

Migration to the South Brings U.S. Blacks Full Circle

by William H. Frey

Blacks ended the 20th century by returning to the region that they spent most of the century leaving. Their return reinforces the South's distinct racial profile as a mostly white-black region.

Census 2000 numbers show that the non-Hispanic black population of the South surged in the 1990s by 3,575,211 people—more than in the other three regions of the United States combined. This number represents 58 percent of the total increase in the country's black population. It is roughly double the number of blacks that the South gained in the 1980s (1.7 million) and well above the gain for the 1970s (1.9 million), when blacks began returning to the South.*

Continued on page 4

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Reinventing USAID?* 3
- Russia's Modest Migration Gains Unlikely to Stop Population Decline* 5
- Childhood Asthma a Growing Epidemic in the United States* ... 10
- Speaking Graphically: Gross National Income, Selected Countries* 11

Blacks Outnumber Hispanics in the South *Continued from page 1*

The black populations of Florida and Georgia gained 674,000 and 632,000 people, respectively. Texas gained 454,000 blacks, and Maryland and North Carolina each gained over 300,000 blacks, reflecting the South's renewed 1990s allure.

Like whites, blacks were attracted by the South's booming economy, low density living, and warmer climate. Other pull factors included historic roots in the region, the existence of a growing middle-class black population, and an improved racial climate. Segregation studies

during the 1990s, and only 1.4 million Hispanics. In most of these states, the black population is substantially larger than the Hispanic population (see map). Even including Texas and Florida, the South's 2000 black population made up 19 percent of the total and whites 66 percent, whereas Hispanics accounted for only 12 percent.

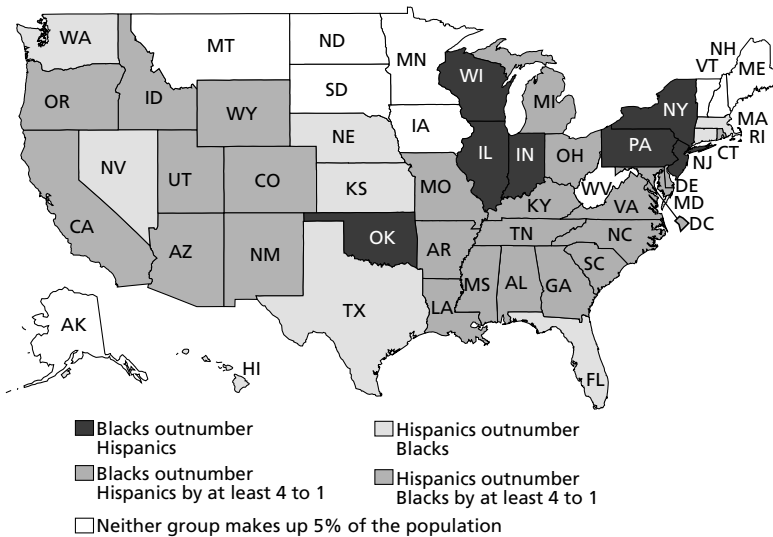
Black Identity Rooted in the South

The identification of blacks with their race is stronger in the South than in other parts of the country. The 2000 census question permitting respondents to describe themselves by selecting more than one race bore this out. (Throughout this article, "black" is used to designate non-Hispanic blacks who selected one or more races.)

In multiethnic states and in states with small black populations, the percentage of blacks selecting "black only" was high but not unanimous. In California, 92 percent of blacks chose this option, and in Oregon only 78 percent did.

In contrast, among both fast- and slow-gaining states of the South, an almost unanimous "black only" response was recorded. In eight southern states and in the District of Columbia, at least 98 percent of black respondents chose this option, a higher percentage than in other largely black-white states of the Northeast or Midwest. These responses reflect lower rates of interracial marriages, but also a greater tendency among southern blacks to identify with African American race.

Relative Sizes of States' Black and Hispanic Populations, 2000



Source: Author's analysis of 2000 census data.

show a decline in black-nonblack neighborhood segregation (using the index of dissimilarity) over the last 20 years for Atlanta (-13 points), Orlando (-24 points), Jacksonville (-15 points), Norfolk (-13 points), and Houston (-16 points).

Hispanic Influence

Much has been made of the fact that, nationally, the size of the Hispanic population now rivals that of blacks. Despite the high rate of growth for the Hispanic population in the South, recent African American gains reinforce the South's historic racial profile as primarily a white-black region. The lion's share of growth in the region's Hispanic population, 71 percent, occurred in two immigrant magnet states—Texas and Florida. The 15 other southern states gained 2.4 million blacks

Not Their Forebears' South

Migration patterns of the 1990s indicate a return to the South of huge numbers of blacks whose parents and grandparents had left the region in earlier decades. The region is now home to almost 55 percent of the country's blacks, compared with less than one-third of the U.S. Hispanic population and less than one-fifth of Asian Americans. The return to the South of blacks, along with the Sunbelt-directed migration of whites, is reinforcing the South's white-black profile, but in a booming new economy and with improved race relations. ■

** Note: Data from the 2000 census are not strictly comparable with those from earlier censuses because Census 2000 allowed identification of one or more races. Nationwide, 4.1 percent of non-Hispanic blacks (2.4 percent in the South) selected more than one race.*

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