

POPULATION

TODAY

News, numbers, and analysis

'New Sun Belt' Metros and Suburbs Are Magnets for Retirees

By WILLIAM H. FREY

When it comes to deciding where to retire, today's older Americans are breaking with convention. A new analysis of census data shows that the elderly are rejecting traditional retirement communities in favor of smaller metropolitan areas and suburbs of the "New Sun Belt"—the fastest growing parts of the South and West. These trends, among the parents of the baby boomers, provide the first inkling of where the huge numbers of baby boomers will retire in the early part of the next century.

The new retirement magnets offer ample amenities and warm weather. Five of the top seven, and 19 of the top 30, are located in Sun Belt states other than Florida and Arizona (see Table 1). Las Vegas, whose older population increased by 65 percent between 1990 and 1998, tops the list.

Most of the new magnets—such as Myrtle Beach, S.C.; Las Cruces, N.M.; and Wilmington, N.C.—are smaller metropolitan areas with populations well under 350,000. But metros with total populations that exceed 1 million—Las Vegas, and Houston and Austin, Texas—have also shown high growth of older people during the 1990s. These areas, along with the well-known retirement spots of Phoenix and Orlando, have seen their over-65 populations rise by at least 25 percent. Close behind are Atlanta; Raleigh-Durham, N.C.; and Denver.

Hot Spots in a Slow Decade

Nationally, the 1990s represent a decade of relatively slow growth of the older population. Because the new entrants into the older population were born in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the birth rates in the United States were lower because of the Depression, the growth rate of the country's 65-and-over population is only 10 percent for 1990 to 1998, compared with 28 percent and 22 percent for the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. But growth rates across metro areas in the 1990s vary greatly: one-fifth of the nation's 271 metros grew by more than twice the national rate.

While the vast majority of areas with fast-growing elderly populations lie in the South and West, college towns in the Northeast and Midwest—places such as

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State College, Pa.; Madison, Wis.; Burlington, Vt.; Bloomington, Ind.; and Lansing-East Lansing, Mich.—have cultural activities and facilities that appeal to older people. And two large northern metro areas that have had above-average growth of elderly residents—Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.; and Columbus, Ohio—are also home to major universities.

New Sun Belt Dominates

The dominance of the Sun Belt is reflected in the fact that 76 percent of the nation's total gain of older residents during this decade has taken place in the South and the West. Growth has been especially accelerated in "New West" or Rocky Mountain states. The seven states that have experienced the fastest growth rates among older residents are Nevada (55 percent), Alaska (49 percent), Arizona (28 percent), Hawaii (27 percent), Utah (22 percent), Colorado (21 percent), and New Mexico (21 percent). While California's older population grew faster than the national average (by 15 percent), many of its retirees have moved to other western states. In fact, older residents who moved out of California accounted for 45 percent of older people who moved to the rest of the West during the first half of the 1990s.

Growth in the South is not quite as fast as in the West. The South still holds the greatest share of the nation's elderly population (35 percent) and accounts for the greatest share (43 percent) of the growth of the older population. But Florida, the traditional magnet for retirees, now has only the 15th-fastest growth rate among older Americans. Within the South, Delaware, South Carolina, North Carolina, Texas, and Georgia show faster gains, and Virginia and Maryland are close behind. The dominant sources of elderly migrants to the South are the Northeast and Midwest. New York and New Jersey dominate the flows to southern states along the Atlantic coast.

No states experienced actual losses in their elderly populations from 1990 to 1998, but 13 small metropolitan areas showed declines. Led

by Pine Bluff, Ark. (-9 percent), these areas span the nation's midsection (Grand Forks, N.D.; Terre Haute, Ind.; Duluth, Minn.; Sioux City, Iowa; and St. Joseph, Mo.) and declining industrial areas to the east (Wheeling, W.Va.; Cumberland, Md.; Scranton, Pa.; Lewiston, Maine; and Utica, Elmira, and Jamestown, N.Y.). These areas are losing younger, healthier elderly residents while retaining a disproportionate share of the very old (80 and over), who require special medical and social services.

Suburbs Are Graying

The Depression cohorts, who began the massive postwar suburban movement of the 1950s, are leading the growth of older Americans in the 1990s. More than earlier generations of older Americans, those born during the Depression tended to reside in the suburbs during their working lives and to raise their children there. These children, the baby boomers, can be thought of as the first truly suburban generation.

About 63 percent of older people living in metropolitan areas of the United States now reside in the suburbs, compared with 56 percent in 1980. The trend toward further suburban growth is shown in the list of the 30 counties that have the fastest growth rate of elderly people in the 1990s (see Table 2). Twenty-one of these counties are considered suburban, and several are located within some of the Sun Belt's largest and most expansive metropolitan areas—Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Denver, and Washington, D.C. Most of this trend represents "aging in place," where residents of the suburban communities simply stay put and grow old together. This pattern will become much more common as the baby boomers reach retirement age. By then, their lifelong reliance on the automobile may lead to "senior gridlock" in the suburbs.

When Boomers Retire

The aging-in-place phenomenon will be a much more dominant force during the first quarter of the next century. This will be a period when almost all communities will increase their older populations due to the aging of the huge baby-boom cohorts. From 2000 to 2025, the nation's old-

Table 1
Metro Areas With Fastest
Growth of Elderly Residents,
1990-1998

Rank	Metropolitan Area*	Growth Rate**
1	Las Vegas, NV	65.0
2	Anchorage, AK	56.9
3	Fort Walton Beach, FL	48.1
4	Naples, FL	46.9
5	Myrtle Beach, SC	45.7
6	Las Cruces, NM	40.3
7	Jacksonville, FL	40.2
8	Ocala, FL	39.5
9	Wilmington, NC	38.3
10	Melbourne, FL	38.0
11	Yuma, AZ	35.6
12	El Paso, TX	35.5
13	Laredo, TX	35.0
14	Colorado Springs, CO	33.6
15	Fayetteville, NC	33.5
16	Charleston, SC	33.2
17	Huntsville, AL	32.9
18	Santa Fe, NM	30.7
19	Pensacola, FL	29.7
20	McAllen, TX	29.4
21	Phoenix, AZ	28.6
22	Houston, TX	28.3
23	Panama City, FL	28.1
24	Orlando, FL	28.0
25	Austin, TX	27.6
26	Provo-Orem, UT	27.4
27	Honolulu, HI	27.2
28	Fort Pierce, FL	26.9
29	Flagstaff, AZ	26.8
30	Reno, NV	26.7

*Metropolitan areas refer to Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), Consolidated MSAs, and (in New England) New England County Metropolitan Areas, defined by the Office of Management and Budget, June 1995. Names are abbreviated.

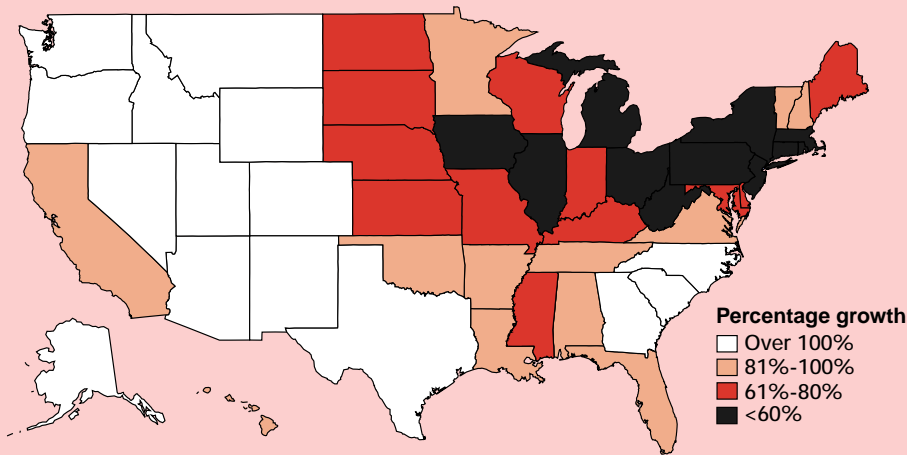
**Rate equals change in an area's age 65+ population between July 1, 1990, and July 1, 1998, per 100 of its age 65+ population on July 1, 1990.

Source: Author's analysis of unpublished data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

erly population is projected to grow by 78 percent. Yet many areas will grow at an even faster pace. For most, this faster growth will take place because broad regions of the country—growing parts of the Sun Belt and the suburbs of most metro areas—already have attracted large numbers of working-age baby boomers. These areas will have more baby boomers aging in place than will those parts of the country that lost these residents during their working years.

This variation across the country can be seen in the accompanying map, which shows states where the older population is projected to double during the next quarter-century along with those where growth

Explosive Growth of the Elderly Population, 2000–2025



Source: Author's analysis of unpublished data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

will be less rapid. Utah's elderly population is projected to grow by 144 percent, and Utah is likely to lead a swath of western states—states that have begun to attract many baby boomers from other parts of the country—in this rapid growth of the elderly population. Some of these states, especially Arizona and Nevada, will gain from residents aging in place and from elderly residents moving there from other parts of the country. The projections suggest that this will also be the case with Texas, Georgia, and North and South Carolina.

The second tier of states with fast growing older populations includes most of the rest of the South, plus California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Vermont, and New Hampshire.

At the other extreme are the old industrial states, from Massachusetts westward through Michigan and Illinois, that have lost large numbers of their baby boomers to other regions of the country. Yet even these states are expected to increase their elderly populations by between 38 percent (New York) and 60 percent (West Virginia) during the next 25 years because of the huge baby-boom wave that will hit all parts of the country.

The parts of the country that will see the fastest growth in their elderly populations over the next quarter-century will face new challenges in providing transportation, health services, and infrastructure because the populations of these regions have typically been dominated by young, not aging, populations. ■

For more information:

For additional data by state and metro area, see annex tables for this article on PRB's Web site: <http://www.prb.org/poptoday/ptappend.htm>.

For a copy of the author's October 1999 policy brief, "America's Demography in the New Century: Aging Boomers and New Immigrants as Major Players," contact the Milken Institute, Santa Monica, Calif., phone: 310/998-2600; e-mail: publications@milken-inst.org.

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Table 2
Counties With Fastest Growth of Elderly Residents, 1990–1998*

Rank	County	Metro Area**	Growth Rate***
1	Nye County, NV	Las Vegas	185.6
2	Flagler County, FL	Daytona Beach	97.8
3	Columbia County, GA	Augusta	92.0
4	Douglas County, CO	Denver	89.1
5	Fort Bend County, TX	Houston	87.8
6	Douglas County, WA	nonmetro	78.0
7	Gwinnett County, GA	Atlanta	77.2
8	Anoka County, MN	Minneapolis-St. Paul	75.8
9	Sarpy County, NE	Omaha	74.6
10	Fayette County, GA	Atlanta	69.9
11	Prince William County, VA	Washington, DC	68.6
12	Central Clark County, NV	Las Vegas	66.7
13	Washington County, UT	nonmetro	65.8
14	Douglas County, NV	nonmetro	65.1
15	Forsyth County, GA	Atlanta	64.8
16	Kenai Peninsula Borough, AK	nonmetro	63.6
17	Polk County, TX	nonmetro	63.2
18	Loudoun County, VA	Washington, DC	62.6
19	Beaufort County, SC	nonmetro	62.2
20	Henry County, GA	Atlanta	60.8
21	Santa Rosa County, FL	Pensacola	60.6
22	Collin County, TX	Dallas	59.7
23	York County, VA	Norfolk	59.6
24	James City County, VA	Norfolk	58.1
25	Anchorage Borough, AK	Anchorage	56.9
26	Nassau County, FL	Jacksonville	56.0
27	De Soto County, MS	Memphis	54.9
28	Brunswick County, NC	Wilmington	54.7
29	St. Charles County, MO	St. Louis	54.3
30	Union County, GA	nonmetro	54.0

*Counties where the age 65+ population exceeded 2,000 on July 1, 1990.

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