock to Lehigh and Northampton counties for their beauty, job opportunities and high quality of life.

The Valley's population of 687,508 people is a more than 40,000 increase since 2010, making it one of the fastest-growing regions in a state where 44 of 67 counties shrunk.

Much of it can be attributed to increases in Non-White residents, and in particular Hispanics or Latinos, as the number of people who identify with that ethnicity grew by nearly 45,000.

"The Lehigh Valley's diversity is one of its great strengths and the numbers show that it's certainly playing a key role in our growth," said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. "The fact is, this is still a very desirable place to live for anyone looking for a higher quality of life. We have a lot to offer."

The Census is taken every 10 years to provide a clear picture of who we are and where we're headed, and the numbers dictate how hundreds of billions of dollars in federal funding will be spent and where it will be invested. The latest numbers can be found at [census.gov](https://www.census.gov).

The release of the Census is done in phases, and for this count, is being unveiled about five months later than usual because of delays caused in part by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The numbers released in August were focused on total count, race and ethnicity, and voting age, to give political and legislative leaders the data they need to redraw Congressional district lines.

The full count, with more detailed demographic information, is set for release September 30.

That the Lehigh Valley grew, and even by how much, should surprise no one. Lehigh and Northampton counties have experienced remarkably steady growth of roughly 40,000 people a decade since 1950. And that continued in a decade, from 2010 to 2020, that started in the midst of a deep recession that cratered the housing market.

Overall, the region generally grew fastest in its suburban townships, where Upper Macungie and Upper Nazareth grew by more than 30%, with Allen and Lower Nazareth growing by more than 20%.

The Valley's cities also grew, with Allentown taking on nearly 8,000 more residents for a 6.6% growth, while Easton increased by 5% and Bethlehem grew by a little less than 1%.

"The hollowing of the cities has been a defining feature of the Northeast for decades and this was a complete reversal of that," said Professor Chris Borick, Director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion, which performs a State of the Lehigh Valley Quality of Life each year. "Not every region can say that. Reversing that trend is going to be important for the future health of the Lehigh Valley."

While the region grew overall by 6.2%, there were pockets where the population decreased slightly, primarily in parts of the Slate Belt and Northern Lehigh County. Most were minor reductions of fewer than 100 residents.

Though the overall growth helps fuel a Lehigh Valley economy with a gross domestic product of more than \$43 billion, it also comes with challenges.

“It means more cars on our roads and more strain on our infrastructure. That’s something we’re going to have to address,” Bradley said. “And it means we need more homes – a lot more. The region currently has a serious housing shortage because so many people want to be here. That, too, will have to be addressed in the coming months and years.”

Bradley said people come here for a quality of life that includes open space, recreation, job opportunities and housing, that despite median sale prices rising sharply to \$275,000 by July, remains relatively affordable in a nation where the median sales price is now above \$380,000.

If there is a statistic that stands out in the new Census numbers, it’s the growth in diversity, and particularly the increase of residents who identify as Latino or Hispanic. Valleywide, an addition of 10,575 Black residents makes them now 6.8% of the population, and an increase of 6,532 makes Asian residents 3.5% of the population. However, an additional 44,599 people who identify with the ethnicity of Hispanic or Latino easily make them the fastest-growing subgroup in the region. It’s especially prevalent in Allentown, where they make up 54% of the third-largest city in Pennsylvania, with 125,845 residents.

Statewide, Hispanics or Latinos crossed the 1 million mark for the first time.

Olga Negron, a Bethlehem Councilwoman and Co-Chair of the Pennsylvania Latino Convention, is celebrating the Valley’s diversity expansion, and she suggested that it will continue because this region has become a safe haven for Latinos, she said.

“A lot of this growth we’ve seen can be traced to Hurricane Maria (2017) and the (2019) earthquake,” said Negron, who sits on the board of the Hispanic Center Lehigh Valley. “When people flee the island, they go to Florida, they come to Pennsylvania and they come here by the thousands.”

But this growth, much like the overall growth, presents challenges. With so many coming from places where Spanish is the primary language, it will require more Spanish-speaking interpreters in schools, hospitals and social service programs, and more attainable housing for those trying to build a new life.

It’s all just more evidence that this region’s growth is undeterred. In fact, this decade – the one that will be counted in the 2030 Census – is already off to a fast start. An LVPC housing market analysis determined that the region’s housing market is 7,000 to 10,000 homes short of what a healthy market should have, based on data on the number of vacant homes.

Developers have spent the first half of this year rushing to fill that void. From January to June, the LVPC reviewed plans for more than 2,500 new units – the most we’ve seen in more than a decade – and that flurry of new home proposals is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

“As long as we remain an attractive place to be for people and businesses, we’re going to keep growing,” Bradley said. “Our most important job over this next decade is managing that growth in a way that preserves the quality of life that everyone comes here to experience.”

Top 10 growing municipalities

Municipality	2020 Population	(Increase since 2010)
1. Upper Macungie Township	26,377	(+6,314, 32%)
2. Upper Nazareth Township	8,127	(+1,896, 30%)
3. Allen Township	5,456	(+1,187, 28%)
4. Lower Nazareth Township	6,922	(+1,248, 22%)
5. Upper Saucon Township	16,973	(+2,165, 15%)
6. Chapman Borough	223	(+24, 12%)
7. Williams Township	6,581	(+697, 12%)
8. Alburtis Borough	2,596	(+235, 10%)
9. South Whitehall Township	21,080	(+1,900, 10%)
10. Forks Township	16,074	(+1,353, 9%)