

December 14, 2010

Immigrants Make Paths to Suburbia, Not Cities

By *SABRINA TAVERNISE* and *ROBERT GEBELOFF*

WASHINGTON — Immigrants fanned out across the United States in the last decade, settling in greater numbers in small towns and suburbs rather than in the cities where they typically moved when they first came to this country, new census data show.

Following jobs to rural and suburban areas, in industries like construction and the food business, immigrant populations rose more than 60 percent in places where immigrants made up fewer than 5 percent of the population in 2000. In areas that had been home to the most immigrants, the foreign-born population was flat over that period.

In Los Angeles County, long a major destination for new immigrants, the foreign-born population remained largely unchanged for the first time in several decades. In contrast, it quadrupled in Newton County, in central Georgia outside Atlanta.

Tuesday's report represented the biggest single data release in the Census Bureau's history, with more than 11 billion individual estimates for 670,000 specific geographic locations — areas as small as several blocks.

Unlike the 2010 decennial census, which counts every American, Tuesday's survey, the American Community Survey, details characteristics using samples taken from about one in 10 Americans between 2005 and 2009.

They show a portrait of a rapidly changing America, whose young population is much more diverse than its older one.

About 48 percent of newborns last year were members of minority groups, compared with just a fifth of those over 65, a statistic that raises questions about possible generational tensions for the United States in coming decades, particularly over the cost of education and health care, said Kenneth Johnson, senior demographer at the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

It also foreshadows a growing divide: Graduation rates for blacks and Hispanics — the overwhelming majority of all immigrants in the United States — are far below those for whites. The trend line therefore suggests that the country will be facing a growing shortage of educated Americans as global competition intensifies, particularly as other countries' graduation levels rise.

In the last large immigration wave, in the late 19th century, immigrants took several generations to assimilate into American society through education. But the United States cannot afford to wait that long as its declining economy struggles to compete with developing countries like China, said Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, co-director of an immigration research center at New York University.

“Today we have two elevators,” he said. “One stuck in the basement and the other moving up faster than it ever has before.”

“It is placing us at a huge disadvantage,” Professor Suárez-Orozco added.

The spreading of immigrants throughout the United States reflects their mobility in the work force, particularly because of the booming housing industry last decade.

Roberto Suro, author of “Strangers Among Us: Latino Lives in a Changing America,” estimated that several years ago, before the housing bubble burst, one out of every three newly arrived Hispanic immigrants was working in construction.

These workers were joined by their families, and communities that had never encountered immigrants in large numbers suddenly saw large influxes. Friction often followed.

Stafford County, Va., for example, where residents have demanded a crackdown on illegal immigrants, saw its immigrant population nearly triple.

“It was a kind of deficit spending, borrowing against the future in very human terms,” said Mr. Suro, a former reporter for The New York Times and The Washington Post. “The leveraged asset was the work of the immigrants. The long-term payout was the social requirement to settle them and look after their children.”

The country’s biggest population gains were in suburban areas. But, in a departure from past decades when whites led the rise, now it is because of minorities. More than a third of all 13.3 million new suburbanites were Hispanic, compared with 2.5 million blacks and 2 million Asians. In all, whites accounted for a fifth of suburban growth.

Even in rural America, where the population grew the slowest — just 2 percent since 2000 compared with 7 percent nationwide — foreign-born residents accounted for 37 percent of that growth. Three-quarters of them were not citizens, suggesting that they had arrived only recently in the states.

Demographers did not agree on what the new data said about segregation trends.

William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, said his analysis of the data showed a decline in racial segregation in 61 of the top 100 metro areas.

One example is New Orleans, where segregation has declined noticeably, probably because blacks from segregated areas left the city after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Black segregation is still higher than it is for Asians and Hispanics in the United States.

“Nationally we are moving to greater integration,” Mr. Frey said.

A study by John R. Logan, a demographer at Brown University, and Brian J. Stults, a demographer at Florida State University, came to different conclusions by looking closely at neighborhoods of between 3,000 and 5,000 people. They concluded that black segregation had changed little from 2000 in the metropolitan areas, and had actually increased in areas where blacks are a smaller share of population.

The data also showed an increasingly pinched middle class. Median income declined by almost 5 percent in the past decade, with a few exceptions, including Maryland, Rhode Island and Wyoming. The deterioration was worse in counties dependent on manufacturing, where income dropped by 9 percent.

Of the five counties with poverty rates higher than 39 percent, four contain or are in American Indian reservations in South Dakota. The fifth, Willacy County, Tex., is in the Rio Grande Valley.

The Washington suburbs were home to some of the most affluent, educated people in America. The three places in the country with the highest median household income are all in Virginia — Falls Church, and the counties of Fairfax and Loudoun. Seven of the 17 counties where more than half of people 25 and older had a bachelor’s degree were in Washington’s suburbs.

There were 62 counties where fewer than 10 percent of the adult population had a bachelor’s degree. Fourteen of these counties were in Georgia, nine in Tennessee, eight in Kentucky and five each in Florida and West Virginia.

The county with the lowest median home values for owner-occupied housing units was Reeves in Texas, at \$29,400. The county with the highest median home values was Nantucket, Mass., at more than \$1 million.

Sabrina Tavernise reported from Washington, and Robert Gebeloff from New York.