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Behind the Big Numbers, a Million Little Stories

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THE 2000 census hangs numbers on what many New Yorkers already know from the streets: the pulse of the city, and perhaps its future, lies in the boroughs outside Manhattan.

As the census figures released last week revealed, the boroughs leaped in population in the past decade - an 11 percent gain in Queens, 15 percent in Staten Island, 7 percent in the Bronx, 4 percent in Brooklyn. (The increase may reflect better counting methods as much as actual growth.) Behind these numbers are vital shifts in neighborhood boundaries and local communities that fill in the complex, variegated picture of a changing city.

"We're in the midst of a vast refiguring of the boundaries of national community on par with the early part of the century," said Jonathan Rieder, a sociologist at Barnard College who has studied race and politics in Canarsie, "when Jewish and Italian and Polish immigrants transformed the American city and process transformed American culture."

At the end of the century, the city has become an extraordinarily diverse place. Yet one expert who has studied the data says the city remains surprisingly segregated.

The numbers released so far are limited to population counts and breakdowns by race and Hispanic origin, and do not include data on the origins of New Yorkers. But planners and demographers who have been studying city population shifts have theories that flesh out the statistics.

In South Ozone Park, Queens, for example, the number of Asians increased 141

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percent from 1990. Parag Khandhar, a policy associate at the Asian American Federation of New York, suggested that immigrants of Indian descent from Guyana and Trinidad - Indo-Caribbeans - probably make up a large portion of these increases. Koreans, he said, could explain the increases in Asians in neighborhoods in central Queens.

Mr. Khandhar also said the Asian populations in some Queens neighborhoods - Floral Park, Rego Park and Forest Hills - might have expanded because second- and third-generation immigrants were moving from the areas they had originally settled in, like Jackson Heights.

What does all this mean for the city?

"I would predict we'll see a noticeable increase in political participation from Asian-Americans," Mr. Khandhar said. "One reason is that the population is growing so fast. A second is that more folks are registering to vote and becoming much more invested in the political process here."

Across the city, the ethnic and racial textures of neighborhoods have changed in complicated ways. Whites have dwindled to a third of the entire population, and, as a result, in some neighborhoods the changes are dramatic.

For example, while 91 percent of Bensonhurst is non-Hispanic, as it was in 1990, the number of non-Hispanics who identify themselves as white fell to 68 percent from 80 percent, and those who identify themselves as Asian rose to 19 percent from 9 percent.

No state assembly district in the city contains fewer than 5,000 residents who identified themselves as Hispanic. The Bronx is almost 50 percent Hispanic. The assembly district with the largest number of Hispanics is the 34th, in Queens, which covers parts of Jackson Heights, Elmhurst and Corona, and has 109,300 Hispanics, 68 percent of the district.

Canarsie, Brooklyn, is another neighborhood that has had significant shifts since 1990. In 2000, the population grew 33 percent from 1990, jumping dramatically to 68,500 from 51,500, and the non-Hispanic population stayed about the same at 92 percent. But in 1990, those non-Hispanic residents were 77 percent white and 10 percent black. In 2000, they were 26 percent white and 58 percent black.

Professor Rieder, at Barnard College, author of "Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism," said the shift was probably due to black immigration from Africa and the Caribbean.

"In the period I studied in the late 70's and early 80's," he said, "black meant African-American, and there was this undifferentiated whiteness, even though Italians and Jews had different ethnic and religious loyalties.

"In the same way that Canarsie in the 70's was a perfect moment that caught

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black and white conflict in the civil rights movement and beyond, Canarsie today shows the ethnic polyglot that defines the city today," he said.

According to Mr. Rieder, the mix represented by a neighborhood like Canarsie will not only transform the city but will also alter how Americans think about race, helping them move beyond simple concepts of whiteness and blackness.

"The idea of assimilation used to mean conforming to white Anglo culture," he said. "Ethnic people today are coming from countries and moving into neighborhoods, and they're not meeting old-fashioned white ethnics. They are meeting other ethnicities of other colors and other new immigrants. America will have to adjust to this new polyglot pluralism.

"There's great drama in Canarsie and in all these neighborhoods," he said. "It is a profound glimpse of the future of America."

Though Manhattan's population remained unchanged from 1990, within its neighborhoods there were telling shifts in the sizes of newer residential neighborhoods. The City Hall area claims 6,288 residents, and 5,955 people live around Wall Street; this is, respectively, an 86 percent and 108 percent increase for those neighborhoods.

Despite the sweeping changes revealed by the new census numbers, New York remains a segregated city, said John Logan, a sociologist at the State University at Albany who has analyzed the 2000 data to determine patterns of segregation.

"For the city as a whole, the level of black-white segregation was very high in 1990, like Chicago, and it has stayed unchanged," Mr. Logan said. "It's still a serious social factor in New York."

"What we see is that where groups are growing, they are most likely to experience increasing segregation," he continued. "It's counterintuitive. How can we be more diverse if we're separating at the same time? Well, that's what we do."

Even people familiar with New York's collage of major ethnic neighborhoods - those who know the sari stores in Jackson Heights, the taquerias in the South Bronx and the Jamaican bakeries in Flatbush - might be surprised by some of the detailed findings revealed by the census.

Bigger numbers mask myriad smaller communities, like the more than 2,800 people in southern Queens who identified themselves as non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaskan. This is more than in any other area in the city. Buoyed by this high number, Queens has more American Indians than any county in the state.

"There's less noise, less people, less everything in Rockaway Park," said Clifford Bernie, 48, who arrived in the city in 1996 from the Ihanktonwan Nakota reservation in South Dakota and slept on a park bench before finding work at the

American Indian Community House in Manhattan. Three years ago Mr. Bernie moved to a \$240-a-month one-bedroom apartment in Rockaway Park that is right by the ocean.

He likes the area. "It's more conducive to my living environment," he said. "It puts space in my head."

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