

## *Making the Return Trip: Elderly Head Back North*



After his wife died, Aaron Green, 83, moved to Pittsburgh from East Lake, Fla., to be near his children.  
Jeff Swensen for The New York Times

By Sam Roberts

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For the first time since the Depression, more Americans ages 75 and older have been leaving the South than moving there, according to a New York Times analysis of Census Bureau data.

The reversal appears to be driven in part by older people who retired to the South in their 60s, but decided to return home to their children and grandchildren in the Northeast, Midwest and West after losing spouses or becoming less mobile.

A stream of elderly transplants leaving Florida was detected by sociologists two decades ago, including so-called half-backs, who stopped short of returning to their home states and settled elsewhere in the South. What is new is the growth in the number of people leaving the region entirely and the dimension of the migration.

“As the numbers increase of people in their early to mid-60s that move from the North to the South, we would also expect the numbers of people 75 and older that move from the South to the North to subsequently increase as well,” said Grant I. Thrall, a geography professor at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

While the number of people ages 75 and older who move at all is relatively small, a survey of geographic mobility released last month estimated that about 121,000 of them left the South from 2000 to 2005, and 87,000 arrived. In a comparable survey a decade earlier, 57,000 left the South and 92,000 moved there.

From 1995 to 2000, another Census Bureau survey of migration patterns found, for the first time slightly more people ages 85 and older left Florida than settled there.

The shifting trends in migration to and from the South might be attributable in part to differences in generation size and other variables, including fluctuations year to year. From 2004 to 2005, a separate Census Bureau survey reported a slight gain in migrants 75 and older to the South.

Phillip Salopek, a Census Bureau demographer, said that while the census sample was small, he “wouldn’t have any hesitation to use the number” in analyzing migration trends for the region over a five-year period.

Ida Kotowitz, 88, lives in the Bronx after 22 years in Florida.  
Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times



William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, said, “The South, and Florida especially, has been a magnet for yuppie elderly: younger seniors with spouse present and in good health.

“These are a catch for communities that receive them, because they have ample disposable incomes and make few demands on public services,” he continued. “The older senior population, especially after 80, are more likely to be widowed, less well off and more in need of social and economic support.”

“Many northern states seem to have better senior services than Florida,” Dr. Frey added.

The Census Bureau defines the South as the 16 states that stretch from Texas to Florida, including Maryland, Kentucky and Oklahoma. Census Bureau surveys ask where people were living one year and five years earlier, not whether they have returned to their home state. But the anecdotal evidence seems compelling.

Virginia Halloran, 83, and her husband, Fred, retired to Florida in 1978 from Cape Cod, Mass. After Mr. Halloran died in 1995, Mrs. Halloran, a former school psychologist, stayed in Atlantis, Fla., just south of Palm Beach.

In 2005, after she had both knees replaced and grew anxious over forecasts of more hurricanes, she moved to a one-bedroom apartment in a Westwood, Mass., retirement community, a short drive from her children and grandchildren.

“It was just to make life simpler for me,” she said, “and, I think, simpler for them.”

Sharon Cofar, who runs a Coral Springs, Fla., company called A Move Made Easy, a relocation service that caters to older movers, said the migration had accelerated since Hurricane Wilma struck in 2005.

“It was very difficult for the adult children to cope with the hurricanes and their inability to help their parents at this difficult time,” Ms. Cofar said, “and many do not want the parents to go through it again, nor do they want to care-give long distance any more.”

Since last year, Ida Kotowitz, 88, has been living in a retirement home in the Bronx, not far from her daughter and grandchildren, where she moved after 22 years in Florida. “I was failing in health, most of my friends have passed away and I was alone,” Ms. Kotowitz said. “Friends are all right when you’re well, but when you’re not, you need family.”

In 1996, Constance Bialek moved with her husband, Fred, to Florida from California after he received a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. He died four years ago. Last November, Mrs. Bialek, 78, moved to an assisted living center across the street from her daughter's apartment on the West Side of Manhattan.

Mrs. Bialek said she did not miss "all those silly accidents with old ladies who don't know how to drive," adding that the diversity of New York City "makes you feel more alive, it keeps you interested in life."



Constance Bialek, 78, who moved to the West Side of Manhattan last year, said the city "keeps you interested in life."  
Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Mildred Morrison, administrator for the Area Agency on Aging of Allegheny, Pa., which includes Pittsburgh, described return migration as part of a natural progression.

"They usually leave after retirement to a warmer climate, and return in good physical health, but maybe on the cusp of declining health, 10 years or so later," Ms. Morrison said, mostly to "reconnect with family."

Not all transplants go home. Aaron Green, 83, a New York postal worker, retired to East Lake, Fla., just outside St. Petersburg, about 20 years ago, then relocated to a garden apartment in Pittsburgh near his son and daughter last year after his wife died.

"When my wife passed on, my son said, 'I think it's time to come home with us,' " Mr. Green recalled. "I said, 'I think so, too.' "

Demographers say that the last time more older people left the South than moved there was during the Depression, when there was a net loss of people older than 65. Among those 75 and older "the ratio of in-movers to out-movers has been declining steadily over time," said Stan Smith, director of the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Calvin Beale, senior demographer of the Economic Research Service at the federal Department of Agriculture, said: "After age 75, as health diminishes and/or widowhood occurs, there is some measure of return flow back to areas of origin, or wherever a caretaker-minded son or daughter lives. And this means a net outflow from the South."

An analysis by demographers at Queens College of the City University of New York suggests that those 75 and older who left the South were fairly evenly divided between married and widowed. More of the movers were likely to be women and white.

After his wife died, Al Petzke, an 82-year-old former steelworker, returned to the Cleveland area from Houston to be closer to his only son.

“It didn’t make one bit of sense for my son to be spending all that money every month flying down to see me,” Mr. Petzke said. His retirement home is in Berea, Ohio, just down the street from the bar at the Eastland Inn, where he used to stop after work.

“I know exactly how I want to die,” he said. “I want to go over to the Eastland Inn, have a shot of whiskey and a beer, and then they can take me to the funeral home.”