

# As metro areas grow, whites move farther from the city center

June 30 2017, by Kim Eckart

---



Metropolitan areas in the United States continue to expand outward into suburbs.  
Credit: University of Washington

In the middle of the 20th century, cities began to change. The popularity of the automobile and the construction of interstate highways fueled the growth of suburbs, while discriminatory housing policies segregated neighborhoods and helped create the phenomenon of "white flight" away from downtowns.

Decades later, the average white person still lives farther from the city center than the average person of color, a University of Washington researcher says, even with the resurgence of downtown living in many communities and the increasing diversity of suburbs. In an era when the growth in the [population](#) of blacks, Latinos and Asians outpaces that of whites nationwide, a new study of who lives where provides insight into the geography of race.

Even in the booming Seattle metro area, a census designation that spans from Everett to Olympia, where people of all races and ethnicities have contributed to the growth, more whites have left central [areas](#) than people of color.

"While the U.S. has become more diverse, and there are fewer hypersegregated neighborhoods, there is still a racial dynamic to sprawl—one in which the new suburbs on the periphery of cities tend to be generally white," said Lee Fiorio, a graduate student fellow at UW's Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology. Fiorio will present his research on [urban sprawl](#) and neighborhood change at the Ninth International Conference on Population Geographies this week at the UW.

"Urban sprawl" is the term for the way a city grows outward as land is developed for houses and businesses. Population gains in these peripheral suburbs, and [population loss](#) in the cities, are occurring mostly among whites, Fiorio argues, based on a new examination of data from 52 [metropolitan areas](#).

The United States population is concentrated in urban and suburban areas; in 2010, 81 percent of people lived in urban and suburban areas, reflecting a century-long migration out of rural areas. Looking at racial and ethnic trends, the white population grew 5.7 percent between 2000 and 2010, compared to 12 percent for blacks, 18 percent for Native Americans, and 43 percent for both Asians and Latinos. By 2044, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates, people of color will make up the majority of the population.

The simultaneous growth of urban areas and the populations of people of color gave Fiorio an idea: As cities expand outward, where are people of various races and ethnicities living? And does the historic trend of white flight hold up today?

Using U.S. Census data from 1990 to 2010, Fiorio examined the racial and ethnic makeup of 52 metropolitan areas by census tract and geographic distance from the city center. Although the census identifies several racial and ethnic categories, Fiorio focused on the populations of the largest: Asians, blacks, Latinos and whites.

While many of his findings mirrored past trends, some were perhaps less expected:

- In all but three metropolitan areas (Charlotte and Greensboro, both in North Carolina, and Greenville, South Carolina) the average person—of any race or ethnicity—lived farther from the city center in 2010 than in 1990
- Despite a rejuvenation of many downtowns, census tracts that lost population over the 20-year period were more centrally located than tracts that gained population
- Over the years, each of the four racial and ethnic groups moved, to some degree, away from the city center, but blacks remained closest, and whites moved farthest

- More people of color have settled in inner-ring suburbs, while whites have driven the growth of sprawling suburbs

The concept of diversity can be a tricky thing, Fiorio said, and that prompted his choice to use absolute numbers of people, rather than percentages. A neighborhood can change in racial and ethnic composition only through residential mobility; while it is not possible to track individuals in publicly available census data, the racial and ethnic breakdown of who moves in and out of a neighborhood is evident from changes in the absolute numbers of people over time.

"How can I think about changing diversity if we know that it involves some groups leaving and some groups coming in?" he said. "If a neighborhood becomes more diverse, but the whites moved out to a place that is all-white, then what is that about?"

Such possibilities helped frame the research, Fiorio said, even if studying the "what" doesn't answer the "why." He notes that his analysis does not delve into the reasons behind the changes, such as the cost of housing or any possible prejudices or other racial issues that motivated some of the white flight of decades ago.

Instead, he said, it raises questions for further study. In the once mostly white inner-ring suburbs, what is causing the demographic shift? Say an elderly man lives in a house in a community adjacent to the city center, but when he passes away, does a white family move in, or a family of color? Did the white family who could have moved in choose to live in a suburb farther away, and if so, why? What socioeconomic factors affect housing construction outside of cities, continuing the pattern of urban sprawl?

Fiorio found the overall population shifted away from the center in all but three metropolitan areas, driven mostly by population growth on the

periphery but in some cases population loss in central areas. But each metro area showed nuanced differences that could be attributed to its own racial and ethnic makeup, as well as its geography and economic trends.

The Seattle metro area, for instance, is growing among all racial and ethnic groups, but population gains and losses can vary by specific neighborhood: An increase in the number of whites in the outer suburbs has occurred alongside a decrease in their population in inner-ring suburbs. Cleveland, on the other hand, has experienced little growth among Latinos and Asians, and significant population loss among blacks and whites in the city center. The urban cores of Atlanta, Houston and Chicago lost population, but their suburbs grew among two or more racial and [ethnic groups](#).

The changes in Fiorio's native Chicago inspired the study, he said. While the [city](#) remains noticeably segregated, its suburbs have grown in varying ways.

Fiorio will present his research June 29 as part of a conference session on "Sociospatial Structures and Relationships." The session also will feature research papers from other universities that examine workforce changes in India, the link between individuals' geographic and occupational moves, and the relationship between geography and social categories such as employment and homeownership.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: As metro areas grow, whites move farther from the city center (2017, June 30)  
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-metro-areas-whites-city-center.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.