

(written for DiversityForce.com)

Beyond the Suburbs: The New White Flight

America is becoming more racially diverse, but not in the way one might suspect. According to Census 2000 data, the transformation is occurring in the suburbs, where the minority population is booming while the white population declines.

For decades, bedroom communities have been growing faster than cities, largely due to middle and upper-class whites looking for a better quality of life. In the last ten years, however, minorities accounted for most suburban growth in 65 of the 102 largest metropolitan areas. In 1990, for example, one in five suburbanites was a minority, compared to one in four in 2000. While record numbers of Hispanics, Asian Americans, and African Americans moved into the suburbs, middle and upper-class whites moved out.

More than 800,000 whites left Los Angeles. New York City lost 600,000. Miami, Chicago, Honolulu, San Francisco and other major suburban areas also experienced noteworthy white losses. Demographer William H. Frey of the Brookings Institution studies race migration and is an expert interpreter of census data. "In essence, they (whites) are making long distance moves to achieve the suburban dream that no longer exists for them in Connecticut, New Jersey or Orange Country," he says.

Increasingly, whites are less enchanted with life in the suburbs. Congestion, urban sprawl and expensive housing—the very reasons whites left the cities for the ‘burbs in the first place—are now driving them away. Once serene neighborhood landscapes are often dotted with office buildings, strip malls and other trappings of bustling downtowns. Baby Boomers headed for their golden years and mobile GenXers’ raising their kids want something better.

Education appears to be another motivating factor for white parents. As suburban school systems struggle to serve the needs of increasing minority student populations, white parents are more apt to look for other alternatives. Jim Wyckoff, Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, found whites often enroll their children in private schools when public classrooms include large groups of minority students. "Decisions of whites with respect to residential location and schooling of their children is heavily influenced by the race of the neighborhoods and schools," he says. While some whites move their kids to private schools, many others move out of the area.

Frey divides the country into three distinct regions based on shifting population patterns: Melting Pot states (those losing whites and gaining minorities), Sunbelt states (the primary destination states for migrating whites), and the Heartland (the remaining states where more than 80% of inhabitants are white).

Thirteen states in the West and Southeast form the Sunbelt region. While immigrants account for most population increases in the rest of the country, here white flight (and to a lesser degree black flight) is fueling expansion into smaller metropolitan areas and rural locales. This new middle-class mecca is expanding twice as fast as the rest of the country and is now home to about a fifth of the nation’s total population. Two of the fastest-growing Sunbelt cities, Las Vegas and Phoenix, grew by more than 100,000, largely due to whites leaving California. Outlying areas of Atlanta, Austin, Tampa, Charlotte, and Raleigh-Durham are fast becoming popular destinations for whites who are on the move.

Nine states, including California, Florida, New York, and Texas, form the heterogeneous Melting Pot. More than 74% of the nation's combined Hispanic and Asian populations reside in these nine states, as do 55% of the country's mixed-race married couples. Whites in this region declined during the 1990s, while minorities increased. This was particularly true in Washington, Los Angeles, New York and other cities with established multi-cultural populations. It is a trend that is likely to continue. As formerly white suburbs become multi-racial ethnic communities, they offer an appealing destination for minorities from inner cities and abroad who want to live where their language and customs are shared and understood. According to Frey, "The demographic future of California and a cluster of other Melting Pot states rest with continued immigrant growth, not with continued white middle-class preferences."

While diversity is alive and well in the suburbs, whites aren't participating to the extent many might hope for. Instead of blurring the social and geographic demarcation lines between whites and other races in the U.S., the new migration trends are creating a greater distinction. It is a course that can be expected to persist as immigration continues and the white retiree population grows. The Sunbelt and Melting Pot regions, and the rest of the country, will have to deal with the resulting social, economic and political fallout.