The "Diversity Explosion" Is America’s Twenty-first-Century Baby Boom

If planned for properly, demographic changes will allow the country to face the future with growth and vitality as it reinvents the classic American melting pot for a new era. By William Frey.

This milestone signals the beginning of a transformation from the mostly white baby boom culture that dominated the nation during the last half of the twentieth century to the more globalized, multiracial country that the United States is becoming

1. The sweep of diversity that has just begun to affect the nation became obvious from my examination of the 2010 U.S. census, census projections, and the results of the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. As a demographer who has followed U.S. population trends for decades, even I was surprised by the sheer scope of this change. This is not just more of the same. I am convinced that the United States is in the midst of a pivotal period ushering in extraordinary shifts in the nation’s racial demographic makeup. If planned for properly, these demographic changes will allow the country to face the future with growth and vitality as it reinvents the classic American melting pot for a new era.

Key among these changes are:

2. The rapid growth of “new minorities”: Hispanics, Asians, and increasingly multiracial populations. During the next forty years, each of these groups is expected to more than double. New minorities have already become the major contributors to U.S. population gains. These new minorities—the products of recent immigration waves as well as the growing U.S.-born generations—contributed to more than three-quarters of the nation’s population growth in the past decade. That trend will accelerate in the future.

FIGURE 1.2
U.S. Race Groups and Projected Growth

Source: 2010 U.S. census and Census Bureau projections.
3. The sharply diminished growth and rapid aging of America’s white population. Due to low white immigration, reduced fertility, and aging, the white population grew at a tepid 1.2 percent in 2000–2010. In roughly ten years, the white population will begin a decline that will continue into the future. This decline will be most prominent among the younger populations. At the same time, the existing white population will age rapidly, as the large baby boom generation advances into seniorhood.

4. Black economic advances and migration reversals. Now, more than a half century after the civil rights movement began, a recognizable segment of blacks has entered the middle class while simultaneously reversing historic population shifts. The long-standing Great Migration of blacks out of the South has now turned into a wholesale evacuation from the North—to largely prosperous southern locales. Blacks are abandoning cities for the suburbs, and black neighborhood segregation continues to decline. Although too many blacks still suffer the effects of inequality and segregation is far from gone, the economic and residential environments for blacks have improved well beyond the highly discriminatory, ghettoized life that most experienced for much of the twentieth century.

5. The shift toward a nation where no racial group is the majority. The shift toward “no majority” communities is taking place as the constellation of racial minorities expands. In 2010, 22 of the nation’s 100 largest metropolitan areas were minority white, up from just 14 in 2000 and 5 in 1990. Sometime after 2040, there will be no racial majority in the country. This is hardly the America that large numbers of today’s older and middle-aged adults grew up with in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and civic lives. One implication of these shifts will be larger multiracial populations as multiracial marriages become far more commonplace.
The “diversity explosion” the country is now experiencing will bring significant changes in the attitudes of individuals, the practices of institutions, and the nature of American politics. Racial change has never been easy; more often than not, it has been fraught with fear and conflict. Yet for most of the nation’s history, nonwhite racial groups have been a small minority. Partly because of that, blacks and other racial minorities were historically subjected to blatant discrimination, whether through Jim Crow laws, the Asian Exclusion Act, or any of the many other measures that denied racial minorities access to jobs, education, housing, financial resources, and basic rights of civic participation.

What will be different going forward is the sheer size of the minority population in the United States. It is arriving “just in time” as the aging white population begins to decline, bringing with it needed manpower and brain power and taking up residence in otherwise stagnating city and suburban housing markets.

Although whites are still considered the mainstream in the United States, that perception should eventually shift as more minority members assume positions of responsibility, exert more political clout, exercise their strength as consumers, and demonstrate their value in the labor force. As they become integral to the nation’s success, their concerns will be taken seriously.