

THE NEW WHITE FLIGHT

It was one of the most significant demographic trends of the latter half of the 20th century. It has also been one of the more controversial issues demographers and sociologists have struggled to interpret. The subject of white residents fleeing to the suburbs from cities, so-called “white flight,” is not, however, past history. Census 2000 reveals that a second wave of white migration is occurring today, the causes of which are both complex and disputable. American Demographics asked two leading demographers to offer their interpretations of this recent population shift.

William H. Frey, the Milken Institute and University of Michigan demographer who coined the term “new white flight” in American Demographics (April, 1994) now finds this dispersal accelerating to outer suburbs and, regionally, to the whiter New Sunbelt. Frey believes that this relocation, while not strictly a flight from immigrants or minorities, reflects, in part, the high cost of city living and a yearning for a suburban lifestyle. He believes the movement will supersede its postwar predecessor in creating a wider regional separation of the nation’s mostly suburban whites from its more urban minority populations.

Roderick J. Harrison, director of the DataBank at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington D.C., and associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Howard University, agrees with Frey that white migration is taking place and that it is primarily lifestyle-driven. However, he objects to the use of the term “white flight” to describe this migration, arguing that doing so dilutes our understanding of what white flight really is, and of the white flight that actually is still occurring, probably on a reduced level, today.

Frey and Harrison use the latest Census data to substantiate their arguments. While the numbers may be indisputable, the reasons for the new white migration are debatable. Here are their perspectives.



LIZ VON HOENESTONE

ESCAPING THE CITY—AND THE SUBURBS

Once again, whites are relocating, but this time it's to the outer suburbs and to expanding metropolitan areas in the New Sun Belt.

BY WILLIAM H. FREY

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The “white flight” from America’s big cities to the newly established suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s was almost a social movement, as the massive migration of whites to the suburbs led to an explosion of tract housing outside large, established cities on the coasts and in the Midwest. For the most part, this movement arose from a quest for a new lifestyle. The flight was related to suburban pulls as much as to city pushes. Exiting the city meant leaving behind congested neighborhoods, aging and costly housing, mediocre schools and services, rising crime and growing nonwhite populations, which felt threatening to many Northern whites. In pre-Civil Rights America, racial discrimination kept minorities from joining this movement, which remained a largely white phenomenon.

Yet among these white parents of the Baby Boom, the allure of newly constructed suburban housing and communities was just as important in motivating the move as the desire to escape the city. Returning war veterans and young couples planning families helped to create a suburban lifestyle conducive to child-rearing, neighborhood outings and the achievement of the American dream of more space and a single-family home. Back then, all of this could be accomplished in close proximity to the city, which still represented the primary center for employment, shopping and entertainment.

Fast-forward to Census 2000, which reveals another wave of white flight under way. Like the earlier white flight, the new one is a search for a better lifestyle, but the geography is quite different. Now it’s the suburbs surrounding established coastal and Midwest cities that are expensive and cramped. Housing has aged, and more urban populations have spilled out to form a maze of shop-

ping malls, freeways and office parks that make it difficult to equate this suburbia with a distinct lifestyle. What both examples of white flight have in common is a quest for living in a low-density environment, with neighbors of similar demographic profiles, and a desire for a safe, community-oriented suburban lifestyle. Indeed, as with the first round of white relocation, the new white migrants seek a lifestyle shift. The difference is that now they are escaping both the cities and the suburbs of these densely populated metropolises. As cases in point, the Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (CMSAs) of greater Los Angeles and New York rank Nos. 1 and 2 in white declines—losing 843,00 and 680,000 whites, respectively, during the 1990s (see chart below). These and other major metropolitan areas now rely on minorities to sustain their demographic gains.

The white relocation away from these metros does not reflect a flight from immigrants or minorities per se, but rather an escape from the increases in economic costs and decreases in quality of life of rampant urbanism. While there is evidence that the moves of some low-skilled whites are in response to job competition, much of this white migration is a response to the high cost of living and the dense,

congested metropolitan areas, which are also attracting new immigrant minorities. No longer composed primarily of young couples, the new white flight also includes empty-nest Boomers and recent retirees.

White Flight to the New Sun Belt

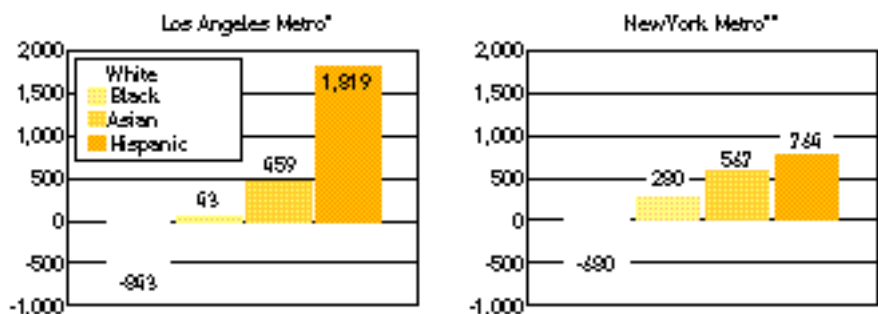
White relocation for lifestyle reasons is no longer an exclusively local phenomenon. Recent white growth is regionally directed to more suburban-like metropolitan and nonmetropolitan communities in the South and West. This movement is primarily to a constellation of growing cities and towns in the New Sun Belt—a stretch of territory removed from the big cities and inner suburbs of the urbanized Northeast, Midwest and West Coast.

While white movement to the Sun Belt might seem like an old story, the recent white dispersal is directed to growing parts of the region—those with low density, family-friendly or senior-friendly development patterns and locations far from the more densely populated South metropolitan areas. In fact, much of the allure of the New Sun Belt for both employers and residents has to do with quality of life considerations, such as less congestion and pollution, greater neighborhood safety and proximity to natural amenities. The highest rates of white growth are occurring in territories of the South that lie outside of the major immigrant metros (Miami, Dallas, Houston and Washington, D.C.) and West (Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego). Much lower rates of white growth

METRO RACIAL DISPLACEMENT

The Los Angeles and New York metros rank Nos. 1 and 2 in white declines during the 1990s.

1990-2000 CHANGE (IN '000) BY RACE FOR:



* Includes the 5-county Los Angeles Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA)

** Includes the 29-county New York Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA)

Source: William H. Frey, analysis of Census 2000

can be seen in the North, and in territories that lie outside the major immigrant metros, such as New York and Chicago (see first chart below).

White Flight to the Exurbs

The local aspect of the new wave of white flight involves a push toward the metropolitan periphery, including communities that lie outside of metro areas and have a rural feel. One of the most startling statistics from the 2000 Census shows that there are now more whites living in our nonmetropolitan territories (23.3 percent) than in central cities of metropolitan areas (22.6 percent). This is a sharp contrast to the more urban nonwhite population (see second chart below). This increase in white residents in nonmetropolitan areas, compared with central cities, represents the reversal of a long-term trend: In 1990, 24.6 percent of whites lived

in central cities, compared with 22.8 percent in nonmetropolitan locales. For many decades, whites moved from nonmetropolitan (rural) areas to big cities, then began to reverse direction from cities to their surrounding suburbs. We have now come full circle as a result of significant white movement to the communities that lie beyond metropolitan boundaries.

As with the regional movement, the white shift to “SUV America” represents a desire for less congestion and smaller communities that enable citizens to have greater input in local government decisions. This movement is prevalent in the New Sun Belt and the outlying areas of older Northeast and Midwest regions. The impact of these peripheral white growth patterns can be seen, in different ways, in metropolitan Atlanta and the greater New York metropolitan region. The Atlanta metro area exemplifies the New Sun Belt

pattern of generally high white growth throughout the metro area but accentuated growth on the periphery. In Atlanta during the 1990s, the white population grew by more than 10 percent in more than half the metro area’s counties, but the fastest-growing counties (white growth exceeds 50 percent) tend to be on the outer reaches of the area—including Forsyth, the second fastest-growing white county in the nation. Forsyth’s new migrants come from within the Atlanta region and from the suburbs of Northern metropolitan areas. They include families and empty nesters in quest of a traditional suburban lifestyle. This growth pattern mirrors those in other fast-growing New Sun Belt areas.

By contrast, the greater New York metro exemplifies a region of pervasive suburban white decline. Almost half of the region’s counties lost white population during the 1990s, and all but two of the remaining ones gained less than 10 percent. Yet whites continued to move farther outside the city. Two counties on the area’s most distant periphery, Ocean County, N.J., and Pike County, Pa., showed white growth rates of 14 percent and 55 percent, respectively. Within these counties, one finds counterparts to the classic 1950s suburban “Levittown” developments.

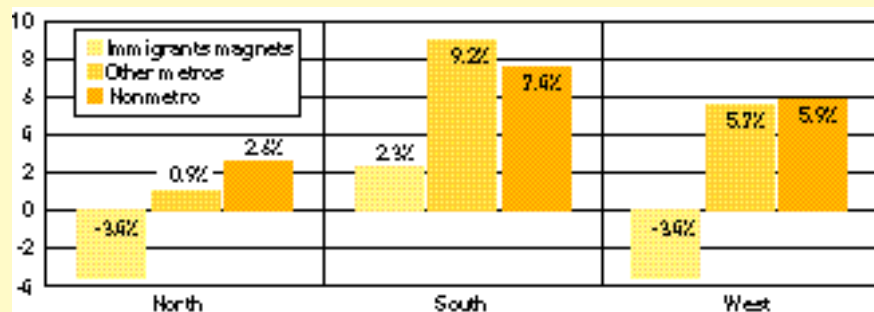
Continued White Dispersal

Both aspects of the new wave of white flight—its regional shift to the New Sun Belt and its exurban shift to the far reaches of the metropolis—represent a continued dispersal of the white population away from America’s largest, most dense urban settlements (see map, page 21). The participants in this new white movement—Gen X couples, empty-nest Boomers and recently retired seniors—are lured by some of the same lifestyles and creature comforts that attracted post-World War II city dwellers to the original suburbs. Yet as with the earlier white flight, the new version also serves to separate its participants from more urban-bound minorities. In fact, the physical distance separating these new white suburbanites from the more densely settled metropolitan areas has increased considerably, extending to different counties and regions rather than just different neighborhoods.

This increased separation may be due to the changing nature of work—the

WHITE DISPERSAL TO THE NEW SUN BELT, 1990-2000

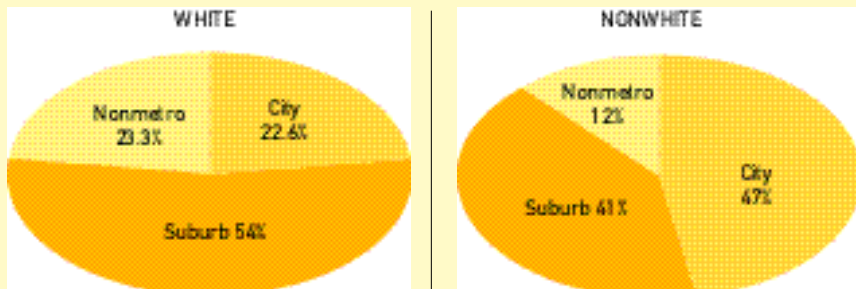
Between 1990 and 2000, high rates of white growth occurred in the less urbanized parts of the South and West, while a much lower rate of white growth can be seen in the North.



Source: William H. Frey, analysis of 2000 Census

REVERSING A LONG-TERM TREND

The increase in white residents living in the nation’s nonmetro areas, versus central cities, represents the reversal of a trend that persisted for decades.



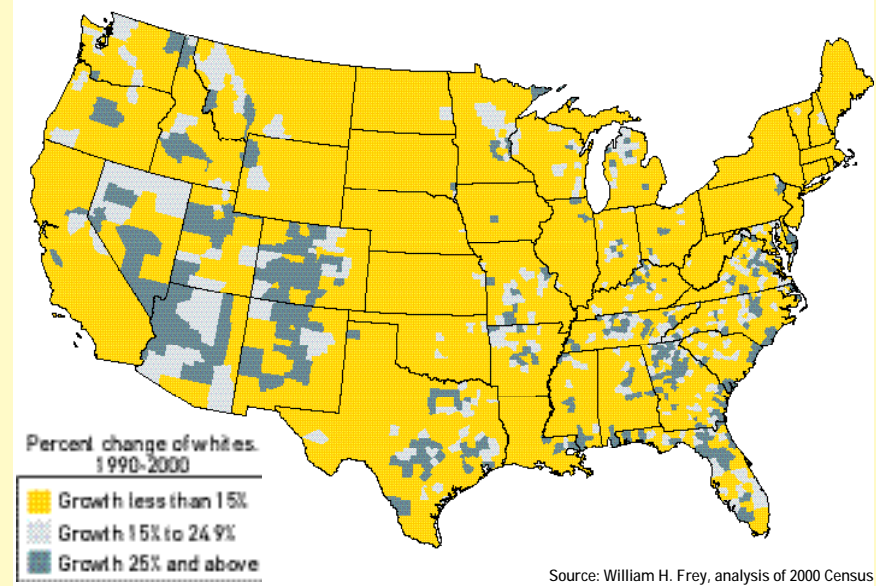
Source: William H. Frey, analysis of 2000 Census

telecommunications revolution and the detachment from the work force of a growing retiree population. Yet this separation also serves to create more geographically distinct “urban” and “suburban” areas in America that share far less overlap than in the past, when suburban commuters, shoppers and theatergoers interacted with big-city dwellers at least part of the time. While new immigration flows are reinvigorating city populations, and traditional suburbs are looking more like cities of the past, the dispersal of whites to yet another frontier is transforming new, fast-growing regions and communities in ways that once again redefine the lifestyles and geography of white suburbia in America. ■

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WHITES DISPERSE, 1990-2000

Between 1990 and 2000, the white population has continued to move away from America's largest, most dense urban settlements. Areas shaded dark blue had the largest growth of whites that decade.



MOVING OUT WHEN MINORITIES MOVE IN

Racial segregation of blacks is actually on the decline. Using the term “white flight” to describe this latest migration of whites is misleading.

BY RODERICK J. HARRISON

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The term “white flight” refers to a more specific phenomenon than white suburbanization, exurbanization or migration, and it was never intended to subsume these much broader movements of the white population. White flight might provide a more eye-catching phrase than “white migration to lower density communities,” but the behaviors that the expression was meant to describe can be lost and forgotten in the process. Just what are these behaviors? What does white flight mean?

White flight alludes to the out-movement of whites—often quite rapid—that can ensue once blacks or other minority populations exceed a threshold percentage of the population in a neighborhood or locality. It thus

refers to a response by whites to the influx of minority populations into predominantly or exclusively white areas, and to the tendency of whites to leave many of those areas more quickly than comparable locales not experiencing such an influx.

In its original sense, white flight is certainly not a term appropriately applied to movements of the white population that cannot be directly tied to changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the neighborhoods or localities from which whites have departed. It seems likely that many, and perhaps even most, of the whites who moved to the suburbs in the decades following World War II were moving from neighborhoods that were experiencing no influx of blacks or other minorities. In the segregated metropolitan areas of the 1950s and 1960s, it is highly unlikely that blacks were moving into enough new neighborhoods to account for most of the whites moving to the sub-

urbs. Instead, only some of the whites moving to the suburbs during that period, and since, could appropriately be described as engaging in white flight, albeit with devastating consequences for the growth of residential segregation in the neighborhoods and cities that they left.

Indeed, long before it was labeled white flight, the practice of “blockbusting” that real estate agents and developers used to rent housing to African Americans in the overbuilt Harlem section of New York City in the 1920s depended on the inevitability that whites would flee a block and neighborhood once a few blacks moved in, according to Gilbert Osofsky in his book *The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930* (Harper & Row, 1963). In addition, the use of restrictive covenants and other discriminatory practices to exclude African Americans from other neighborhoods, limited black migration from the South to expanding, segregated ghettos in Northern and Midwestern urban destinations. These same cities remain to this day among the most residentially segregated in the nation.

The most popular measure of segre-

gation, the dissimilarity index, has been used by social scientists to gauge residential segregation since the 1950s. It quantifies the percentage of the minority group population that would have to move from one Census tract (or Census block) to another in order for the minority population to be represented in each Census tract at the same percentage it represents in the metropolitan area's population—for example, 25 percent in each census tract in a metropolitan area where blacks are 25 percent of the population. The dissimilarity index rose from about 50 percent for blacks in 1900, to 75 percent in 1940 and 77.5 percent in 1950, before peaking just short of 80 percent in 1960 and 1970, according to Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigdor in an April 2001 Brookings Institution paper, "Racial Segregation in the 2000 Census: Promising News." This means that in 1900, about half of all African Americans, on average, would have had to live in a different ward (Census tracts had not yet been created) to achieve an equal distribution of blacks within each of the nation's cities with African American populations. In 1970, however, nearly 80 percent of African Americans, on average, would have had to move to new Census tracts to achieve complete integration.

It is noteworthy that the increased residential segregation of African Americans was almost entirely accomplished by 1940, prior to the outflow of whites to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s. It is also notable that since 1970,

the residential segregation of blacks has fallen substantially, to 65.2 percent in 2000. This indicates that "only" two-thirds of blacks would now have to move to equalize their distribution through the average metropolitan area in the United States, a level still considered highly segregated. Authors Glaeser and Vigdor argue in their report that the declines in the segregation scores reflect the decline in the number of metropolitan area census tracts with no black residents (to only 17.2 percent of all tracts in 2000, from 61.8 percent in 1960), and a corresponding increase in

The term "white flight" refers to a response by whites to the influx of minority populations into predominantly or exclusively white areas.

tracts where blacks represent less than 10 percent of the population (to 44.9 percent from 18.3 percent) and represent 10 percent to 50 percent of the population (to 20.8 percent from 11.1 percent).

There are corresponding increases in the percentage of blacks who live in metropolitan area tracts that are less than 10 percent black (to 14.5 percent in 2000, from 7.0 percent in 1960) and 10 percent to 50 percent black (to 35.6 percent from 22.8 percent). Indeed, in 2000, for the first time most African

Americans (50.1 percent) no longer lived in majority black Census tracts. Segregation has thus been reduced primarily by relatively small percentages of blacks (less than 10 percent) entering predominantly white areas, especially in rapidly growing cities and suburbs. Desegregation in heavily black Census tracts and in metropolitan areas with large concentrations of blacks seems to have contributed less to the decline.

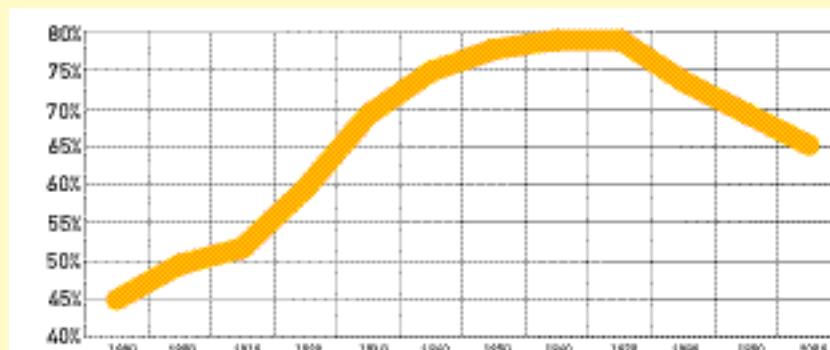
These declines in residential segregation and increases in the percentages of blacks living in integrated tracts might suggest that, if anything, white flight has abated in the past several decades: Proportionally more whites and blacks than ever before are living together in racially integrated neighborhoods. Such a conclusion, however, would ignore patterns that may indicate that white flight from blacks and other minorities persists at significant levels. For example, a study of 1990 and 1980 Census data presented at the 1992 meetings of the the Alexandria, Va.-based American Statistical Association found that in 1990, 1 in 5 blacks lived in a Census block that had been less than 10 percent black in 1980. However, because this influx often pushed black representation above 10 percent during the decade, only 12 percent of African Americans actually inhabited blocks that were still less than 10 percent black in 1990.

Evidence of how the racial composition is changing in these and other neighborhoods that African Americans and other minorities have moved into would be needed to understand how and where white flight, as well as less racially motivated processes of residential transition and succession, might still be retarding the progress toward a nation whose increasingly diverse populations actually become each other's neighbors. ■

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MEASURING SEGREGATION

The dissimilarity index rose to about 75 percent in 1940, peaking just short of 80 percent in 1970. Since 1970, the residential segregation of blacks has actually fallen.



Sources: Adapted by Roderick Harrison from Glaeser and Vigdor and from other sources