Where are all the Cajuns?

Census survey shows fewer than 42,000 live in Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Carl Brashear can now add his years of expertise and just start counting names in his local phone book to show that new U.S. Census estimates on the nation's Cajun population appear flawed.

According to Monday's release of estimates derived from a survey of 700,000 American homes, there are fewer than 80,000 people nationwide who say they're of Cajun ancestry. 42,000 of them in Louisiana.

"Anyone who's lived in Louisiana for any extent of time can see that's ludicrous," said Brashear, a University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor of Cajun studies whose specialties in demographics.

"There are more than 42,000 Cajuns in Lafayette alone."

Brashear concluded in his own study that there are 200,000 to 300,000 Cajuns in Louisiana, followed by more than 100,000 in Texas.

Census officials said the disparity may be due to kinks in its new sampling survey, which bureau officials hope will replace the Census long form, sent out at the beginning of every decade. The long form was sent to more than 17 million homes in 2000.

"Certainly, there are possibilities the long form will show different results because of the number of people who get interviewed," said Kevin Deardeff, the bureau's chief of ethnic statistics.

"We'll see how the 2010 long form results will show different results because of the number of people who get interviewed," said Reinaldo Barnes, historic site manager at the Longfellow-Evangeline State Commemorative Area.

Audrey Brignac, tourism coordinator for the St. Martinville city government, said that if the number of Cajun people is declining, it's a shame, because the tourists she sees can't get enough of Cajun culture.

"If they have a French last name, as most Cajuns do, they simply may have answered that they were of French or French Canadian descent, Deardeff said. Cajuns are descendants of French Catholic Acadians who migrated to the French-speaking Louisiana in the 1760s after being kicked out of eastern Canada by the British.

"People are dying off, and the young people aren't taking up French," Bienvenue said.

Clement Lafitte, a tourist from France, said a desire to visit a culture so closely related to his brought him to Acadiana, or more specifically "the food and music."

One resident, Jerry Blackwell, a Lafayette resident working with Exhibits Etc. on the Museum of the Acadian Memorial in St. Martinville, said that if Census numbers show a decrease in the Cajun population, it's a trend that won't last long here.

"For a while, they were all getting out of Acadiana," Blackwell said. "It seems like they've staying more now."

Emamline Broussard, left, plays her accordion for Antoine and Marie-Oudle de Parades from France. Broussard, a French-speaking native who returned to Acadiana, does not consider herself Cajun due to her mixed heritage.
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Cajuns

The survey showed nearly 525,000 people of French descent in Louisiana, more than any other state, with California second. There also were about 104,000 people of French-Canadian ancestry, which placed Louisiana fifth behind Massachusetts, Michigan, New York and New Hampshire.

Whatever people call themselves, Cajun culture remains prevalent in southwestern Louisiana, said Michael Doucet, fiddler and leader of the Lafayette-based Cajun band Beausoleil.

"Anytime you go out to the gas station or the supermarket, people recognize you and you start speaking French," Doucet said.

The Census bureau's methodology shows that its survey hit most of the parishes — including Lafayette, St. Martin and Iberia — where Cajun populations are prominent. But Beausoleil said the numbers were low because most Cajun populations are not evenly dispersed throughout Louisiana, but concentrated in Lafayette and a number of smaller communities in the southwestern part of the state.

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"Not every parish in Louisiana was in the survey, and we'll be trying to determine the ramifications of showing results for relatively small groups in specific locations," he said.

Brazeaux said that while the census survey's numbers are low, it seems to have had some success tracking the migration of Cajuns across the country.

Brazeaux said that when Louisiana's oil industry — which is concentrated in communities where most Cajuns live — went into bust cycles in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s, Louisiana's population in those areas began hemorrhaging.

"College grads were flocking to a high-tech corridor from north Dallas down to Austin. A large number also went to California and Atlanta," Brazeaux said.

There also was a bit of a Cajun migration to Orlando, Fla., and Charlotte, N.C., as Southern cities which were booming at the time of Louisiana's oil bust, Brazeaux said.

The Census survey shows Florida, North Carolina and Georgia among the 10 states with the most Cajuns. Then there were a few surprises, such as New Jersey and Ohio. Some of them may consider themselves Acadians, who were grouped with Cajuns in the survey.

"Frankly," Brazeaux said, "the data is bizarre and there's just no getting around it."