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From the Los Angeles Times

Inland Empire Is No.1 in Growth

By J. Michael Kennedy
Times Staff Writer

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The Inland Empire, fed by migrants from coastal California, is the fastest-growing urban area in the United States, according to a survey released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Since 2000, there has also been a significant outflow of people from places long associated with the ideal of California living — Los Angeles and the Bay Area — to more affordable regions such as the Inland Empire. Riverside County ranked first in annual immigration, with an average of 56,719 new residents per year, while San Bernardino County was fourth, with 24,742 more people per year. They sandwiched the counties where the major growth areas of Las Vegas and Phoenix are located.

"It's a move to the interior of California," said William Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution. "It's a flight from the coast."

He said the move inland was not just by the white middle class. "It's a rainbow movement," he said. "This is equal opportunity, middle-class flight."

Frey said factors for luring people to the Inland Empire included more affordable housing, better school systems and a rapidly expanding economy.

The numbers released by the Census Bureau present only a partial picture of population movements within the U.S., because they do not include such crucial factors as births, deaths or foreign immigration.

But they do serve as a barometer for how cities and sections of the country are faring, based on the number of people who move to a place and the number who leave it.

Hans Johnson, a demographer with the Public Policy Institute of California, said the numbers often reflect "the well-being of one place compared to another place."

"People are just interested in where people move," he said. "They see it as a sign of valuation about where they live. It's a quality-of-life indicator, even though that quality might not necessarily be there."

The census figures also showed that the nation's three largest population centers — New York, Los Angeles and Chicago — are suffering from the greatest population exodus. Further, according to the Census Bureau, 18 of the nation's 25 largest metropolitan areas experienced a net population loss between 2000 and 2004.

The states with the highest rates of net immigration are Nevada and Arizona, followed closely by Florida. Johnson said California's population trends are reflected in the migration gains and losses by county. The largest gains are inland, in counties containing cities that have customarily been considered second tier, such as Riverside, San Bernardino, Stockton and Sacramento.

Johnson said that, on balance, what the census figures show is that California's traditional allure is flagging. "We aren't facing outright decline," he said, "but there is a signal that California is not as attractive to residents of other states as it once was."