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March 16, 2001

Outer Suburbs Outpace City in Population Growth

By DAVID W. CHEN

While population growth in New York City outpaced that of its traditional suburban bastions, Nassau and Westchester Counties, few places in the state grew as fast as New York's outer suburbs, census figures released yesterday show.

In the closest and most populous suburbs, Westchester's population grew by only 3.7 percent - almost the same as the figure for the entire state - while Nassau's grew by only 3.0 percent.

A little farther afield, Rockland County grew by 6.4 percent, while Suffolk registered a 6.7 percent gain, just ahead of the 6.0 percent pace in the city. But in less populated areas farther up the Hudson Valley, the picture changed: Putnam County grew by 13.1 percent, Orange by 10.2 percent and Dutchess by 7.2 percent.

Putnam, in fact, was the second-fastest-growing county in the state, trailing perhaps the biggest surprise of all, Staten Island.

The census results show a vivid picture of the metropolitan population pushing relentlessly north into the Hudson Valley and east onto Long Island.

In addition, the census figures showed that while the number of whites dropped in both the city and the suburbs, the number of minorities living in both the inner- and outer-ring suburbs skyrocketed. Some counties recorded percentage gains even greater than those registered in the state's most diverse county, Queens: the number of Hispanics increased by 147

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percent in Putnam, and the number of Asians increased by 63 percent in Nassau.

On an anecdotal level, at least, demographers and sociologists said that they were not surprised that the suburbs had become more diverse and that more people, equipped to telecommute or desperate for more open space, were moving farther away from the city. But the official snapshot did surprise some by just how drastic those changes turned out to be.

All seven suburban New York counties reported surges in numbers of Hispanic residents, registering gains that not only dwarfed the state average of 26 percent, but even the 42 percent increase in Queens. The lowest increases were in Rockland (54 percent), Westchester (56 percent) and Suffolk (61 percent).

"Hispanics came out as a big surprise, because they were well above the estimates we were looking at," said Roy Fedelem, principal planner with the Long Island Regional Planning Board.

Sharp percentage increases applied to the Asian population as well. A few counties, including Nassau and Orange, outpaced the 52 percent growth rate for Asians in Queens.

But when it came to blacks and whites, the numbers were flat, or in decline, throughout the downstate suburbs. And for the first time ever, Mr. Fedelem said, Hispanics outnumbered blacks on Long Island.

Demographers and sociologists are still waiting for more detailed statistics to be released later this year or early next year on migration patterns, income, housing and other indicators. But already, the initial data paint a portrait of an evolving suburbia.

"I feel that suburbs are changing in ways like the cities, and in a way, are becoming more like cities certainly in their diversity," said John Logan, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Albany. "It's sort of like dropping a rock in a pond and right at the center at first, that's where the big impact is, right in the city, but it ripples out pretty fast."

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