

San Francisco Asks: Where Have All the Children Gone?

By THOMAS FULLER
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SAN FRANCISCO — In a compact studio apartment on the fringes of the Castro district here a young couple live with their demanding 7-year-old, whom they dote on and take everywhere: a Scottish terrier named Olive.

Raising children is on the agenda for Daisy Yeung, a high school science teacher, and Slin Lee, a software engineer. But just not in San Francisco. "When we imagine having kids, we think of somewhere else," Mr. Lee said. "It's starting to feel like a no-kids type of city."

A few generations ago, before the technology boom transformed San Francisco and sent housing costs soaring, the city was alive with children and families. Today it has the lowest percentage of children of any of the largest 100 cities in America, according to census data, causing some here to raise an alarm.

As an urban renaissance has swept through major American cities in recent decades, San Francisco's population has risen to historical highs and a forest of skyscraping condominiums has replaced tumbledown warehouses and abandoned wharves. At the same time, the share of children in San Francisco fell to 13 percent, low even compared with another expensive city, New York, with 21 percent. In Chicago, 23 percent of the population is under 18 years old, which is also the overall average across the United States.

Many immigrant and other residential areas of San Francisco still have their share of the very young and the very old. But when you walk through the growing number of neighborhoods where employees of Google, Twitter and so many other technology companies live or work, the sidewalks display a narrow band of humanity, as if life started at 22 and ended somewhere around 40.

There is one statistic that the city's natives have heard too many times. San Francisco, population 865,000, has roughly the same number of dogs as children: 120,000. In many areas of the city, pet grooming shops seem more common than schools.

Prohibitive housing costs are not the only reason there are relatively few children. A public school system of uneven quality, the attractiveness of the less-foggy suburbs to families, and the large number of gay men and women, many of them childless, have all played roles in the decline in the number of children, which began with white flight from the city in the 1970s. The tech boom now reinforces the notion that San Francisco is a place for the young, single and rich.

In 1970, a quarter of San Francisco's residents were children, nearly twice the level of today. The overall demographic picture of San Francisco is a city with more men than women — 103 for every 100 women — and with no ethnic majority. Whites make up slightly less than half the population, Asians about one-third and Latinos 15 percent. The black population has markedly declined and stands around 6 percent.

Opinion is divided on whether having fewer children in the city is something San Francisco should worry about.

Mr. Lee, the software engineer, said he loved San Francisco — the weather, the food, the friends he has made. But the city, he said, feels somewhat detached from the life cycle.

"It's similar to when you go to college and you are surrounded by people who are in the same life stage or who have the same attitude about what their priorities are," Mr. Lee said. "That's all you see: people who are exactly like you."