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‘Proud of who we are’: Multiracial residents are Sacramento’s fastest growing racial group

Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks : 7-9 minutes : Invalid Date

Equity Lab: Sacramento residents answer ‘What is equity?’

The Bee interviewed Sacramento residents to hear their hopes, worries and vision for what a better Sacramento might look like and what equity means for them and the city.

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The Bee interviewed Sacramento residents to hear their hopes, worries and vision for what a better Sacramento might look like and what equity means for them and the city. By [Alyssa Hodenfield](#)

Dani Putney has always wrestled with their racial identity.

Growing up in Rio Linda as an mixed-race Filipinx kid with olive skin and “very English” surname, Putney remembers sharply a clash of experiences — heading down to Jollibee in South Sacramento; hearing but not understanding their mother as she spoke Tagalog to relatives in Cebu; marking only the “white” check box on school census forms.

“I definitely felt a little bit strange, and by a little bit, I mean, a lot,” Putney said, now a PhD student at Oklahoma State who’s written a [book of poetry on mixed-race identity](#). “There were these interior things I wasn’t sure how to put a finger on.”

In Sacramento County, nearly 212,000 people [identify as being of two or more races](#), or about one in seven residents, according to 2020 Census data. A decade ago, only about 93,500 people identified as multiracial. The percentage of people who identify as biracial or multiracial in Sacramento County has doubled in the last decade, a larger increase than any other racial group.

Across the United States, the growth has been dramatic. More than 33 million people, or about about 1 in 10 residents, identify as being of two or more races, according to the new census data. A decade ago, only about 9 million people identified as multiracial, making them the fastest growing demographic in the country.

“I want this conversation to be brought out much more,” said Rashad Baadqir, who teaches ethnic studies at Sacramento State and is Black. “It’s not just happening now, it’s been happening for many years.”

There are a number of possible explanations for the growth: The relatively [recent legalization](#) of interracial marriage; the growing acceptance and [positive attitudes](#) toward people of different races marrying; newer immigrants settling down in the United States and starting families; [dating apps](#) making it easier for people to meet others outside their existing social circles.

It’s the children from these relationships that are [driving much of the change](#) in the country’s racial and ethnic landscape, and they’re also the ones often burdened with being a kind of [symbol of hope](#) — a reflection of the country’s ongoing embrace of diversity and a sign that a more racially tolerant future is approaching.

But demographers and social scientists are cautious about embracing the idea that a more multiracial country will make for a more inclusive one focused on racial equity for all. Change is slow; it wasn’t until 2000 that the U.S. Census Bureau even offered the option to choose more than one race.

Multiracial people are also not a monolith. Biracial and multiracial people can come from any combination of racial and ethnic backgrounds, [meaning the lived experiences](#) of one person who checks the "two or more races" box on the census can be entirely different from the next person's. They span a variety of political views, economic statuses, religious beliefs and more. And as of now, they're still a small subset of the overall population.

Understanding how multiracial people operate and are perceived in political and social spheres is still an evolving research field, said Sarah Gaither, an assistant professor at Duke University's Identity and Diversity Lab who studies multiracial identities and grew up in Sacramento.

Some researchers have found that multiracial people may be more [liberal leaning](#) on [certain issues](#) compared to people who identify as only white. And there is evidence that there may be psychological benefits to identifying as multiracial, such as being [more likely](#) to [reject the idea](#) that that race biologically predicts one's abilities.

"Some research has shown that multiracial people are able to think more flexibly and they may accept people for who they are without questioning them," Gaither said. "They're more willing to do so because they have firsthand experience being questioned personally (and also) growing up in diverse family environments."

It's a perspective that Gaither, who is [biracial but presents to most people as white](#), knows well. Gaither's father is Black and her mother is white. Growing up in Carmichael in the 80s and 90s, Gaither recalls her suburban childhood as a largely positive one, but unavoidably marked by race.

"We had a number of experiences of people not thinking he's my dad, or that he's kidnapping me when we're walking through the mall," she said.

Today, Sacramento touts its reputation as one of the most diverse cities in the United States, with several robust immigrant enclaves and neighborhoods of colors. The Sacramento region is [more nonwhite than ever before](#), and the city of Sacramento is one of only two cities in the country recently identified as places where [racial residential segregation](#) has gone down in the last decade.

"When I arrived here, I kept hearing how diverse Sacramento is," said Baadqir, whose two daughters are biracial, "and what I've seen, being here, is really, it's one of the most inclusive cities, I see it across the board."

More than anything, the growing number of multiracial residents will force demographers, social scientists and government agencies to find better ways of understand and categorize people's identities. When Gaither got her updated driver's license in North Carolina, she left the race category blank, since she couldn't select a "biracial" category.

"We're seeing people's willingness to claim their individuality in new ways," she said. "To be proud of who we are, and to be specific."

For years, "I felt like I was a white person and didn't have any contact on a deeper level with my identity until high school age when I started writing poetry," Putney said, "starting to excavate my identity and reclaim what was always mine."

There have been times more recently that Putney has felt they needed to exclusively say they are Asian, to validate their identity and assure themselves they were "[Asian enough](#)."

Discovering and embracing their identity has been a work in progress, Putney said, involving digging into family records and ancestry data and talking with family members. Writing poetry has allowed Putney to now see "how important it is to claim my messy, liminal identity because that's uniquely me, and I should be able to claim that."

"I'm becoming more and more of myself every day," they said.

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Sarah Gaither, left, an assistant professor at Duke University's Identity and Diversity Lab, poses for a family picture with her mother Kathy Gaither, brother Adam Gaither and father Clifford Gaither in Sacramento after Adam's graduation from Sacramento State in 2012. Courtesy Sarah Gaither

Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks covers equity issues in the Sacramento region. She's previously worked at The New York Times and NPR, and is a former Bee intern. She graduated from UC Berkeley, where she was the managing editor of The Daily Californian. [Support my work with a digital subscription](#)