

The
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Segregation

From infusion to diffusion

A promising process of osmosis picks up speed

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THE wall of the Bricklayer's Arms, a pub in the High Town neighbourhood of Luton, displays paper money from all over the world: trophies, explains the landlady, from customers with families living abroad. Down the road there is an Afro-Caribbean butcher, a Chinese health shop, a Polish barber and a Swedish restaurant. The shops, and the notes on the pub wall, are new. Fifteen years ago Luton's residents were clearly split along ethnic lines: Pakistani and Bengali Britons lived in Bury Park; whites in High Town. Now it is much more mixed.



Britain is becoming less segregated. The 2011 census showed that ethnic minorities were moving out of big cities, making smaller towns and suburbs less white. Beyond the hyper-diverse capital there are now three “plural cities”—Luton, Leicester and Slough—where no single ethnic group makes up more than half the population. A new analysis of the census by Stephen Jivraj and Ludi Simpson at Manchester University shows that across the country, ethnic groups are starting to mix more evenly.

In the ten years from 2001, the authors found, all but one of the 407 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales became more ethnically diverse, according to an index they constructed to measure the local representation of each of the 13 main ethnic groups that are recorded in the census. One reason is that London, once the main landing pad for new immigrants, has become

unaffordable. Migrants used to congregate in London boroughs where housing was cheap, such as Croydon, Southwark and Newham. But now even the poorest London neighbourhoods are pricey. In 1995 houses in Newham cost 17% more than the national average; now they cost 33% more.

Another cause of the mixing is that non-white Britons have spread out. Black people of African (as opposed to Caribbean) origin have dispersed the most, swapping London for well-connected suburban towns like Milton Keynes and Salford. British-Chinese, who were already widely scattered, have dispersed the least. (In fact, an influx of students from China, who are heavily concentrated in university towns, has slightly increased segregation levels among people of Chinese origin.)

New groups are appearing, too, varying the mix and straining the categories on the census. The number describing their ethnicity as “other” doubled between 2001 and 2011, partly a result of migrants arriving from a wider range of places. There is also a much larger mixed-race population, which grew from 661,000 to 1.2m. Mixed-race Britons are better integrated than other non-whites: whereas South Asians, for instance, are still fairly concentrated in large cities like Manchester, mixed white-Asians, whose parents are typically richer, are spread throughout the suburbs.

If current trends continue, Mr Simpson and Mr Jivraj predict, by 2031 48 local authorities will be “plural”, with no group making up a majority (see chart). In half of them the largest group will be white British. In 20 of the rest, mostly in London, those ticking “other” will be the largest.

All this diffusion means new faces have appeared in sleepy areas used mainly to white British people. In last month’s general election the anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP) performed best in seaside towns and places in the Midlands where immigrants are new, rather than plentiful. In Clacton, the only constituency to elect a UKIP MP, only 4% of the population is foreign-born, compared with a national average of 13%.

Meanwhile in places such as Luton, where different ethnic groups have lived next-door to each other for some time, views on immigration are becoming more relaxed. The English Defence League, a thuggish far-right outfit born in Luton, is now widely despised, residents say. Last month UKIP won only 12% of the vote in the city. As Britain becomes more diverse, it may become more tolerant, too.

Correction: The print version of this article mistakenly said that by 2031 “another” 48 local authorities would be plural. In fact, 48 is forecast to be the total number of such authorities, not the increase. Sorry.

From the print edition: Britain

