

Somewhere else is a place for us

Maria! Maria! Where have all the Puerto Ricans gone?

The city's Puerto Rican population plummeted by more than 100,000 during the past 10 years, even as the Hispanic population jumped by 21%.

The 2000 census counted a mere 789,172 Puerto Ricans in the city, the lowest number since 1960, while the number of Dominicans and Mexicans skyrocketed. Today, in the town that gave the world "West Side Story," barely one of every three Hispanics is Puerto Rican.

But it's a different song in the rest of the country. The number of Puerto Ricans in the 50 states increased nearly 25% — to a record 3.4 million last year from 2.7 million in 1990 — which means nearly as many *boricuas* live on the mainland as in Puerto Rico.

So, where did they all go?

At La Rosa del Monte moving company on Tiffany St. in the Bronx, they have a pretty good idea.

Hiram Rodriguez, the owner, is a Puerto Rican from the mountain town of Jayuya. He started the firm with one old truck in 1970. He's a multimillionaire today, with a fleet that operates throughout North America.

"It's either Florida or Puerto Rico for those who call us," one of Rodriguez's workers told me yesterday.

So many have moved to the Sunshine State that its Puerto Rican population has nearly doubled since 1990, making it second only to New York State.

Comfort is yours in . . . Florida

Take Marlene Cintron, a financial analyst for Merrill Lynch. Her mother moved to Hialeah 15 years ago to escape the cold. She chose Miami-Dade County over her native Puerto Rico because its crime rate was lower.

Then there's Kissimmee — the new Puerto Rican mecca near Orlando.

Cintron's brother bought a new home there three years ago. He soon discovered that most of his neighbors were Puerto Ricans from New York and New Jersey.

Another favorite relocation spot is Pennsylvania, which also saw a huge increase in its Puerto Rican population.

Thousands have moved from New

York City to the Poconos and the Delaware Valley in recent years in search of affordable housing and better schools. Many still make the long commute here to work each day.

Even Staten Island and the suburban New York counties have seen a jump in their Puerto Rican populations.

"When I was a kid growing up on the West Side [of Manhattan] in the 1950s, heaven was moving to Queens," said Fidel Del Valle, former chairman of the Taxi and Limousine Commission. "When Queens wasn't heaven anymore, it became Long Island."

So Puerto Ricans who pioneered the Hispanic presence in the city are fleeing, just as generations of Italians, Irish and Jews did before them.

The rising new groups among Hispanics are Dominicans and Mexicans. The Dominican number is huge. The Census Bureau won't report how huge until the summer, but it is rapidly approaching parity with Puerto Ricans.

It's time Latino politicians asked themselves what they are doing to ensure equal political representation for Dominicans. Of some two dozen Hispanic elected officials in town, only two are Dominican. A shameful record given the Dominican population, even if a substantial proportion cannot vote because they are not yet citizens.

Changing the face of leadership

With redistricting upon us, there's a chance to change that, says City Councilman Guillermo Linares, the city's first Dominican elected official.

At least one state Senate seat, maybe even a congressional seat, should be configured where Dominicans have a shot at winning, Linares says.

He is grateful to Puerto Ricans for paving the way for him and other Dominicans to be accepted in this town. Like many Dominicans, he is married to a Puerto Rican. His children, born in New York, represent a new Latino identity.

But New York is changing. The Italians, the Irish, Jews and African-Americans are not the only ones who must adapt to change. So must the Puerto Ricans.



JUAN GONZALEZ