

# Merced among fastest-growing counties in the state, report says

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A growing UC Merced footprint and one of the youngest populations in the state put Merced County in the third spot for fastest growing counties in California, according to the latest growth projections from the state Department of Finance.

The [state's report](#), released this month, also projects that Madera and Kern counties will be among the state's 10 fastest-growing counties by mid-century. The three counties trail only Yolo, the report says.

Merced County's population is projected to grow by nearly 68 percent between 2015 and 2060, reaching 452,519 residents. If the state's estimates prove accurate in other parts of the state, Kern will overtake Fresno in the 10th most populated county by 2052.

Perhaps it's no surprise that UC Merced's [next phase of growth](#) is expected to bring new people to Merced and be an economic driver in the region, but there's another reason for growth, according to Walter Schwarm, a demographer at the Department of Finance.

## 67.8 percent

### **Merced County's projected to growth between 2015 and 2060**

Swarm said that Merced's relatively young population means the county has a higher-than-average birth rate.

"There's still fairly healthy growth in the number of children in Merced. That contributes differentially relative to the other counties."

High housing prices along the coast and in the north part of the state – and a reluctance to build more there to meet the demand – will continue to push more people inland, including those who live in the Valley but commute for better-paying jobs, he said.

That growth, fueled in part by cheap land and relatively inexpensive housing compared to the state's coastal areas, likely will mean more traffic and wear-and-tear on the region's roads, said Tony Boren, executive director of the [Fresno Council of Governments](#), a regional planning agency.

Keeping up with the additional vehicles and pounding they'll bring to Valley roads will be an ongoing challenge for transportation planners, Boren said. With the state trying to encourage more use of public transit and alternate modes of transportation, like bicycles, Boren said the region is in a constant battle with the state over dollars to keep needed roads in good repair.

The other piece important in that is Merced still remains, in terms of the Central Valley area, it has a relatively large birth rate still.

Walter Schwarm, a demographer at the Department of Finance

The trip from farm to market starts on a county road and continues on a state highway – and it takes vehicles to move the goods. “You're not going to get a ton of raisins to market on the back of a bicycle,” Boren said.

Growth effects aren't just going to be felt in Merced County. According to the state's projections, Madera County – whose population was estimated at 154,956 in 2015 – could hit 262,065 residents by 2060. Fresno County's population could grow from 979,357 to 1.46 million by 2060.

More broadly, the state projects several notable trends: California will become older, more Hispanic, and likely to join the ranks of Japan and some European countries that have more deaths than births. Migration is expected to keep California's population growing.

But growth won't be universal – or even. Counties in the northeast corner of California are expected to continue losing population. Coastal California will see growth slow as more people move into the inland regions like the Central Valley and inland Southern California.

## 452,519

### **The projected population of Merced County in 2060**

About 14 percent of California's population is 65 or older. By 2060, that could grow to 26 percent. In Merced County, the 65 and older crowd will grow from about 10.6 percent in 2015 to nearly 18.5 percent by 2060.

For years, baby boomers kept the state's population skewing younger than the national average. Now they're reaching Social Security age, and that's pulling the average higher at a rate faster than the rest of the country, the Department of Finance said.

Officials won't know how accurate such long-term projections are until 2060. Projections four decades out are based on current conditions, according to Bill Schooling, chief of demographic research at the Department of

Finance. Past projections sometimes have been spot-on, while other times have been well off of the mark, particularly when unanticipated changes occur.

“You can be misled,” he said.

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