Boomer Magnets

Baby boomers are now choosing the towns where they will build careers and raise families. Their favorites will be the most powerful consumer markets of the 1990s. In general, boomers like big suburbs and small cities. But younger, older, and black boomers each have distinct preferences.

by William H. Frey

Baby boomers were known as a restless generation, but now they are settling down into middle age. They have made clear choices about where they want to live, work, and raise families. The towns that attract baby boomers and cradle their children will be the richest consumer markets of the 1990s and beyond.

Nationally, baby boomers are 31 percent of the total population. But certain cities in the South, West, and Northeast are emerging as boomer magnets. In the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, for example, 38 percent of residents were

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baby boomers in the 1990 census. That share will probably increase in the 1990s.

Baby boomers aren't completely finished with their restless years. A blizzard of change-of-address labels will continue through the next decade as younger baby boomers (aged 25 to 34 in 1990) move to take advantage of career opportunities. But the vast majority of older baby boomers (aged 35 to 44) have already chosen their long-term homes. One-third of Americans in their 20s move every year, according to the Census Bureau, but that share drops to one-fifth of adults in their early 30s and one-tenth of adults aged 45 and older.

Two clear preferences emerge when you look at the list of boomer magnets. First, baby boomers like the suburbs even more than their parents did. They are heavily concentrated in the metropolitan

areas that surround major cities like Los Angeles, New York, Boston, and Chicago. Second, boomers are also partial to smaller cities that offer a high quality of life, such as Santa Rosa, California, and Manchester, New Hampshire.

Tracking the boomer magnets is important to almost anyone in business, for one simple reason. The baby boom is the most economically powerful generation in the U.S., and they will remain so until they are too old to cash their own Social Security checks.

BIG SUBURBS AND SMALL CITIES

The three most powerful boomer magnets of the 1980s were the Orlando, Fort Worth, and Atlanta metro areas. These had the highest 1980-90 baby boomer growth rates, among metropolitan areas with higher-than-average shares of baby boomers.

Booming & Busting

[top 12 metropolitan areas ranked by percent growth and decline in the baby-boom population 1980–90, boomers as a percent of the total population, and total population in thousands, 1990]

Magnets

Boomer magnets have higher shares of baby boomers and higher rates of growth.

rank	top metropolitan areas	percent growth in boomer population 1980–90	boomers as percent of total 1990	total population 1990
1	Orlando, FL	51.6%	35.1%	1,070
2	Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	34.5	36.1	1,330
3	Atlanta, GA	33.0	37.7	2,830
4	Santa Rosa-Petaluma, CA	30.2	35.1	390
5	Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa, CA	29.1	35.3	450
6	Dallas, TX	28.3	37.5	2,550
7	Manchester-Nashua, NH	24.2	36.3	340
8	Reno, NV	23.4	36.3	250
9	Portsmouth-Dover-Rochester, NH	23.3	36.4	350
10	Seattle, WA	22.1	37.6	1,970
11	Austin, TX	21.8	37.7	780
12	Washington, DC-MD-VA	20.6	37.9	3,920
	U.S. average	1.0	32.5	80,755

Losers

Two-thirds of the metros that are losing baby boomers are in the Midwest.

rank	bottom metropolitan areas	percent decline in boomer population 1980–90	boomers as percent of total 1990	total population 1990
1	Provo-Orem, UT	−27.7%	25.2%	260
2	Davenport-Rock Island-Moline, IA-IL	−20.2	30.7	350
3	Peoria, IL	−20.1	30.1	340
4	Huntington-Ashland, WV-KY-OH	−17.4	29.2	310
5	Gary-Hammond, IN	−16.9	30.9	600
6	Youngstown-Warren, OH	−16.8	29.4	490
7	Erie, PA	−15.8	29.9	280
8	Beaumont-Port Arthur, TX	−15.5	30.1	360
9	Pittsburgh, PA	−13.1	30.6	2,060
10	Buffalo, NY	−12.4	30.8	970
11	Shreveport, LA	−12.3	30.7	330
12	Canton, OH	−10.1	30.8	390
	U.S. average	1.0	32.5	80,755

Source: Author's calculations based on 1990 census. Data for metros of 250,000 or more.

Most boomer magnets are in states that had rapidly growing population totals in the 1980s. Six of the top 12 boomer magnets are located in the South, while four are in the West, and two are in New England. Two of the top 12 boomer magnets are in northern California, 3 are in Texas, and Florida has one.

Most boomer magnets have a suburban style but are near a large city. They are likely to have a high share of nonfamily households, because a high share of baby boomers are never-married or divorced. They are also likely to have a high cost of living because of the intense demand boomers create for housing. And some magnets are attractive because of economic opportunities. In Austin, Texas, high-tech research and development is booming. In Reno, Nevada, manufacturing jobs are plentiful.

Four meccas for young professionals of the 1980s are now evolving into powerful boomer magnets. Atlanta, Dallas, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. are known for high-quality educational systems and cultural institutions. They are also among the metros with the highest proportions of baby boomers both in 1980 and 1990, suggesting that boomers who moved to these metros during the 1970s have stayed.

One noticeable omission from the 1980s magnet list is the epicenter of the hippie years—San Francisco. While it still retains a high proportion of baby boomers as a share of its total population, San Francisco's attraction for boomers declined substantially during the 1980s. Congestion, high prices, and an influx of youthful immigrants helped push this metro off the "magnet" list.

Twelve metro areas have smaller-than-average shares of baby boomers (less than 31 percent of their populations), and 1980-90 boomer losses exceeding 10 percent. Most of the "loser" areas share an unfortunate mix of geographic isolation and poor economic performance. They are located primarily in the Great Lakes and Great Plains regions, where the economy depends on energy and agriculture. Most have populations under 500,000, and most have lost jobs in manufacturing, mining, and farming.

Pittsburgh and Buffalo are now making valiant efforts to rebuild their economies, but the long-term loss of their native baby boomers will be hard to overcome. Most of the losing metros rank high on quality-of-life measures, and they also have lower-than-average housing and living costs. Their hope lies in attracting the next generation as it enters its 20s.

The largest boomer loser is Provo-Orem, Utah, but its reason for losing boomers is not related to economic decline. Provo is home to three colleges or

Baby Boomer Bingo

(top 12 metropolitan areas ranked by percent growth in younger, older, and black baby boomers 1980–90, and younger, older, and black boomers as a percent of the total population, 1990)

Older

Older boomers have settled in "edge cities."

rank	metropolitan area	percent growth in older boomer population 1980–90	older boomers as percent of total 1990
1	Santa Rosa-Petaluma, CA	27.1%	18.4%
2	Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa, CA	24.7	16.9
3	Orange County, NY	21.2	16.1
4	Sacramento, CA	21.0	16.3
5	Atlanta, GA	20.5	17.5
6	Oxnard-Ventura, CA	20.4	16.4
7	Portsmouth-Dover-Rochester, NH	20.3	16.8
8	Austin, TX	16.9	16.4
9	Lake County, IL	16.1	16.9
10	Reno, NV	15.8	17.3
11	Middlesex-Somerset-Hunterdon, NJ	15.7	16.2
12	Manchester-Nashua, NH	15.1	16.5

Younger

Younger boomers need jobs and cheap housing.

rank	metropolitan area	percent growth in young boomer population 1980–90	young boomers as percent of total 1990
1	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	72.7%	18.7%
2	Las Vegas, NV	60.3	18.8
3	Orlando, FL	54.5	19.6
4	Atlanta, GA	46.0	20.3
5	Dallas, TX	45.8	21.3
6	Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	45.8	20.4
7	Phoenix, AZ	38.1	18.5
8	Manchester-Nashua, NH	33.1	19.7
9	San Francisco, CA	33.0	20.0
10	Seattle, WA	32.2	19.8
11	Washington, DC-MD-VA	31.9	20.4
12	Reno, NV	31.1	19.0

Black

Black boomers are heading for the Sunbelt.

rank	metropolitan area	percent growth in black boomer population 1980–90	black boomers as percent of total 1990
1	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	96.1%	34.9%
2	Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood-Pompano Beach, FL	54.7	34.5
3	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI	53.9	34.2
4	Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa, CA	48.6	36.9
5	Sacramento, CA	42.8	34.5
6	Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA	39.5	41.1
7	Middlesex-Somerset-Hunterdon, NJ	39.5	37.9
8	Atlanta, GA	29.3	37.6
9	Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	28.3	34.8
10	Austin, TX	26.8	34.5
11	Orange County, NY	25.8	34.6
12	Seattle, WA	24.5	36.4

Note: Younger boomers were born between 1956 and 1965. Older boomers were born between 1946 and 1955. Metros of less than 250,000 residents not included. Black metros restricted to black populations of 20,000 or more.

Source: Author's calculations based on 1980 and 1990 censuses

universities, and its boomers left because they graduated. The next generation of students hasn't matched the baby boom's college enrollment levels.

In 1980, 19 million baby boomers (then aged 15 to 22) were still in high school or college. This one-time bonanza for college towns will not be repeated.

YOUNGER, OLDER, AND BLACK

The list of metros that attract younger boomers (born between 1956 and 1965) is very different than the list of cities that attract older boomers (born between 1946 and 1955). Young and old were both drawn to the bright lights of big suburbs, but younger boomers are more sensitive to housing costs and job availability.

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Like their senior counterparts back in 1980, younger baby boomers who are still on the move are likely to be unmarried and highly educated professionals. In 1990, 37 percent of 25-to-34-year-old migrants were college graduates, and 35 percent held executive or professional jobs. About 47 percent of the men in this group are unmarried, along with 38 percent of the women. Younger boomers may be demographically similar to the freewheeling young professionals of the 1970s and 1980s, but they face staggering housing costs and a tighter job market.

The list of young boomer magnets for the 1980s still includes traditional centers for young professionals, such as Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Atlanta, Seattle, and Dallas. But it also includes Riverside-San Bernardino, California; Las Vegas; and Orlando, three rapidly growing job centers. Phoenix and Reno also rank high, suggesting that younger boomers are strongly attracted to second-tier cities in the South and West.

Older boomers are already settled in areas where they can balance their careers and families in relative comfort. Heading the list of older boomer magnets are three small metros at the outer edge of San Francisco's economic influence: Sacramento, Santa Rosa-Petaluma, and Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa. The list also includes Orange County, New York, and Middlesex-Somerset-Hunterdon, New Jersey, both of which are on the edge of greater New York City. It includes Oxnard-Ventura, California, just north of Los Angeles; Lake County, Illinois, just north of Chicago; and Manchester-Nashua and Portsmouth-Dover-Rochester,

New Hampshire, north of Boston. In fact, only one big-city metro Atlanta was a magnet for older baby boomers during the 1980s.

The suburbs grew as older boomers abandoned the cities. As Santa Rosa-Petaluma, Orange County, Oxnard-Ventura, and Lake County were gaining older boomers, San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago were losing them.

The magnet metros for black baby boomers are different from the overall list of baby-boom magnets. Black boomers are moving to three types of metros: suburbs like Riverside-San Bernardino, California; new areas for blacks like Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota; and prosperous southern cities that attract local and northern blacks, such as Atlanta.

Riverside-San Bernardino nearly doubled its black population during the 1980s. Its relatively low housing costs made it the top magnet for black baby boomers. Most of the other suburban metros that attracted black boomers also drew older white boomers. They still have a relatively small black presence.

Minneapolis-St. Paul, Sacramento, and Seattle are attracting a new wave of black boomers into largely white labor markets. Blacks are less than 7 percent of these metros, compared with a national average of 12 percent.

Although the residential preferences of baby boomers seem clear, the boomers aren't finished moving yet. Predicting migration patterns is a risky business, and it is especially risky for a generation as unpredictable as the baby boom. The list of boomer magnets won't be final until the last baby boomer turns 40 in the year

2004. Six years later, the oldest boomers will begin another wave of migration as they choose their retirement homes.

This article analyzes census data for MSAs, PMSAs, and NECMAs with populations exceeding 250,000. "Magnets" for each category of baby boomers are defined on the basis of percent change during the 1980s for areas with large 1990 shares of baby boomers. Baby boomers are defined as persons aged 25 to 44 in 1990. Young baby boomers are aged 25 to 34. The baby-boom population growth for an area is calculated by comparing its population of 15-to-34-year-olds in 1980 with its population of 25-to-44-year-olds in 1990.

"Baby-Boom Magnets" are metros with the fastest-growing baby-boom populations, among those with baby-boom shares that are greater than 35 percent. "Young Baby-Boom Magnets" are metros with the fastest-growing young baby-boom populations, for areas where the share of young baby boomers exceeds 18.5 percent. "Old Baby-Boom Magnets" are metros with the fastest-growing old baby-boom populations, among areas where the old baby-boom share is greater than 16 percent. "Black Baby-Boom Magnets" are metros with the fastest-growing black baby-boom populations, for areas where the share of black baby boomers exceeds 34 percent. This list is restricted to areas with at least 250,000 total persons and 20,000 black persons in the 1990 census. Finally, "Baby-Boom Losers" are metros where the baby-boom population declined by more than 10 percent, among areas where the share of baby boomers lies below 31 percent.