

# What Every Planning Commissioner Should Know About Demographics

by Judith Waldrop

Demographics isn't just a big word. It's a powerful tool that local leaders can use to better understand their community's present and future needs. The following tips will help you with demographic issues that may impact planning decisions:

1. *Deal With Diversity.* Diversity is the most important trend of the 21st Century. By 2005, three out of every ten Americans will be black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, or native American. An even greater share of America's workers will come from these minority groups. Some urban areas, like Los Angeles and New York, are already well beyond these numbers. But minority populations are growing the fastest in some unexpected places. During the 1980s, Georgia saw the greatest increase in people who don't speak English at home, with a gain of 113 percent. Metropolitan Atlanta's immigrant population is fast approaching one-quarter million, with much of this growth in the suburbs.

The implications for planners are massive. Community services, like hospitals and schools, need to prepare for a multi-lingual client base. Authority figures, from police to planning commissioners, need to be aware of cultural differences, including unacceptable hand gestures, reasons for avoiding eye contact, and taboos against touching someone of the opposite sex. In order to give the best service to new residents, hiring practices should reflect the emerging population groups.

Because new immigrants are usually younger than the general population, and because many of them come from a tradition of large families, they may generate new growth in school-aged populations. They may even change the recreational needs of a community. For instance, newly immigrated Hispanic populations will be

more interested in baseball and soccer fields than football fields or golf courses.

2. *Understand Households.* Even places that will not experience rapid gains in minorities will have to deal with a different type of diversity — changing lifestyles and living arrangements. Many city ordinances still define “families” according to a 1950s

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standard. But the typical family of the 1950s, married couples with children under 18, is expected to decline by 1 percent between 1990 and 2000, according to a study by *American Demographics* magazine. Couples without any children at all will increase 46 percent.

Nonfamilies will be one of the fastest growing household types, according to *American Demographics*. Nonfamilies include people living alone, unmarried hetero- and homosexual partners, roommates, and friends who live together as family. The number of women living alone will increase 17 percent over the decade of the 1990s and the number of men living alone will grow 20 percent. At the turn of the century, people living alone will outnumber married couples with young children.

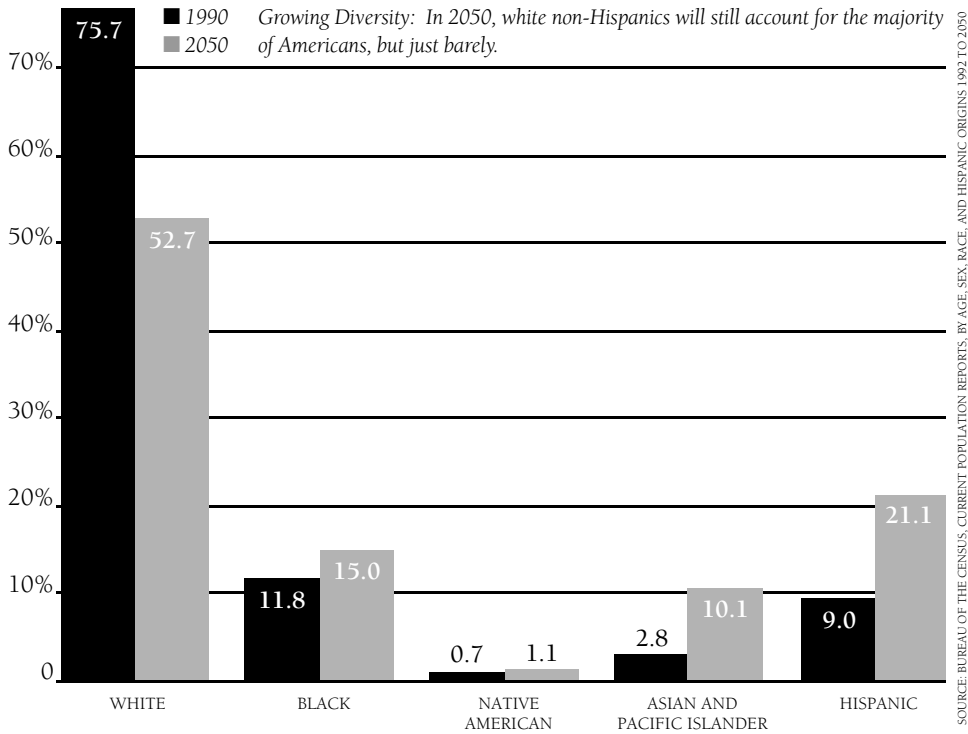
The changing composition of American households will reshape both housing demand and land use needs. In some

areas, growth in smaller, childless households will increase the demand for multi-family housing while decreasing the need for new schools. Don't assume, however, that smaller households want rental units. Many new residents in resort, retirement, and professional communities will be older, more affluent householders who still want to own their own home in the form of a low-maintenance, luxury condominium.

3. *Beware of the Echo.* When the Baby Boomers reached childbearing age, they created a new baby boom that researchers called the “Echo.” But the increasing number of births was deceptive. The Echo is really a parent boom. Because there were so many women having babies, there were a great many children. Still, the number of children born to the average woman has actually declined — and as Baby Boomers move out of their childbearing years, the total number of babies born each year will drop. In 1993, 4.04 million babies were born, compared with 4.16 million in 1991.

An accurate projection of future school-aged population is important for planning for future demands on public services and facilities, including schools, parks, and social services. If your community is considering expanding its school facilities, don't assume recent growth will continue. Use the 1990 census to estimate how many women in your community are currently of childbearing age (15 to 44 years old). Consider whether developments in your jurisdiction will provide new housing for potential mothers. Then project these conditions into the future. [For information sources, see the “Resources” sidebar on page 6].

4. *Age Gracefully.* Increasing longevity gains is only part of the reason for the growing importance of the elderly popula-



tion. Equally important is the fact that American women are having fewer children and the large number of people born during the Baby Boom years, 1946 to 1964, is not being replaced by equally large numbers of young people. In 1990, 31 million Americans — about one in every eight persons — were aged 65 or older. By 2050, over 80 million Americans — about one in every five persons — will be that old.

Not all areas of the country will be equally affected. The rate of increase will be the fastest in Nevada, Arizona, Washington, Georgia, Utah and California. Because young adults are much more likely to move than older people, places with high rates of out-migration will be affected the most within states. If your community is one of those facing major increases in its elderly population, it might be time to reevaluate your community in terms of

recreational centers, transportation facilities, hospitals, nursing homes, and special services for the elderly.

**5. Do Your Homework.** Most planning commissioners love their communities — sometimes they love them so much they ignore evidence that may point out some problems. An in-depth analysis of census data can help you understand your community's needs better and spot potential problems before they get out of hand. For example, a quantitative measure of poverty households will not only help you understand how your community compares with others nationwide, but will help settle the question of whether your public housing supply is adequate. Likewise, if you know what types of people are moving out of your community, you can begin to understand what's driving them away and try to correct the problem.

Every city and county has a unique set

of strengths and problems. You can't find out about these on the national news. And you can't depend on your local news to report the situation objectively. You must do your own research.

**6. Face the Facts.** The truth is that most of the population "facts" planners must work with are only close approximations of the actual numbers. Even the decennial census must rely on estimation and sample surveys for certain numbers. There will most certainly be some error in any population numbers you see that are generated in between censuses.

Local area population estimates are usually derived from housing counts. But different researchers may use different estimates for vacancy rates or the average number of persons in each occupied dwelling unit. Some researchers may choose a completely different method. They may assume past growth trends will account for current population. Or they may assume one area remains a certain proportion of a larger area for which there are more accurate estimates.

Generally speaking, the smaller the area of the estimate, the greater the potential for error. A plant closing or a new development can have an enormous impact on a small community but little or no effect statewide. Officials who need data for rapidly changing areas will have the most problem finding accurate estimates. Don't panic when researchers change their estimates. They may have just gotten new data that will make them more accurate.

As a planning commissioner, you need to know how researchers came up with their estimates and why they chose a particular method over another. Choosing one method over another doesn't make someone a liar, but someone with a vested

*continued on page 6*



## Resources:


Every state and most territories of the U.S. have State Data Centers, agencies working cooperatively with the Census Bureau to help the public, government, and nonprofit organizations access census data and related information. These data and other services are provided free or for a nominal charge. Most of these agencies have recently produced updated population projections by age for small areas within their states. To obtain a listing of State Data Centers contact: Data User Services Division, Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., or call: 301-763-1580. The Census Bureau and many State Data Centers are also now making data available on the Internet.

A growing number of private companies are also producing demographic estimates and projections. While these are likely to be more expensive, it may be worth the price. Private companies can often provide more recently updated information, and can also customize the information to meet your particular needs. For a listing of the "Best 100 Sources of Demographic Data," contact *American Demographics*, at: 800-828-1133 (there is a small charge for this listing). Of particular note, Lapkoff & Gobalet Demographics Research of Oakland, California, has developed a method that looks at current and potential housing availability to predict school aged population. They analyze the changing age of female residents to determine whether there will be room for new families in the future.

## Demographics

*continued from page 5*

interest in the outcome might choose a method that will make the best case for his point of view. Look at all the possibilities before you draw a quick conclusion.

If you're dealing with projections or forecasts — numbers that hope to predict future populations — you have an even bigger problem. That's because no one has yet perfected a methodology that can accurately predict the future; and the trends upon which researchers must base their forecasts, such as migration patterns and birth rates, are always changing. If you don't have the staff to answer all your questions, talk to someone with your State Data Center.  Resources

7. *Get Hold of Your Census.* After the 1990 census, officials all over the country protested that their local areas got short changed by census undercount. After all, over \$40 billion dollars is distributed nationwide according to population counts. Even though the 1990 census count missed fewer than 2 percent of the total U.S. population, some areas fared far worse — especially those with large minority populations. If your area was one of those missing large numbers of residents, the idea of missing millions of dollars in federal funding may have driven officials to legal action.

The best way to combat census undercount is to start working with the Census Bureau now. Find out what their problems are and what they're doing to assure an accurate count in the year 2000. The decisions that are going to influence the outcome of the next census count are being made now. Getting involved could be a lot more satisfying and cheaper than litigation in 2001. ♦

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