

In the Under-5 Set, Minority Becoming the Majority

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Body

A surge in Hispanic immigration over the past decade has dramatically altered the racial and ethnic composition of the region's youngest residents, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures released today.

As with minorities in general, immigrants tend to be younger than non-Hispanic whites and still in their childbearing years. As a result, in five suburban Washington counties, more than half of children age 4 and younger were minorities when the annual Census Bureau survey was taken a year ago.

In three of the counties -- Prince William, Montgomery and Charles -- the share reached about 60 percent. And in Prince George's, where Hispanic immigration has supplemented an even larger African American population, more than 90 percent of these children are minorities.

The implications for governments and communities are wide-ranging, demographers said. As the current crop of youngsters reaches kindergarten age, school systems that would otherwise be losing students will continue to grow or remain stable. They will also need to accommodate an ever-larger number of students who were raised in immigrant households where English was not spoken.

In addition, although most Hispanic children younger than 5 are native-born U.S. citizens and therefore eligible for government health care and other benefits, research indicates that if their parents are not U.S. citizens, they will be less likely to claim assistance, said Michael Fix, director of studies at the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute.

"All of this really reinforces the importance for counties to increase their investment in early childhood development now," Fix said. "If you don't make that investment, one of the penalties you pay down the line is that you have kids in school who don't speak English well and whose overall performance lags behind."

Fix pointed to studies indicating that as many as 75 percent of elementary school children learning English as a second language were born in the United States.

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"Even more worrisome is that over half of the English-as-a-second-language learners in high school were native born," Fix added.

As these **minority** children mature, counties that until fairly recently were dominated by non-Hispanic whites are likely to shift to **majority-minority** status, said William Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution.

"The bubbling up [of **minorities**] that we're now seeing at the younger ages will continue to move up through the age range, through the teenage years, the working-age years and then the housing-buying years," he said. "The child population is really a microcosm of the future."

Minorities had already grown to 47 percent of the population in Charles and 48 percent in Prince William in July 2007, up from about one-third in 2000. Montgomery, at 46 percent **minority**, is also getting close.

Demographers cautioned, however, that the extreme ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of area **minorities** makes it difficult to make broad predictions about the impact of the region's impending shift to **majority-minority** status.

In Prince George's, for instance, 62 percent of children younger than 5 are non-Hispanic blacks, and they include a substantial share born to affluent families.

Similarly, in Fairfax County, Asian children account for 17 percent of those younger than 5. Often born to upwardly mobile immigrant professionals who encourage them to supplement regular schoolwork with additional classes, Asian students are disproportionately represented among the county's top-performing students. And last month it was announced that for the first time Asian Americans will outnumber whites at the county's most prestigious public magnet school, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology.

Nor can Hispanic immigrants, who hail from a wide range of nations, be easily categorized.

"You cannot necessarily predict that just because they'll **become majority-minority**, all these schools will **become** low-income," Fix said. "The Washington area has one of the most diverse foreign populations in the nation."

Adding to the complexity of the picture is that the Census Bureau collected its data through July 2007, before the current economic downturn and before Prince William and other counties adopted initiatives against illegal immigration.

In Prince William, the percentage of students enrolled in classes for English as a second language dropped nearly 5 percent from a record of 13,404 in September to 12,775 by the end of the school year. The impact of the downturn and immigration restrictions will be reflected in Census Bureau data to be released next year.

Graphic

IMAGE

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