

In a Generation, Minorities May Be the U.S. Majority

August 19, 2008

The New York Times
August 14, 2008

By Sam Roberts

Ethnic and racial minorities will comprise a majority of the nation's population in a little more than a generation, according to new Census Bureau projections, a transformation that is occurring faster than anticipated just a few years ago.

The census calculates that by 2042, Americans who identify themselves as Hispanic, black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander will together outnumber non-Hispanic whites. Four years ago, officials had projected the shift would come in 2050.

The main reason for the accelerating change is significantly higher birthrates among immigrants. Another factor is the influx of foreigners, rising from about 1.3 million annually today to more than 2 million a year by midcentury, according to projections based on current immigration policies.

"No other country has experienced such rapid racial and ethnic change," said Mark Mather, a demographer with the Population Reference Bureau, a research organization in Washington.

The latest figures, which are being released on Thursday, are predicated on current and historical trends, which can be thrown away by several variables, including prospective overhauls of immigration policies and sudden increases in refugees.

A decade ago, census demographers estimated that the nation's population, which topped 300 million in 2006, would not surpass 400 million until sometime after midcentury. Now, they are projecting that the population will top 400 million in 2039 and reach 439 million in 2050.

So-called minorities, the Census Bureau projects, will constitute a majority of the nation's children under 18 by 2023 and of working-age Americans by 2039.

For the first time, both the number and the proportion of non-Hispanic whites, who now account for 66 percent of the population, will decline, starting around 2030. By 2050, their share will dip to 46 percent.

Higher mortality rates among older native-born white Americans and higher birthrates rates among immigrants and their children are already driving ethnic and racial disparities.

“A momentum is built into this as a result of past immigration,” said Jeffrey S. Passel, senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center. “In the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s, there were more Hispanic immigrants than births. This decade, there are more births than immigrants. Almost regardless of what you assume about future immigration, the country will be more Hispanic and Asian.”

With the Census Bureau forecasting even more immigrants, other demographers estimate that the proportion of foreign-born Americans, now about 12 percent, could surpass the 1910 historic high of nearly 15 percent by about 2025 and may approach 20 percent in 2050.

According to the new forecast, by 2050, the number of Hispanic people will nearly triple, to 133 million from 47 million, to account for 30 percent of Americans, compared with 15 percent today.

People who say they are Asian, with their ranks soaring to 41 million from 16 million, will make up more than 9 percent of the population, up from 5 percent.

More than three times as many people are expected to identify themselves as multiracial — 16 million, accounting for nearly 4 percent of the population.

The population of people who define themselves a black is projected to rise to 66 million from 41 million, but increase its overall share by barely two percentage points, to 15 percent.

“What’s happening now in terms of increasing diversity probably is unprecedented,” said Campbell Gibson, a retired census demographer.

Several states, including California and Texas, have already reached the point where members of minorities are in the majority.

“Within the conventional definition of race, of white, black, Asian, minority vs. non-minority, this is a big change,” said David G. Waddington, chief of the Census Bureau’s population projections branch.

All the projections are subject to changing cultural definitions. The share of Americans who identify themselves as white, regardless of their ethnicity, will remain largely unchanged, declining from less than 80 percent in 2010 to about 76 percent when the majority-minority benchmark is reached in 2042.

“The way people report race 20 or 30 years from now may be very different,” Dr. Waddington pointed out.

The Census Bureau’s projections are likely to fuel debates over immigration policy, overpopulation and the changing electorate, and recall earlier eras when the Irish, the Italians and Eastern European Jews were not universally considered as whites. As recently as the 1960s, Hispanic people were not counted separately by the census and Asian Indians were classified as white.

William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, said that by the 2028 presidential election, racial and ethnic minorities will constitute a majority of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 for the first time.

Two years later, when all the baby boomers will have turned 65, nearly 20 percent of Americans, compared with fewer than 13 percent today, will be over 65. By 2050, about 89 million Americans will be in that group, more than double the number today.

“In 2020, the burdens of seniors to the white working-aged population become larger than the burdens of children,” Dr. Frey said.

The changes projected by the census point toward a nation in which the older population will be whiter (deaths will outnumber births among whites, beginning in the 2020s) and where black Americans will still have slightly higher rates of infant mortality and lower life expectancy.

Steven A. Camarota, research director for the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors limits on immigration, expressed concern about congestion and other issues related to population growth driven by the foreign-born.

Gregory Rodriguez, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, a public policy institute, argued that while “assimilation became a dirty word in the 1960s and ’70s,” America has always been evolving and becoming enriched by new cultures, whether from Europe or from South America and Asia.

Indeed, Dr. Gibson, the retired census demographer, once estimated that in 1492 about 96 percent of the inhabitants of what is now the United States were American Indian and the rest of Polynesian origin. Well before the English landed in Jamestown, the Spanish became America’s first minority.

When the first census was conducted in 1790, about 64 percent of the people counted were white, a bit more than half of whom were of English origin. By 1900, about 9 in 10 Americans were non-Hispanic white, mostly of European ancestry.

The share of Americans who can trace their roots to immigrants directly from Europe has been shrinking. The federal Office of Management and Budget now defines whites as descendants of “the original peoples of Europe, North Africa or the Middle East.” Hispanic or Latino people, according to the same government agency, are of “Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture.”

“We may be using the same words 50 years from now,” said Mr. Passel, of the Pew Center, “but I feel confident in saying they’ll mean something different.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/washington/14census.html?_r=2&th=&oref=slogin&emc=th&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin