



Tracking

Florida's Trends

For 80 years, the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR) has been the go-to resource for information about the state's population and economy.

And during difficult economic times, demand is even higher for information produced by the bureau.

"There have been some tremendous shifts in Florida's population trends and economic climate over the last couple of years," says BEBR Director Stan Smith. "In times like these, having the latest economic and demographic data is even more important than usual."

From the state capitol in Tallahassee to city hall in Miami, and at hundreds of city councils, banks, newspapers and chambers of commerce in between, people interested in where Florida is going turn to BEBR for guidance.

One of the bureau's best-known products is the monthly Florida Consumer Confidence Report. Conducted by the bureau's Survey Research Program, the monthly survey of about 500 adults is based on a similar national survey conducted by the University of Michigan. Newspapers around the state are quick to publish the survey's results as an indicator of how the state's economy is faring.

The survey is benchmarked to 1966, so a score of 100 means Floridians have the same degree of confidence in the economy today as they did in 1966. A lower number means they are less confident.

The all-time highest score for the survey occurred in 2000, when it reached 111. In June 2008, confidence slipped to 59, the lowest point in the survey's 25-year history.

But program director Chris McCarty says the trend in 2009 has been up.

Confidence surged six points in April to 71, bolstered by perceptions that it was a good time to buy big-ticket items like cars and appliances.

"The size of the increase comes as somewhat of a surprise," says McCarty. "We had expected confidence among Florida's consumers to move up and down in a fairly narrow window from the low to the upper 60s."

In addition to gauging consumer confidence, the program conducts many other surveys for state agencies such as the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Transportation and for outside organizations including the Kaiser Family Foundation and RAND Corporation.

During 2007-2008, more than 200 UF students working seven days a week out of a 75-station computerized lab completed more than 60,000 interviews.

"Students from both UF and Santa Fe College make up more than 50 percent of our interviewing staff," McCarty says. "For many of them this is their first job. Although it is not a career for most, the survey lab is a source of employment and a place where they learn to work with others and manage their workday."

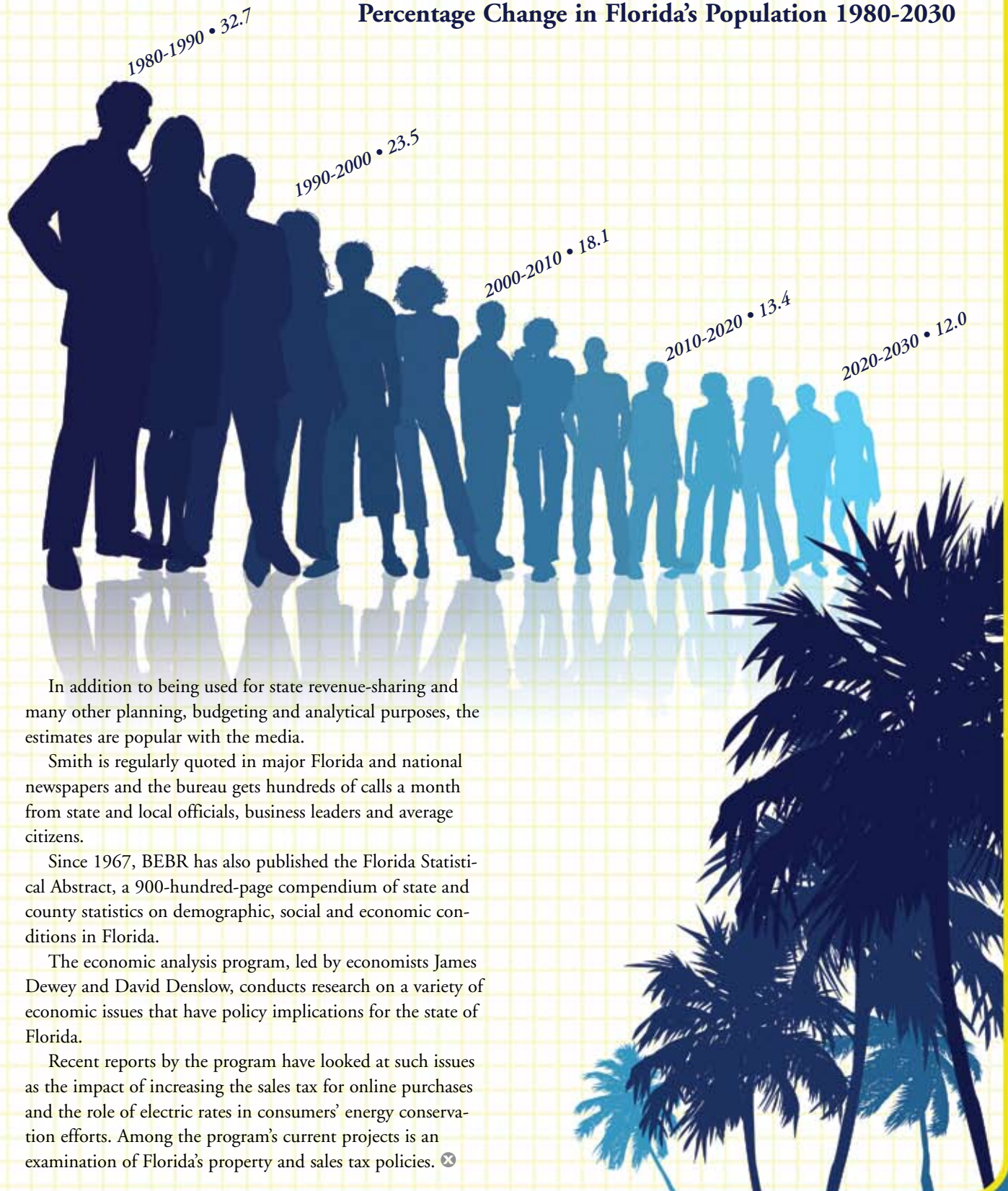
BEBR is also the state's official source for population data.

The bureau began making county population estimates for Florida in the 1950s and in 1972 received the first of a continuous series of annual contracts from the State of Florida to produce the state's official city and county population estimates.

The latest estimate, released in March, reflected the smallest population increase in Florida in more than 60 years.

"A tremendous slowdown in population growth has occurred, primarily because of tough economic times," says Smith, who also heads the Population Program. "People don't move to Florida when they can't find jobs and have difficulty selling their homes. The state has not experienced a decline of this magnitude since the 1940s, when thousands of military personnel stationed in Florida left the state after World War II."

Percentage Change in Florida's Population 1980-2030



In addition to being used for state revenue-sharing and many other planning, budgeting and analytical purposes, the estimates are popular with the media.

Smith is regularly quoted in major Florida and national newspapers and the bureau gets hundreds of calls a month from state and local officials, business leaders and average citizens.

Since 1967, BEBR has also published the Florida Statistical Abstract, a 900-hundred-page compendium of state and county statistics on demographic, social and economic conditions in Florida.

The economic analysis program, led by economists James Dewey and David Denslow, conducts research on a variety of economic issues that have policy implications for the state of Florida.

Recent reports by the program have looked at such issues as the impact of increasing the sales tax for online purchases and the role of electric rates in consumers' energy conservation efforts. Among the program's current projects is an examination of Florida's property and sales tax policies. ✕