

Mirror Image

FLORIDA TREND looked for the community whose demographics most closely match the state's. We found it in a city that resembles Florida in other ways, too.

By Mike Vogel



Carlos Bonet, 65, was born in Puerto Rico and moved to Port St. Lucie in 2006. "It's so nice and friendly and quiet. The people are great," says Bonet, dancing here with his wife, Yvonne.



If Florida looks in a mirror, what it sees will be ZIP codes 34953 and 34983 in Port St. Lucie.

The two ZIPs — and to an extent the city itself — are as close as it comes to dead ringers for the state, demographically speaking. One ZIP, 34953, correlates to within three decimal places of an exact match for the state's breakdown of white, black and "other" races and Hispanic ethnicity. The other misses by just a whisker. On average, they are within 1 percentage point of the state's shares of those races and its share of Hispanics and non-Hispanics.

Mayor Gregory J. Oravec is hardly surprised. "We still have what makes Florida, Florida," he says. By that, he means the coastal climate and quality of life.

The city also has a history of what made Florida into Florida. Created out of whole cloth, Port St. Lucie was founded by a Florida legend, General Development Corp., which itself was the creation of other Florida legends, the Mackle brothers. In 1958, GDC bought 40,000 acres, mostly inland and inaccessible from the coast. In 1961, GDC, which had



Maiga Auguste, 35, was born in Haiti and lived in New Jersey before moving to Port St. Lucie at age 24. Auguste wanted to be closer to family members who had moved previously. "I don't have to worry about the safety issue compared to other cities. The scenery is nice and beautiful."

to build a bridge across the St. Lucie River to open the area, created Port St. Lucie as a "paper city," incorporated without residents, out of 40,000 acres of mostly inland land. In true Florida style, GDC put ads in northern newspapers and sold lots on the installment plan — \$10 down and \$10 a month — before there were streets to even reach the lots. There was and is no port in Port St. Lucie. That was just marketing.

Lack of water and sewer service held back development for years. GDC went bankrupt, and the city took over GDC's role as utility provider. Port St. Lucie boomed in the 1980s, the same decade that saw the arrival of I-95 as another way — along with Florida's Turnpike — to reach the south.

Miami native Joe Lowry moved into ZIP code 34983 in 1981, building a house on a parcel he shared with his parents and sister. He

spent 34 years leading an outdoor crew for Florida Power & Light and, on the side, provided for builders the ubiquitous culverts that enabled the construction of driveways over drainage ditches all over the city.

That business ran five to six days a week with his wife, Vicki, taking orders, his son loading the culverts on a truck after school and Lowry delivering them the next morning before work — upward of 120 culverts some weeks. The family also has run a Christmas tree sales lot for 26 years. He and Vicki, their two grown children and five grandchildren still live in the city. "I can live anywhere I want in the United States. I like Port St. Lucie. I really do," says Lowry, 67. "You try to get involved and make things work."

The two ZIP codes hold thousands of houses, surrounded by well-maintained yards, for the most part. There's no urban-style

The Census in 2005 ranked Port St. Lucie the fastest-growing city of more than 100,000 people.

downtown, but national retailers are well-represented. The city's relatively late founding and even later development had an unintended effect: It's not segregated, says Mayor Oravec. By the time growth came, the social and legal barriers that created minority and ethnic enclaves in older Florida cities were mostly gone. Residents from traditional minority groups say they've experienced no discrimination or hostility based on their race or ethnicity.

Port St. Lucie nearly doubled in population from 2000 to 2010. The Census in 2005 ranked it the fastest-growing city of more than 100,000 people in the nation. Then came the bust, and Port St. Lucie became a symbol of foreclosures. Today, though, with more than 174,000 residents, it's the ninth-largest city by population in Florida. Last year, it made *Forbes'* list of the best places to retire, though it



trends younger than the state overall. The median age in ZIP code 34983 is 38.6; it's 34.6 in 34953. The state median age is 41.

Carlos Bonet and his wife, Yvonne, moved to ZIP code 34953 in 2006 after Bonet's sister and her husband talked them into moving there. Raised in Spanish Harlem, he is a retired New York bus operator. The couple quickly established themselves in their new city. At 65, he's president of the Spanish American Club, a social club. "We love to dance," he says. His grown daughters and their children also live in Port St. Lucie.

One driver of growth has been affordable housing. The joke goes

that Palm Beach County's affordable housing program is St. Lucie. Commuters pack the highways south in the mornings.

In the last decade, the city tried to diversify away from an employment base built on real estate, services and call centers. (The percentage of people living in poverty is 18.2% in 34983 and 16.9% in 34953, compared to the statewide average of 16.3.) The city leveraged big to lure an entertainment company and bioscience researchers to anchor an envisioned knowledge-based economy. Two have closed their doors, leaving the city on the hook for their buildings and facing a tax increase.

Port St. Lucie's relatively late development means there's no segregation, says Mayor Gregory J. Oravec.

The two ZIPS closely resemble — within a couple of percentage points — the state's overall percentage of foreign-born residents and the share of people who speak a language other than English at home. (The state numbers are 19.4% and 27.4%, respectively.)

Haiti-born and New Jersey-raised Maiga Auguste moved to Port St. Lucie when she was 24 to be closer to family. (Some 3,400 Haitians live in the two ZIP codes.) She found it a good place to get serious about her future and her faith. "There's not a lot to do. It forces you to focus on your goals. It forces you to get rooted," Auguste says. She completed a two-year degree in criminal justice, earned a bachelor's in public safety organization management and now, at 35, is a detective with the city police. Residents are invested in protecting their community's quality of life and are helpful to police and each other, she says.

Auguste volunteers with a local Haitian community center that offers immigrants life skills training, English language courses, GED classes and other services. She tells youth there, "know who you are and believe in God and strive and you'll be fine."

She likes the sense of peace, the fresh air and the safety in ZIP code 34983. "I can walk at 8 o'clock at night and not be too scared. The scenery is nice and beautiful. Citizens worked hard for their homes. They worked hard to provide a certain quality of life for their families, their kids."

► Classifying the ZIPs

Drawing on data on income and other factors, Redlands, Calif.-based GIS company ESRI assigns each ZIP code three classifications out of 67 possibilities to describe the people there. ZIP code 34983 in Port St. Lucie has "family-oriented, stable, hard-working people who have lived, worked and played in the same area for years," akin to neighborhoods in industrial areas around the Great Lakes with people who buy American and eat at modest chain restaurants. It also has "Middleburg" — married couples whose area is transitioning

from semi-rural and who are "conservative, family-oriented young couples, many with children" and "American Dreamers," tending to be foreign-born, young married couples with children and grandparents on the edge of metros in the South and West who bought because of affordable housing and open space. Neighboring ZIP 34953 sounds much the same, though there "American Dreamers" are the largest group, followed by the "Middleburg" and "Up and Coming Families," younger, more diverse, more mobile, hard workers who trade a longer commute for more house and are struggling with debt.

Diverse, But Unevenly So

In Florida, some places resemble the statewide averages more than others.



FLORIDA TREND asked the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research for help in answering this question:

What places within Florida are most and least like Florida?

"That is an interesting question, but there is no definitive answer," says Stefan Rayer, director of BEBR's population program.

Statewide, we're 57.2% non-Hispanic

white, 15.3% black, 22.9% Hispanic with the remaining 4.6% scattered among the Asian, native American, Pacific islander or multiracial categories.

But that distribution is uneven across the state. There's Miami-Dade County, for example, the only county in Florida with a Hispanic majority. Then there's Gadsden County, the only county with a black majority. Then there are counties with

no racial or ethnic majority — Orange, Broward, Hardee, Osceola and Hendry — and those throughout the state with different levels of white majorities.

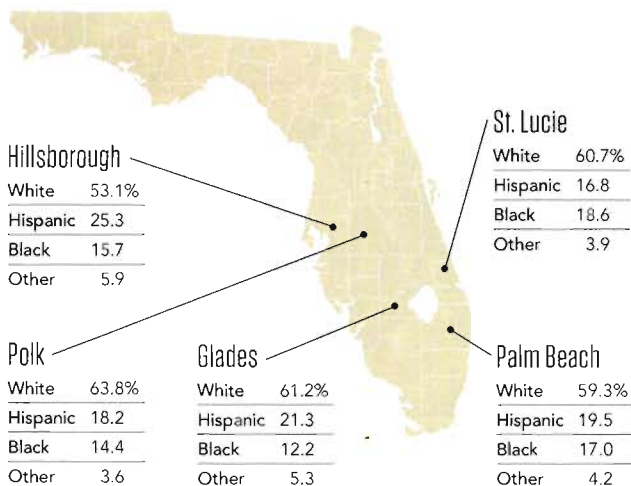
Rayer took U.S. Census estimates on race and ethnicity in Florida counties, cities, unincorporated areas with a defined area, and ZIP codes and checked how they correlated with the statewide numbers.

State Profile

White 57.2% Hispanic 22.9% Black 15.3% Other: 4.6%

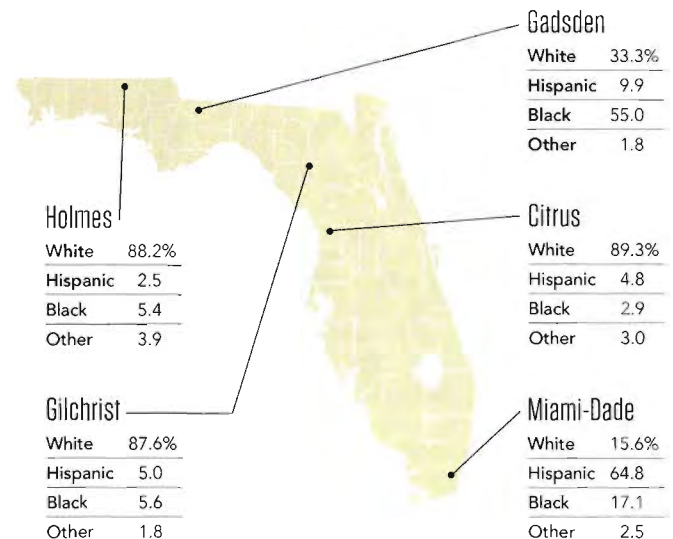
Counties Most Like the Statewide Averages

Among counties, Palm Beach, Hillsborough and Glades correlate closest to the state averages.



Counties Least Like the Statewide Averages

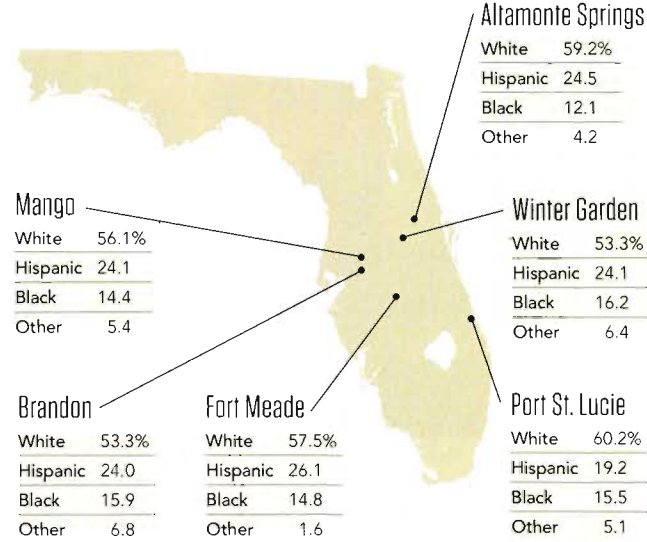
The two counties that are the least like "statewide" Florida: Miami-Dade with its Hispanic majority, followed by Gadsden with its black majority. (The next 10 most dissimilar counties, led by Citrus, are on the list because more than 80% of their population is white.)



BEBR analysis of U.S. Census 2009-13 ACS 5-Year Estimates, adjusted for rounding errors

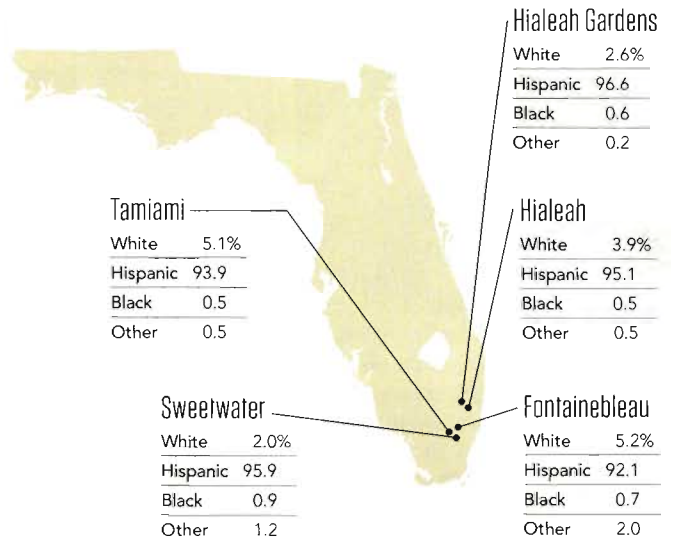
► Cities/Places Most Like Statewide Averages

Among cities and what are called Census-designated places — not cities but identifiable communities — the closest to the statewide profile are Mango, an unincorporated community in Hillsborough County, and the city of Fort Meade in Polk County. Both are small.



► Cities/Places Least Like Statewide Averages

The most dissimilar? Among major cities, it's Hialeah in Miami-Dade.



BEBR analysis of U.S. Census 2009-13 ACS 5-Year Estimates, adjusted for rounding errors