



This week's issue ▶ Archives ▶
Subscribe now ▶

best colleges

plus: grad schools, rankings, financial aid, careers

news

Search

Go ▶

▶ Advanced Search

Business & Tech

Education

Health

Opinion

Personal Finance

Personal Tech

Politics

Travel

Vital Statistics

Work

Interactive Tools

Live Chat

News Quiz

Photography

About U.S. News

Products & Services

Market@usnews



U.S. News 4/2/01

A nation of new cities

Immigrants are stirring a rich American melting pot and helping stem the population drain from urban centers

By Angie Cannon

When it opened in 1927 on Chicago's North Side, Roosevelt High School educated mostly middle-class Jewish kids. The poet Shel Silverstein, comedian George Gobel, and nuclear science pioneer Alvin Weinberg all passed through Roosevelt's halls. None would recognize the place today. The school teems with 1,700 kids from 58 countries. Some 60 percent are Hispanic, nearly 20 percent are Asian. The Babel of voices includes 30 different languages. "We start at Mexico and go all the way to Chile," says Principal Miguel Trujillo. "We start in the Middle East and go all the way to the Philippines and Indonesia."

This dramatic polyglot infusion—even for a traditional immigrant gateway like Chicago—has helped stem a 50-year slide in population for a place that nearly 20 years ago lost its "Second City" designation to Los Angeles. In the past decade, Chicago actually gained population, by a small but prideful 4 percent. Boston, an even earlier immigrant destination, Atlanta, an emerging one, and New York, the ultimate one, also showed increases as the Census Bureau continued last week to roll out its detailed portrait of the nation.

Think of the census as a most advanced camera fitted with lenses that can provide both the widest angles and the most telescopic views of the country. From the data, Americans are now learning that the turn of this century is very much like the turn of the last, a story of the role of immigrants in national life, but this time with immigrants from fundamentally different origins. The impact of this is being felt powerfully in major urban centers, particularly the brawny burghs that first helped define this nation to the rest of the world.

City lights. This window on the new makeup of our cities offers an intriguing glimpse of how the nation may come to be seen in the years ahead. Just as cities and inner suburbs now are becoming more diverse, and in some cases even slightly less segregated, the same may happen on a much grander scale in the decades to come. Atlanta, in part because of its terrible traffic problems, is experiencing a modest reversal of the white flight that desegregation engendered 30 years ago. Affluent blacks are turning historic trends upside down as well, choosing the suburbs. Chicago's numbers tell another story: The white population continues to drop.

NA

email tools

Subscribe to e-newsletter

E-mail this page a friend

related articles

The draw of downtown: Big growth predicted in many U.S. cities. (10/5/98)

related sites

American Fact Finder. This section of the U.S. Census Bureau's Web provides a wide range demographic informat

Center for Immigration Studies. The CIS has a wide range of informa available on immigrati issues.

There's a tendency to lump cities together for convenient, expedient analysis. But the census data make it clear that the trends diverge at least slightly from place to place. For every Chicago or Atlanta, there is a St. Louis, Philadelphia, or Hartford experiencing a continuing erosion of population.

Hartford's situation is particularly grim. One day last week, community activist Eddie Perez provided a tour of the efforts to rehabilitate the ravaged remains of his boyhood neighborhood of Frog Hollow. The two- and three-family brick homes now are miserable shells, their windows smashed or boarded. The fronts are scarred with graffiti. Yards are littered with trash and weeds. It is literally a war of attrition. "I've been part of the war for the last 30 years," Perez says. "And it is war." The answer to the looming question "Where have all the people gone?" is depressingly familiar to urbanists: to the suburbs. Hartford, which was among the nation's wealthiest communities a century ago, has lost 13 percent of its population since 1990 as 18,000 people repeated a troubling pattern: fleeing in search of better schools and less crime. Saundra Kee Borges, city manager of the beleaguered Connecticut capital, says: "We're happy that we didn't lose as many as we feared." And the numbers also serve to reinforce a regional inferiority complex that Hartford long has harbored because of its place between Boston and New York. New York's record 8 million people and Boston's strongest growth in population in 50 years will do little to change that dynamic.

Open arms. Other cities in the loser column include Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Baltimore, where officials try to see the glass as half full because the declines there weren't as precipitous as predicted. It has been a long fall, particularly for St. Louis, which was the nation's fourth-largest city in the census of 1900. "You can't paper over the problems-these are cities that still need to get their act together," says Bruce Katz, director of the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy at the Brookings Institution. "They need to get lean and be entrepreneurial."

The numbers-good or bad-are important because they determine political clout in terms of the size of congressional delegations and the amount of federal money that flows to communities based on population.

New York, the iconic immigrant destination, seems to be saved by its open arms. Only because of a swell of new immigrant residents was the city able to gird against decline. "New York would be struggling if not for immigration," says John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at SUNY-Albany. "New York's comeback is very much associated with those things that make the region attractive to immigrants."

His words are brought to life in places like Flushing, Queens, where help-wanted signs are found in any number of languages for the blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and whites who live there. It was in Flushing, after all, where Hillary Rodham Clinton joked during her Senate campaign, "Nowhere else in the world but Queens can I be told to 'go home' in 100 different languages."

With Kit R. Roane in New York and Stephen Sawicki in Hartford

