Census: La. natives don't like leaving home

State has highest percentage of native-born residents

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — From their preference for spicy food to drinking beer in the streets or pronouncing Cajunese words their own way, the people of Louisiana have their own way of doing things.

A recent U.S. Census survey shows one of the big reasons for that.

No state's population has a higher percentage of native-born residents. In Louisiana, 79.4 percent of the population was born there.

Economists and sociologists say Louisiana's native-born percentage is due in part to a strong tradition that makes it hard for those who grow up here to leave.

"We've had students take much better jobs than they were capable of getting just so they could stay here," says Tim Renz, a University of New Orleans economist.

State officials, most recently Gov. Mike Foster Jr. in 1999, have lamented the outflow of Louisiana's young adults. Foster made a public plea for young, talented and educated Louisiana residents to find a way to stay home.

Indeed, Census figures released earlier this year showed the number of Louisiana residents age 25-34 dropped from 371,000 in 1990 to 331,000 in 2000.

Louisiana's largest city, New Orleans, is loaded with extended families who've remained here for generations.

Across the state, UL Lafayette sociologist Jacques Henry, who specializes in Cajun demographics, said the smallest and distinct population, Cajuns, don't like leaving home. Many older Cajuns still speak French, and even younger ones have a particular accent and pace of speech indicating the normal French influence, such as pronouncing the normally soft "w" as a hard "v". And they want to stay in Cajun country, hardly anywhere else.

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THE DAILY ADVERTISER

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