

# suburbanite

BALTIMORE

January 2006 Issue no. 19



## are suburbs the new cities? are cities the new suburbs?

THIS MONTH'S GUEST EDITOR **KARRIE JACOBS** | COMING OF AGE IN COLUMBIA **AN ESSAY BY STEPHEN AMIDON**  
**DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH** A SURPRISING FIND FOR FOODIES | **OFF THE GRID** MARYLAND'S NEW SOLAR HOUSE



# skipping the city for the suburbs

New immigration patterns mean that urban places like Baltimore may become more homogeneous while the suburbs diversify

BY TOM WALDRON

For decades, immigrants flocked to Baltimore, drawn by the city's industry and opportunity. In recent years, new patterns have emerged, and Baltimore City no longer attracts the same numbers of immigrants. Most of those who do come to the region are bypassing the city entirely and settling instead in the suburbs.

According to The Brookings Institution, a private nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and public policy studies, Baltimore City's foreign-born population grew by 26% during the 1990s. This was significant, given that the city was losing tens of thousands of non-immigrant residents during that decade. But the growth in the number of immigrants in Baltimore in that time was well below that of most of the nation's cities.

Meanwhile, much larger numbers of immigrants were settling instead in the Baltimore suburbs. Overall, 89% of new foreign-born immigrants in the region settled in the suburbs in the 1990s. This phenomenon is taking place in several other cities and has important implications here and elsewhere.

Journalist Tom Waldron recently discussed the issue with Audrey Singer, immigration fellow at the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. Singer, a resident of the Adams-Morgan neighborhood in Washington, D.C., has written extensively about immigration patterns.

**URBANITE:** How have immigration patterns changed in our cities, generally speaking?

**SINGER:** There are two big recent trends. The first is that we are a suburban nation and now, for the first time, there are more immigrants in the suburbs than in central cities. Related to that is that immigrants are locating themselves directly in the suburbs, whereas in the past, immigrants moved to the cities because that's where the jobs were. There was housing close by; transportation was usually not a huge issue. And they tended to concentrate there and move to the suburbs when they started to do better economically.

Now, in massively suburban metropolitan areas like Atlanta, the opportunities are in the suburbs. Immigrants are settling directly there and bypassing the cities because the cities don't have the same function that they used to have for immigrants.

The second big trend is the new geography of immigration. Immigrants are landing in big numbers in all kinds of new places like Las Vegas and Charlotte, North Carolina. A few metropolitan areas have absorbed the majority of immigrants for the past fifty years. New York and L.A. are still the big magnets, with Chicago and Miami not far behind. But what has happened in the past

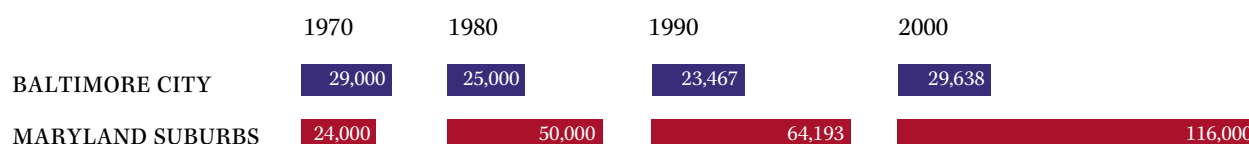
ten to fifteen years is a new development where immigrants are moving to metropolitan areas with very little history of immigration. We've seen a spreading out to places we didn't see before all over the country and a particularly high impact on places in the Southeast.

**URBANITE:** What are some of the metropolitan areas that come to mind where immigration patterns have changed significantly in the past twenty or thirty years?

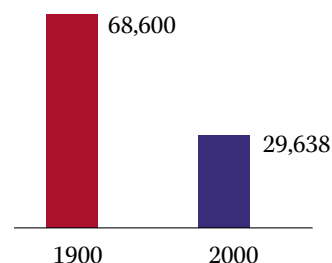
**SINGER:** Emerging immigrant gateways are places like Atlanta, Dallas, Fort Worth, Las Vegas, and Orlando. All of those places had really virtually no twentieth-century history of immigration. Atlanta's foreign-born population, for example, grew by almost ten times between 1980 and 2000. It went from 46,000 to 1980 in 423,000 in 2000. And immigrants in Atlanta are living almost entirely outside the city of Atlanta. That's high drama. And these immigrants are coming from a pretty diverse set of countries.

There are a couple of things driving this. Local economies are robust in these growing places, and there are the kinds of jobs and industries that attract immigrant labor, like construction. I should point out that all of these places were booming; their native populations

FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION: CITY VERSUS SUBURB

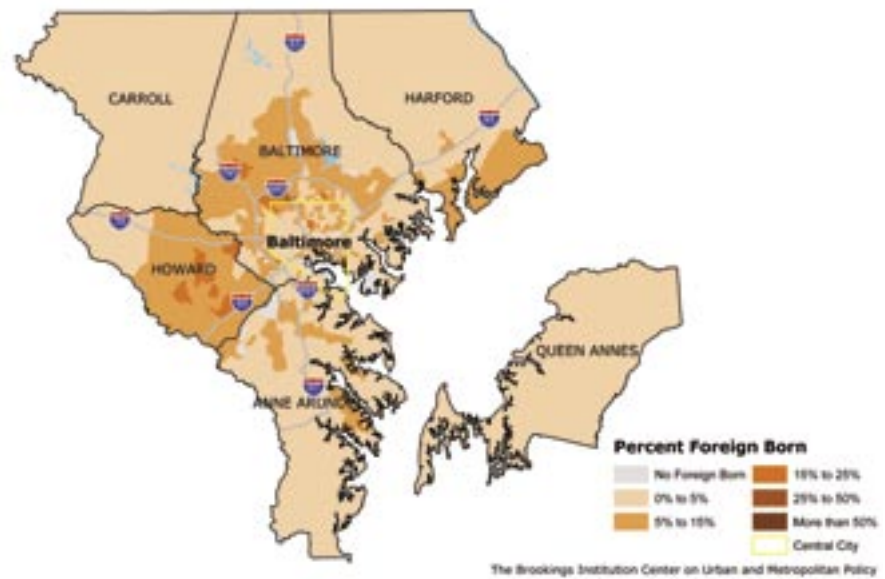


FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION LIVING IN BALTIMORE CITY



**“Suburbs are becoming more like cities, and cities are becoming more like suburbs in a lot of ways.”**

Percent of Total Population that is Foreign Born by Census Tract  
Baltimore Metropolitan Area, 2000



were also growing at a fast clip, even faster than the immigrant population.

**URBANITE:** How does Baltimore fit in?

**SINGER:** Baltimore is a former gateway. It’s part of a class of cities that used to attract a lot of immigrants but no longer does. And to be fair, there’s another interesting thing about Baltimore. The foreign-born population in the city in the past thirty years has remained constant or has increased a little bit, whereas in a lot of the other former gateways like Cleveland, Buffalo and Pittsburgh, the foreign-born population has dipped very low and is either still declining or has never reached the point of where it was even thirty years ago. In the case of Baltimore City, the immigrant population is only about half the size of what it was in 1900.

One reason that the city has been able to still attract immigrants may be that in Baltimore, there is infrastructure downtown that is “immigrant friendly.” There are places to live and places to open up businesses that are centrally located, unlike in some of these emerging gateways. Those places have no history of immigration and have a different urban form, which is very suburban, very spread out, very dispersed; the jobs and the housing are all decentralized. There’s less of an opportunity to residentially concentrate in some ways.

**URBANITE:** Can we expect Hispanic immigrants that are in the city to keep moving to the suburbs?

**SINGER:** If the current wave of immigrants follows the classic migration and settlement patterns like we’ve seen in the past for Baltimore, then we would expect those immigrants who are doing relatively well and have the means to move, to start moving to the suburbs. The question is, How long will it take?

When you get down to it, immigrants come to this country for the economic opportunity it offers, for the future of their families. So a lot of them are interested in having the best education for their kids. That does become an issue for some of these parents.

**URBANITE:** As parts of Baltimore continue to be redeveloped, do you wonder if the city will become more homogeneous over time?

**SINGER:** I think it’s already happening in a lot of places, like San Francisco, which used to house a lot more lower-income immigrants. The cities around San Francisco have absorbed some of them.

But I think what’s good for Baltimore City may not be good for its poorest inhabitants. To the extent that some immigrants fit into that category, then they’ll be impacted too, especially in terms of housing issues. Not all immigrants are poor, of course.

**URBANITE:** What are the implications of fast immigrant growth in Baltimore and elsewhere?

**SINGER:** There are huge implications on the ground, of course. You can graph economic cycles with anti-immigrant sentiment. When times are good, immigrants are not a problem. When things start to go south, then people look around for people on whom to blame their problems.

We have this huge federal immigration machine in terms of admission policies and border enforcement. But when it comes to helping immigrants fit in once they are here, the social, cultural, and residential issues that come with immigration are really addressed at the local level.

Because there’s not a huge pot of federal money for local communities, schools, hospitals, and agencies to dip into to make things run a little more smoothly, immigrants are being incorporated [into the larger society] through big

institutions. So schools are a huge factor in how people get integrated. The workplace serves to integrate or not integrate people. There are also the many community-based organizations that provide all kinds of services to immigrants and also Baltimore’s significant refugee population.

**URBANITE:** How do you see the opportunities for Baltimore City, Baltimore County, or Howard County?

**SINGER:** Baltimore City is concerned about population loss. And I think some leaders see immigrants as a way to stem that loss. So retaining immigrants who move there, or stealing them away from other places like the surrounding counties or Washington, D.C., could help population loss.

**URBANITE:** How do you define city and suburb? Is there a definition, or is it a state of mind?

**SINGER:** Suburbs are becoming more like cities, and cities are becoming more like suburbs in a lot of ways, not just regarding immigration issues. The newly developing places in the Southeast and the Southwest, like Phoenix and Atlanta, are suburban-like places. I think there are things that still define central cities like density and form. But I think newer American cities—those that developed after World War II and that are continuing to boom now—are very suburban-like. I’m talking here about the cities themselves, which are then surrounded by miles and miles of “real suburbs.” So the suburban landscape is the dominant one for most people. It means a lot of things for the way we live.

*For more information on Singer’s work, see The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways, published by the Metropolitan Policy Program at The Brookings Institution, [www.brookings.edu/metro](http://www.brookings.edu/metro). ■*