THE rich are getting richer, while most families in the region’s suburbs have been losing economic ground since 1999.

The suburbs are becoming increasingly diverse as Asian and Hispanic immigrants bypass New York City, traditionally the first stop for new arrivals.

And among those who commute between the suburbs and New York City, the trend is toward traveling in reverse: from homes in the city to jobs outside it.

These are among the changes that have taken place across the metropolitan region since 1999, according to an analysis of data released in bits and pieces by the Census Bureau over the last six months.

A review of the census data and other demographic information for Long Island, three counties in Connecticut, five in the Hudson Valley and 14 in northern and central New Jersey shows that the region is undergoing significant demographic change and other shifts. The data support some commonly held beliefs about income distribution, housing, and commuting.

For example, the cost of housing is consuming an increasingly higher percentage of household income. When that is coupled with a huge increase in home equity borrowing, a result is that many families are mortgaged to an extent unheard of just a few years ago.

Also, for most residents of the region’s suburbs, taxes are rising faster than income.

Instead of commuting to the city, an increasing number of suburban residents work closer to home.
And thousands of people are leaving the more affluent towns and suburbs close to New York City, bound for more affordable locales that may be a county away, or across the country. Many students from around the region who have gone off to college are not coming back, helping to turn the suburbs, increasingly, into a land of 50-somethings.

Jobs in the region are drifting to opposite ends of the income scale: Sharp declines in the number of people working in manufacturing and clerical jobs have been accompanied by modest increases in finance and professional work, and big jumps in lower-paid jobs like food service, maintenance and personal services.

Slumping Income

From 1999 to 2005, the median household income in the region fell, dropping to $67,165 from $69,750 for households outside the city. (The 2000 census measured the level of income in 1999, and the numbers are adjusted for inflation.) The period covers the end of the stock market boom in 2000, and the Sept. 11 attacks.

Only in those growing towns and suburbs at the region’s periphery — Mercer and Hunterdon Counties in New Jersey, and Suffolk, Orange and Dutchess Counties in New York — did the median income rise, as people moved to find bigger homes than they could afford closer to the city.

“Since 2001, incomes haven’t kept pace with inflation, because we had slow job growth,” said Pearl Kamer, the chief economist for the Long Island Association, a business group.

From 1998 to 2000, Long Island added more than 30,000 jobs a year, Dr. Kamer said, but since 2001, job growth on the Island has been just 7,000 a year. “It’s as if the suburbs hit a wall in terms of job growth,” she said.

The median income masks a growing inequality in the region, as earnings for those at the top of the scale increased. There are more rich
people in the region, and more poor people, than in 2000, but the middle has been squeezed.

The number of households making less than $50,000 increased 5.4 percent — to 1.77 million from 1.68 million — from 1999 to 2005. Similarly, the number making more than $200,000 grew 6.7 percent, to about 410,000 households in 2005 from about 384,000 in 2000.

But the households in the middle — those with family income from $50,000 to $200,000 — contracted, falling to 2.54 million from 2.60 million.

“There was growing inequality between the haves and the have-nots — those who got advanced education and skill levels, and those who didn’t,” Dr. Kamer said.

This trend has brought benefits to some parts of the region. In Westchester, and in Fairfield County, Conn., home to many commuting Wall Street workers (and the growing hedge-fund industry in Fairfield itself), peak incomes are way up. The top 10 percent of earners in Fairfield made $343,000 or more in 2005, up from an inflation-adjusted figure of $268,000 in 1999.

But for many others, income has not risen.

“Business has seen 16 or 18 straight quarters of double-digit profit increases,” said James T. Hughes, dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Public Affairs at Rutgers University. “That money isn’t filtering down. Lower incomes are the result of minuscule new hiring and minuscule pay raises.”

Recent national data indicate that wage increases have been more broadly distributed. In October, for the first time in four years, the average hourly wage outpaced inflation over the previous October, indicating that some outside the top echelons of income have begun to see their real incomes rise.
Loss of Young Workers

The low rate of job growth comes at a time of extremely low unemployment in the region, which some economists say suggests that employers are having a hard time finding workers.

Part of the explanation for that could be the striking decline in the number of regional residents in their 20s and 30s, another trend that emerged from this year’s census release.

In just five years, the number of people in the region who are 20 to 35 dropped from 2.41 million to 2.26 million.

Seth Forman, the acting executive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board, said unemployment in Nassau and Suffolk Counties fell to 3.3 percent in October from 3.8 percent in October 2005, while the region gained 4,878 new jobs.

“This is not a high number of new jobs, of course,” Mr. Forman said. “But at 3.3 percent unemployment, there is a question as to just how many more jobs the region can add without pulling in significant numbers of workers from other regions, or increasing residential development.”

Where are the young workers? There is evidence that some are moving farther from New York City.

Migration from the region to exurban places like Pike and Monroe Counties in northeastern Pennsylvania has increased in the last several years — especially among young families who make about 30 percent less than the median income for the region, according to Internal Revenue Service data.

And many are probably living in the city now. The fastest growing segment of commuters from 2000 to 2005 was reverse commuters, the census shows, those living in the city and taking trains or driving to the suburbs for jobs.
“One of the biggest growth areas on Metro-North is going north from Fordham Road in the Bronx to jobs in White Plains and elsewhere in Westchester,” said Gerry Bogacz, director of planning for the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council.

But some workers are just leaving the region, which has experienced a net loss of taxpayers to Sun Belt destinations like central Florida. The median income of the people leaving is about half that of those staying in the region, the I.R.S. data show.

“Young people to Florida is part of the new New-York-to-Florida migration,” said William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution.

The Cost of Shelter

A major culprit in the shortage of young workers is the high cost of housing.

From 2000 to 2005, the median price of homes in the region more than doubled, to $391,151 from $188,785, according to the census. What the data show is that people have stretched their incomes to get into homes.

According to the census, the number of homeowners in the region grew to 3.3 million in 2005 from 3.1 million in 2001.

But an increasing number of them are spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing, the level that the federal government considers the limit of affordability. Property taxes grew, from a median of $4,800 to $5,800. And homeowners borrowed heavily, either to get into a more expensive home or to extract equity from the homes they already owned.

That combination pushed the proportion of homeowners in the region who were spending upward of 30 percent of their income on housing to 38.2 percent in 2005 from 29.5 percent in 2000, the census data show. More ominously, the number of households paying 50 percent or more of their income for housing grew to 15.6 percent from 10.9 percent.
“It’s eating up such a large share of homeowners’ budgets now, and that may be untenable, particularly if their income is disrupted in any way,” said Mark Zandi, chief economist for Moody’s Economy.com. New buyers who put down little on their homes are especially vulnerable, Mr. Zandi said.

Nationwide, data from the Mortgage Bankers Association show, delinquencies on prime-rate mortgages rose in the second quarter of 2006, after four years of declines.

Retirees Staying Put

While younger adults are leaving the region, retirees are not racing each other to the Sun Belt as they used to.

The segment of people in the region who are older than 75 swelled by 10 percent in five years, and providing appropriate health care, housing and other services for the elderly is a major concern for many families and a growing challenge for the suburbs.

“There will be more people with the chronic diseases of aging,” said Renée Pekmezaris, vice president for community health for the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System. “We need to find better ways to manage this population at home, because that’s where they’re staying.”

The number of regional residents 45 to 60 years old grew 24 percent — to 1.44 million in 2005 from 1.16 million in 2000 — setting off a boom in age-restricted apartments for empty nesters and retirees in New Jersey and Connecticut. Jane O’Connor, a consultant in Hawley, Mass., who specializes in over-55 housing developments, estimated that there are 200 such communities in Connecticut now, up from 50 in 2000.

“That’s a hot part of the housing market, because it doesn’t generate any schoolchildren,” said Dr. Hughes of the public affairs school at Rutgers. Municipalities that once encouraged the development of offices because
they generated commercial property taxes but not pollution are now encouraging the development of older-adult communities.

Ms. O’Connor said that such developments have been far less numerous in New York because the process of obtaining permits is more difficult.

The New Immigrant Wave

The racial and ethnic makeup of the region is changing rapidly, as the white population shrinks and minority groups grow.

Whites still constitute a majority in the suburban region, but the number of white residents dropped to 8.6 million in 2005 from 8.8 million in 2000. The 2005 total amounted to 66 percent of the region’s population, down from 69 percent five years earlier.

Most of the racial and ethnic demographic changes are being driven by recent immigrants.

With large numbers of people arriving from India, China and the Philippines, the Asian-American population has increased 29 percent in five years. And with tens of thousand of new Mexicans and Ecuadoreans, the Hispanic population has grown by 21 percent, according to the census.

The African-American population in the region has also grown, but more modestly, about 6 percent.

The bulk of new immigrants since 2000 have bypassed New York City, where previous immigrant waves entered to gain an economic foothold before dispersing across the region and the country.

“They’re jumping over the urban centers, because there’s work in the suburbs,” said James Claffey, a board member of the Long Island Immigrant Alliance. “It’s simple, really: It’s labor following capital.”

The changes have led to friction in parts of the region.
Several suburban communities have turned to ordinances and enforcement dragnets to try to banish Hispanic day laborers from gathering on street corners in search of jobs. And in Edison, tension between the police and the booming Indian community has set off protests and name-calling.

“Local municipalities are just beginning to grapple with their burgeoning immigrant populations,” said Ryan Lilienthal, the acting director of the New Jersey Immigrant Policy Network, an immigrant advocacy group. “Because they haven’t been at it as long as the city, it’s not always playing out as smoothly.”

The immigrants have also begun to transform the region’s schools, which are adopting new roles in assimilating them. In the process, many schools have had to shift from a historic mission of educating a largely affluent, white, English-speaking population.

Now their responsibility includes many students whose native language is not English and who may also be financially disadvantaged. Helping them achieve the educational standards required of workers in a region that demands higher skills can be demanding.

“A lot of people being educated here cannot participate in this economy,” said Joseph J. McGee of the Fairfield Business Council. “It’s hard to bring middle-income people into these areas, because even at a good salary of $60,000 to $80,000, they can’t afford housing. So the indigenous labor force is your labor pool.”

Dr. Kamer said: “The jobs are there, but there’s a structural mismatch. They don’t have the job skills or the language skills, so there’s the challenge of integrating them into the economic mainstream.”