

Singles on the move? Yes, to the suburbs

Solo households — no mate, no children — are growing and redefining neighborhoods.

By Lini S. Kadaba
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Sharon L. Hopson sounds every bit the typical urban dweller.

She's well-heeled, an accountant and single, at 38 unfettered by roommate or mate.

Typical, except that Hopson prefers to make her home outside Philadelphia, deep in little league territory. She lives in a townhouse in Mount Laurel. "It's nice. It's quiet. The crime rate is very low," she says.

Hopson is the new face on the suburban block — the solo single.

As households such as hers become more common in that bastion of families with children, they are redefining singlehood, and influencing everything from housing to watermelons.

Put another way, *Sex and the City's* sequel might well be *Sex and the Suburbs*.

Nationally in 1970, traditional families made up 40 percent of households, while homes with people living alone lagged at 17 percent. Now, the picture is dramatically different, with home-aloners edging out nuclear families for the first time in 2000, 26 percent to 24 percent — a gap only expected to widen.

In the Philadelphia suburbs, solo-single households at 24 percent are closing in on — and in Delaware County have overtaken — married with children households at 27 percent. Throw in singles living with roommates — 29 percent — and nuclear families are outnumbered. (Count Philadelphia, at **one-third for home-aloners, and singles rule.**)

That could mean a suburbia with more houses built shoulder-to-shoulder and more boutiques and galleries filling — and helping to boost — suburban downtowns.

The solo ranks count more than Gen Xers/Yers postponing marriage and following jobs to the back of beyond. They take in boomers and longer-living seniors, divorced or widowed, and nests empty.

Sooner or later, they will need more services, whether assisted living or rides to doctors.

"It's no longer the homogeneous, white-bread, Ozzie-and-Harriet suburbs," says William Frey, a Brookings Institution demographer. The rise of singles "is making the suburbs much less family-oriented" and changing the definition of suburbia.

The new suburbia embraces computer consultant Mark Osiecki, 31.

He wants to wed, eventually — one reason he invested in a four-bedroom colonial on a large wooded lot in East Brandywine. Osiecki refuses to rush. "Now people are putting careers ahead of things," he says, "finding out who they really are in their late 20s and early 30s."

Younger singles insist, though their mothers might disagree, that the pressure to couple is less. Why? They point to high divorce rates. Besides, many can afford to live alone quite nicely.

Over and over, singles talk about "not settling just to be with someone," as Hopson says. "I am so complete with myself."

The family focus of the suburbs also is changing, making the choice of life alone easier. Osiecki, for one, has noticed that the local grocer now **stocks, among hefty, family-size packages of ground beef, one pounders** right for him.

Expect more nods to solo singles, the fastest-growing segment of the population. By 2010, traditional families will make up only 20 percent of households, according to census projections, and people living alone will reach 27 percent.

"People enjoy being single," says Brandon Greimann, 33, a never-married software developer living in West Chester to be close to his Exton job. "I have lots of friends who are in no rush to change that."



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Inquirer Suburban S
Sharon L. Hopson teaches an aerobics class at a Lucille Roberts gym in Delran. The accountant lives in Mount Laurel and is among a trend of solo singles living in the suburbs.

Singles fashion lives in suburbs

SINGLES from A1

Twenty years older, Gloria Welburn of Morton, a divorced mother of two grown children who runs a house-cleaning service, talks about a "type of freedom" after years of "doing, doing" for others.

Now, she can watch TV till 2 a.m. or spend a day in her garden. "It's all about me," she says, without apology.

As nuclear families decline, developers are betting on new formulas.

In Chester County, more neotraditional villages are taking shape on drawing boards — a movement driven largely by childless singles and empty nesters who prefer an urban-like environment. Or rather, what John McIlwain, senior fellow for housing at the Urban Land Institute, calls "urban lite," a sanitized version of city life.

"When people are living alone, they want other people around them," he said. "They don't want to be in the suburbs in the middle of a cornfield with the crickets. They want to hear a few sirens, walk to the market, see people."

J. Brian O'Neill, a King of Prussia-based developer, is one of several chasing singles "with a vengeance," proposing 10,000 units (townhouses, singles, lofts) in Lower Merion, East Whiteland, Valley Forge, Delaware County.

Last month, nurse Lynn-Marie Kelso, 46, joined the singles-in-suburbia club by moving from Philadelphia to a house built cluster-style in Bucks County, where she grew up. "I feel like I'm returning to my roots," she says. "It's kind of nice out here."

Enough singles fancy suburbia that the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce holds two of its Young Professionals Network events *outside* the city. Coyote Crossing in Conshohocken was a recent venue.

At the Pottery Barn, unattached singles are registering for housewarmings and significant birthdays rather than waiting for a mate, and single women are hefting power tools in home-improvement clinics at the Lowe's in Plymouth Meeting.

West Chester, for one, would not support its many restaurants, boutiques and galleries without a healthy dose of younger singles, says Malcolm Johnstone, executive director of the town's Business Improvement District.

The borough also hopes to lure older singles by attracting bus tours visiting QVC — and often full of solo seniors — into town for a couple of hours.

Marketers, too, are eying singles. The Bambino, a canteen-size watermelon designed for smaller households, is expected to show up in more stores in the region this spring, and the U.S. Potato Board is weighing in by promoting two-pound bags of spuds for singles along with the cookbook *Solo Suppers*.

Singles, too, are uniting — not in matrimony but solidarity. They are joining Unmarried America, a singles lobby, or turning out for singles workshops — such as ones psychiatrist Donna Cotzen has held at Main Line School nights — offering tips, not on finding Mr. Right, but on building a circle of friends.

Politically, the impact of suburban singles is a toss-up. Younger singles — usually Democrats — could challenge Republican strongholds, says Republican pollster David Winston. Or, he says, they might reinforce existing patterns, having chosen

suburbia because of shared values with soccer moms.

It could create some "strange bedfellows," if younger Democratic and older Republican singles join forces on issues such as school taxes, says Ken Smukler, a Democratic political strategist.

Not everyone is heralding the new dynamic. "Children are the future of any society," says sociologist David Popenoe, codirector of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

The American family may not be on the verge of extinction, but Popenoe says "a decline in child-centeredness" is, amply evidenced, he says, by more adult-only communities, more child-free zones, and "more beefing in the workplace by people who don't have children."

A suburbia brimming with older singles also could pose challenges for social services.

New Horizons Senior Center, which recently moved from Ardmore to larger confines in Narberth, has seen membership climb. Val Hillman, 81, of Ardmore is a typical visitor, taking classes (gentle yoga, for one) and connecting with ElderNet's ride program to get to her eye doctor.

Based in Bryn Mawr, ElderNet, with 90 percent of its Lower Merion and Narberth clients living alone, has watched demand for its services — rides, home visits, chore help, all provided by volunteers — grow 12 percent in recent years, from 145 clients in 2001 to 163 last year, executive director Ruth Sperber says.

Recently, she spoke to officials with several Montgomery County municipalities.

Her advice: Start building a network of services for home-alone seniors.

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