

THE EVOLVING REGION: WHAT'S CHANGING AND WHAT'S NOT IN THE CHICAGO METROPOLITAN AREA

**James H. Lewis
Roosevelt University**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the Chicago area grew less rapidly during the 1990s than faster-growing places in the south and west, it did follow the national trend of strong metropolitan growth led by suburban population increase. During the 1990s, the Chicago region absorbed hundreds of thousands of newcomers, the city of Chicago reversed a 50-year trend of declining population, and metropolitan sprawl continued, with most net population growth in the Chicago region taking place on its fringes. The changing faces that embodied this mobility, and the pressure put on existing social infrastructure by population increases, are changing the region in important ways. Key population trends during the 1990s included the following:

- While Chicago registered its first population increase in five decades, that increase was primarily attributable to natural growth, rather than in-migration. Community areas historically African-American lost substantial population, while new Latino neighborhoods and largely gentrifying neighborhoods increased in population.
- The former outer ring of suburbs, the “edge cities,” were supplanted as the growth periphery by yet another ring farther to the west. The edge-city ring gained some population, but is essentially built-out.
- The older “secondary” cities maintained population or, as in the case of Hammond and Gary, lost people.
- The Chicago region experienced tremendous immigration from other countries, particularly documented and undocumented Mexicans. Many Chicago suburbs are now more than one-third immigrant.

In many respects, the movement of people and the net increases in population are creating a more uniform urban environment across the region. The seemingly insatiable demand for new housing, caused by the prosperity of the 1990s and the growth of population of the region, led to the replacement of much of the rural green space with new urban landscape, as well as the expansion of Chicago's commuter suburbs out to the arc defined by Joliet, Aurora and Elgin. The 2000 Census data show that on average, suburbanites are traveling farther to work and spending more time in their cars. Fewer workers work within the places they live.

The greater density and new demography more characteristic of cities are accompanied by the problems long associated with cities. Suburban schools are becoming overcrowded and want for funding, and urban ills such as crime and drug abuse are becoming more prevalent in the suburbs. People of

color are now found in most Chicago-area communities. While the pace of African-American integration into white communities has been slow, Latino and Asian dispersal across the region has progressed rapidly over the past 20 years, raising issues of access and potential issues of influence. Increasing dispersal of workers in various industries across the region is gradually immunizing each individual community from economic downturn attributable to the vicissitudes of any single industry. While a tight housing market still separates people into economic enclaves, the concentrated poverty that has characterized the south and west sides of Chicago dissipated somewhat during the 1990s. By 2000, the modal Chicago area community had some people of color and diversity of occupations and had been touched by “urban” problems.

While the forces of population growth and movement have created increasing commonality of many experiences, the varied sources and causes of population increase have perpetuated the tendency of people to live in cultural and ethnic enclaves. The 1990s saw the continuation of 30 years of black chain migration from Chicago to the south and west suburbs. Chain migration from Mexico changed the face of numerous Chicago neighborhoods and inner-ring suburbs during the 1990s. While the workers search for employment and industry’s search for workers have drawn increasing numbers of blacks and huge numbers of Latinos into the west and northwest suburbs, housing markets have dictated that Latinos, in particular, will tend to live near one another in the suburbs. Many northwest suburban apartment complexes now have a distinctly Mexican character. Likewise, the explosion of loft conversion in and around Chicago’s downtown transformed the area into one of the region’s hottest destinations for white professionals. And across the entire 13-county area, outlying counties continue to draw more migrants from other parts of the midwest, while the city draws more from the east and west coasts.

As people move into, out of, and around the Chicago area, it remains a highly racially and culturally segmented place, but an increasingly urbanized region.