

Survey finds snowbirds have distinct features

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Traffic and longer lines at the grocery store signal their arrival: snowbirds have flocked back to the Coachella Valley.

But just who are these featherless friends -- an estimated 92,400 of them -- who descend on the desert when the mercury dips, boosting our population by 18 percent?

Because the U.S. Census Bureau does not track part-time residents, getting a handle on them can be a challenge.

But a health survey due out in January by the Health Assessment Resource Center in Palm Desert provides a revealing snapshot.

For example, while British Columbia license plates may dot parking lots across the valley this time of year, nearly 90 percent of snowbirds are U.S. citizens.

Take Don Campbell.

He lives in the Coachella Valley six months out of the year to get away from winter in the Pacific Northwest.

"It just snowed," Campbell said of his other home in Seattle.

The retired sales manager watches that weather with glee while staying in Cathedral City.

And then there's Jerry Gold. He's a retired dentist who lives in Rancho Mirage six months to escape the bitter Michigan winters.

"I've been coming since 1980," Gold said. "At that time, the city closed down when the snowbirds left."

He marvels at the desert rats who complain about the "chilly" 60-degree weather.

"If it goes below 80, you guys start bundling up," he said.

According to the health survey, the typical snowbird is white, female, college-educated, 55 or older and earns more than \$75,000 a year.

Fewer than 2 percent are Latino; 17 percent are employed and nearly 8 percent earn little enough to qualify for federal poverty programs.

Snowbirds are more likely to be widowed than their permanent counterparts, but less likely to smoke or be overweight.

Other data tidbits: roughly 7 percent are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; 1 in 4 tip back an alcoholic beverage every day and 3.2 percent said they've driven drunk at least once.

Snowbirds play a pivotal role in the desert's estimated \$1 billion tourism industry, said Tom Kirk, Coachella Valley Association of Governments executive director.

"The snowbird population is critical to the valley in more ways than I can probably count," he said.

Begun in 2006 with a grant through the California Wellness Foundation, the health survey creates data for researchers, nonprofit organizations and community leaders.

"We're not only a producer of data," said Eileen Packer, executive director of the Health Assessment Resource Center, which did the survey. "We want people to use it."

Who we are

SNOWBIRDS

- * White - 96.0 percent
- * Latino - 1.5 percent
- * Earn \$75,000 or more annually - 62.5 percent
- * Earn little enough to qualify for federal poverty programs - 7.7 percent
- * Older than 55 - 92.3 percent
- * College graduate - 44.3 percent
- * Male - 45.1 percent
- * Female - 54.9 percent
- * Single - 6.5 percent
- * Married - 78.3 percent
- * Divorced - 1.9 percent
- * Widowed - 13.4 percent
- * Employed - 17 percent
- * Retired - 74 percent
- * LGBT - 7.2 percent
- * Straight - 92.8 percent
- * Overweight or obese - 47.5 percent
- * Drink alcohol every day - 25.5 percent
- * Driven drunk - 3.2 percent
- * U.S. citizen - 89.8 percent

PERMANENT RESIDENTS

- * Population - 430,265
- * White - 59.6 percent

- * Latino - 27.7 percent
- * Earn \$75,000 or more annually -20.1 percent
- * Earn little enough to qualify for federal poverty programs - 51.5 percent
- * Older than 55 - 38.7 percent
- * College graduate - 23.9 percent
- * Male - 48.7 percent
- * Female - 51.3 percent
- * Single - 31.4 percent
- * Married - 48.6 percent
- * Divorced - 11.2 percent
- * Widowed - 8.8 percent
- * Employed - 46.0 percent
- * Retired - 23.7 percent
- * LGBT - 9.2 percent
- * Straight - 90.8 percent
- * Overweight or obese - 60.3 percent
- * Drink alcohol every day - 9.7 percent
- * Driven drunk - 4.5 percent
- * U.S. citizen - 91.1 percent

Source: 2010 Community Health Monitor

About the report

Every three years, the Health Assessment Resource Center, a Palm Desert-based nonprofit organization, conducts a health survey called, the "Community Health Monitor," to provide reliable data on key health issues in eastern Riverside County.

The snowbird profile was constructed using the most common nonresident responses to a variety of health questions.

For more information about the survey and its January release, contact Eileen Packer, HARC executive director, at (760) 601-3663.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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