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Many William Land Elementary students speak a language other than English  
Nation-Society

## Welcome to America's Most Diverse City

The country's real melting pot is 2,800 miles from New York. So what's life like in Sacramento — a place where everyone's a minority — and why is there still racial tension?

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Sequoia Way is easy for travelers to overlook. Nestled in the middle-class neighborhood of Village Park on the south side of Sacramento, Calif., it is an unremarkable stretch of single-story frame houses. But if you stroll a bit along the winding road and visit Sequoia Way's residents, you will quickly realize there's something extraordinary about this street.

You will meet Tom and Debra Burruss, who moved onto the street a couple of years ago. He's black and she's white, but on Sequoia the interracial union doesn't stand out. The Burrusses' next-door neighbors are also minorities, a Vietnamese couple named Ken Wong and Binh Lam. Living directly across are the Cardonas, a Hispanic-and-white couple. And nearby are the Farrys, a Japanese- and-white pair. In fact, sprinkled throughout the street are more flavors than you can get at Baskin-Robbins—Mexicans, African Americans, East Indians, Asians, you name it.

Now head downtown to William Land Elementary School. Here the classrooms are so ethnically diverse that teachers are considering switching from celebrating individual cultural holidays, like Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo and Chinese New Year, to holding a multiethnic festival. Of Land's 347 kids, 189 speak a language other than English at home. Immigrant parents are so common in Sacramento's public schools that one child volunteered that her father is also a foreigner—he's from New York.

Or go over to Downtown Plaza mall and chat with teenage couples like Kayla, 17, and Gerald, 18. Kayla's mother is white, and her father is black; Gerald's mother is Japanese, and his dad is black. As they munch pizza in a bustling food court as diverse as a U.N. cafeteria, Kayla shrugs her shoulders at the notion of same-race friendships. "Personally, it doesn't matter what color you are," she says. "I am mixed, he is mixed, and most everybody is mixed."

So it goes in America's most integrated city, as determined in research for TIME by [the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University](#). In Sacramento everyone's a minority—including whites. Of the city's inhabitants, 41% are non-Hispanic white, 15.5% are black, 22% are Hispanic and 17.5% are Asian/Pacific Islander. Although many cities are diverse (think New York City or Los Angeles), in Sacramento people seem to live side by side more successfully. The city got that way thanks in part to affordable real estate for middle-class households (the black population has dropped in the Bay Area but increased in Sacramento over the past 10 years) as well as innovative housing programs for low-income families. In addition, state-government agencies and college campuses are sprinkled throughout the city, providing stable, well-paid, equal-opportunity employment.

But while Sacramento approaches an ideal for integration, it certainly isn't paradise. Beneath the multicolored surface, the city's 407,018 inhabitants vacillate between racial harmony and ethnic tension. You see a Sikh casually strolling into a Mexican restaurant for takeout, an Eskimo and a white punk hanging out together downtown. But you also see black and Hispanic parents outraged because their kids' test scores lag behind those of whites and Asians in integrated schools. And you hear Anne Gayles-White, the N.A.A.C.P. chapter president, saying "There's still too much hatred and racism in a city like this."

Sacramento's Crayola culture is no statistical anomaly. Indeed, it may well be a sign of the times. Non-Hispanic whites still account for 69% of the U.S. population and maintain a predominant share of the nation's fiscal and political power. But by 2059 at the latest, according to U.S. Census figures, there will no longer be a white majority in America. Sacramento, then, provides perhaps the clearest view into the nation's future—a glimpse into what our neighborhoods, schools, churches and police forces may look like just a few decades from now.

### **70 Languages, One System**

Three weeks ago, Yun Qian (Cindy) Zhong, a sixth-grader assigned to Randy Helms' homeroom, walked into William Land Elementary School for the first time. She had all the gifts of a model student—intelligence, friendliness and an eagerness to learn. There was just one problem: Zhong, an immigrant from Canton, China, didn't speak a word of English.

Helms didn't panic. His students and their parents hail from as far away as Vietnam, Mexico, Germany, Portugal, Panama and, fortunately, China. By the end of Zhong's second week, Helms, with help from the Cantonese-speaking students in his class, had

taught Zhong to count past 10 as well as to answer yes and no to questions translated for her.

A William Land education doesn't come easy. The school is located in a poor community downtown (90% of Land's kids qualify for free lunch), the classes are big (Helms alone teaches 32 students) and language barriers are routine (many kids' parents speak no English). Kids are tested for English proficiency within 30 days of enrolling; most score from 1 to 5 out of a maximum of 10. Across Sacramento, educators face similar challenges. How does a school district of 53,400 students communicate with a parent group that speaks more than 70 languages? And perhaps even more pressing, how much do cultural differences contribute to the fact that Latino and African-American children do not perform as well on standardized tests as white and Asian kids in the city's integrated schools?

Take John F. Kennedy High School, which at first blush is a picture of integration, with 21% white students, 22% black, 35% Asian and 16% Latino (the remainder are primarily Pacific Islanders, Filipinos and American Indians). J.F.K. routinely ships top graduates to Ivy League schools. But while the typical Asian kid has a 3.01 grade-point average, African-American kids score 1.85. What's going on? School district superintendent Jim Sweeney attributes the gap to class differences. J.F.K. students come from two neighborhoods—a middle-class area known as the Pocket, and a low-income, predominantly black and Hispanic part of town called Meadowview. Lower-income parents, he says, are often less able to spend time helping their kids with homework and encouraging them to learn. "Some surveys say poor children actually hear a million less words a year in the formative years," he says.

That explanation is too simplistic for Patricia Gandara, a University of California at Davis professor of education and Sacramento resident. She believes that teachers and administrators stereotype students on the basis of race. There are plenty of examples—from the teacher who asked a Latino boy if his parents had jobs (his mother was a school principal) to the Mexican child in an advanced-placement class who was asked whether she was Asian (her classmates couldn't imagine that a Latina could perform so well). "The schools make assumptions along class lines about which parents care and which don't, and parents and children begin to read those signs very early," Gandara says.

The district is making some progress in closing the gap. One effective method: home visits, which foster a relationship between teachers and parents and encourage working together to meet a child's needs. Suggested by a parent in 1998, the program helped boost reading scores in the district's elementary schools 36% and math scores 73% (reading and math scores are still only at the 46th and 59th national percentile, respectively).

### **The Most Segregated Hour**

It is Sunday morning in Sacramento's Meadowview community, and hundreds of Russian-speaking immigrants—men in dark suits, women in traditional head scarves, children excited about the latest X-box game—are thronging into the First Slavic Evangelical Baptist Church. A couple of blocks away, African Americans fill the

sanctuary at Twenty-Fourth Street Baptist Church to listen to the Rev. Samuel Mullinax preach the same Gospel. An hour later, Latinos begin filing into the pews of nearby St. Anne's Catholic Church for a Spanish-language Mass. Meadowview residents live together, but many pray separately.

More than 30 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. famously said that "the 11 o'clock hour on Sunday is the most segregated hour in American life." It's an indictment that still carries weight today, as an estimated 90% of Americans worship primarily with members of their race or ethnicity. Yet Sacramento's complex social tapestry challenges conventional notions that racial segregation in worship is a failure of America's national ideal of equality. Sometimes segregation is driven not by bigotry but by language barriers and cultural heritage.

When Ukrainian immigrant Tamila Demyanik says, through an interpreter, that "the church is the major part of my life," it is no understatement. To the Demyaniks, First Slavic is a lifeline in a foreign land. Her husband buys bread at First Slavic and checks its bulletin board and a Russian phone book for community information. Longtime church members accustomed to America provide emotional support to newcomers and help them negotiate thickets of red tape in health care, housing and more.

Kevin Armstrong, a United Methodist pastor and director of the Religion and Public Teaching Project, based in Indianapolis, Ind., concedes that segregation, whether voluntary or compulsory, seems at odds with religious ideals. But he argues that the outcome often justifies the practice, particularly in immigrant communities. "They preserve their tradition," Armstrong explains, "sing in their native language, eat the food of their own culture, [and are] with people who remember what their land looks like and who their people are."

### **Shades of Blue**

Cruising Del Paso heights in an unmarked police car, Chou Vang, 33, gestures toward a section of tired apartment houses and talks about gang violence. "Back in Laos, the Hmong are a minority ethnic group," he explains, "and the ethnic Lao ruled and ran the country. They have carried their old tensions to this country."

Vang is a police officer with the Sacramento police department, assigned to the problem-oriented policing unit. He is also a Laos-born member of the Hmong. The combination—his cop instincts and Hmong sensibility—enables Vang to be an effective negotiator in Hmong cases, including recurring episodes of gang violence between north-side teens and another Hmong gang in the southern part of town. Vang works on cases of all types, and frequently they involve drugs. In Del Paso Heights methamphetamines are the drug of choice. In Sacramento just last week federal authorities indicted 10 people on charges of importing yaba, a candy-flavored amphetamine.

The Sacramento police department has had difficulty attracting immigrant officers and people of color. White men still make up 46% of the department's staff; women swell the Caucasian ranks to 70%. Hispanics of any race account for 12%, blacks 8% and Asians

8%. Concern about racial profiling led the department to launch a study of its practices in 2000, and its first report found that 27% of drivers stopped by police were African American although African Americans make up only 15.5% of the local population. Despite such controversies, Vang feels he made the right move in signing up. "Occasionally someone will tell me to go back to my own country," he says. "But for the most part, I don't think they see me as an Asian. They just see me as a police officer."

### **All of Me**

When Mariko Ferronato was 3 years old, she would regularly quiz her mother about which half of her was white and which was Japanese. "I thought there was a physical line that divided the Japanese me from the Caucasian me," says Ferronato, now 18 and a high school senior. A soccer goalie who plays the violin and has her eye on pre-med studies, Ferronato says her racial identity developed in stages. At her mostly white elementary school, she considered herself a white person "who happened to eat a lot of sticky rice." But in the ninth grade at her diverse high school, another student, who is white, called her a "cheating Jap." It hit hard. "I then tried to focus primarily on my Japanese side, completely ignoring my white side, as if to make up for all those years," she says.

In the 2000 U.S. Census, 24 in 1,000 people said they were multiracial (it's the first time Census pollers asked the question). It's often said with pride. While people of mixed race were once portrayed as tragic figures in movies, such as 1934's *Imitation of Life*, its 1959 remake and 1960's *I Passed for White*, today's pop-culture scene is bursting with mixed-race heroes, from movie tough guys Vin Diesel and The Rock to golfer Tiger Woods and rising tennis star James Blake to singers like Alicia Keys and Norah Jones. Sacramento is ahead of the curve; 2 of every 10 babies born here are multiracial. When those babies grow up and start marrying—a national survey shows more than 90% of today's teens approve of interracial marriage—the numbers will climb even higher.

It took time—and a feeling of not quite belonging at an Asian students' club—for Ferronato to finally realize that she is neither Japanese nor white. She is both. "Now I believe in the theory of hybrid vigor," she says. "A specimen derived from two different species has the strongest traits of both sides."

But people are not plants, and theories are not proofs. Sacramento, as a city, is still searching to find its best self, its strongest traits. Single-race parents of mixed-race children can offer guidance to their kids but not always full understanding. Sacramento is on a similar, unchaperoned journey. Will hybrid theory hold? Who can tell? But the blossoms will be something to see.

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,340694-3,00.html>