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RAINBOW ATLANTA: Census shows racial barriers disappearing in city, suburbs

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Once, you could color a map of Atlanta using just two crayons --- pinkish-white for the suburbs, and ebony for the inner city.

But as data from the 2000 census show, Atlantans have done a lot of coloring outside the lines in the last decade. Stand at a school- bus stop, stroll through a department store, or queue up at the post office, and you instantly recognize the rules on race are changing.

Metro Atlantans are much more likely to go home to integrated neighborhoods than they were a decade ago. The numbers are almost eye- popping. During the '90s, metro Atlanta residents living in the most segregated neighborhoods dropped by 39 percent, while those living in the most integrated neighborhoods rose by a stunning 2,500 percent.

Old assumptions about who lives where no longer hold:

The suburbs are no longer "white." In the '90s, blacks, Hispanics and Asians flocked to Gwinnett, Cobb and other suburban counties.

Whites aren't fleeing this change the way they did a generation ago. More of them are staying put --- or even moving back intown, where they're sure to rub shoulders with minorities.

Similar moves toward integration are happening in metro areas across the country, but especially in the fast-growing Sun Belt. The South is actually integrating faster than the North.

"This is a huge change we're in the middle of," said Edward Glaeser, an economist at the Brookings Institution and an expert on long-term housing patterns.

The move toward integration took place against a backdrop of enormous change in Atlanta's racial and ethnic makeup. The 2000 census found, although the area still has a solid white majority, population growth rates for Hispanics, Asians and blacks far

outpaced whites during the '90s.

The Rev. Ron Sailor Jr. doesn't need new census numbers to tell him the social canvas is changing.

"All of the numbers you're seeing on your census figures, we're preaching to them on Sunday morning," said the associate pastor of Gwinnett County's largest predominantly black church, the 2,600-member Christ the King.

Some Hispanics, Asians and blacks have clustered in areas by themselves, but many others spread hither and yon. Even the whitest sections of metro Atlanta --- Buckhead and east Cobb --- grew more diverse in the '90s. The only major exceptions came in two middle-class black areas, in south DeKalb and south Fulton, which actually became more homogeneous during the decade.

Has Atlanta finally grown into its shoes as the city too busy (and sprawling) to hate?

Nancy Gaitan thinks so. The 19-year-old Hispanic helps her parents run their La Elegancia jewelry store in Lawrenceville. She says it's much more "natural" now to see blacks and Hispanics in Gwinnett.

"The suburbs accept us now, whereas they didn't want us years ago," she said. Originally from Costa Rica, she and her family have been in the Atlanta area since 1990, moving to Gwinnett last year.

"It's a nice surprise to see plenty of Hispanic and black faces out in public," she said, "though we do tend to keep among ourselves socially."

Anne Hutchinson, 48, who lives in a gradually integrating Duluth neighborhood, agrees. She says it will take more time for different racial groups to really interact with each other, but the day is coming.

"Old patterns and habits take time to die," she said, "but I think this progression is inevitable, and I think it's a good thing."

White flight slows

One of those old habits was commonly known as "white flight." Like their counterparts in many other cities, white Atlantans in the '70s abandoned older neighborhoods in droves, fearing that black neighbors would "drive down property values." Demographers cite a "tipping point" --- about 20 percent minority --- when whites typically bail out of a community.

"At that point, a lot of whites will not move into a neighborhood or they will try to sell," said Charles Gallagher, an assistant professor of sociology at Georgia State University. "In some ways, it's a constant kind of housing dance that whites do, depending on who their neighbors are."

But the new census numbers show such a striking increase in integration that they put that notion in question.

Hutchinson grew up in an all-white suburban enclave of Birmingham before moving to Atlanta in her mid-20s. She says her parents never would have considered living in an integrated neighborhood in the 1960s. They worried too much about "declining property values," a phrase she acknowledges could be a cover for racism.

"Some white people still worry about that," she said. "But it impresses me how much Atlanta and the South have changed since I've been here. I think we're a little more rational in confronting those old fears now."

And with more whites willing to keep their homes, property values don't fall just because neighborhoods become more diverse.

"I don't see that prices have increased or decreased due to minority influx," said Karen Love, a white real estate agent based in Duluth. "I feel that the appreciation rate across the metro Atlanta area suburbs is very similar."

Here Comes the Sun(Belt)

Decatur commercial photographer J.D. Scott, who is accustomed to being in public with his white girlfriend, recently took a business trip to Detroit. He noticed a difference almost immediately. Sitting in a restaurant with a white female colleague, he said he kept getting odd looks from the waiter.

"It could have been nothing, but I did notice a strange vibe," Scott said. "It made me realize how I don't get those kinds of looks much anymore in Atlanta."

Scott was on to something.

Integration increased across most of the United States in the '90s. Out of 291 metropolitan areas analyzed in a recent Brookings Institution study, all but 19 are more integrated now than they were in 1990. But the change was especially prevalent in the fast-growing South and West, with their acres of freshly minted neighborhoods. Integration was lower in Rust Belt cities, where there's been less recent growth to shake up old living patterns.

According to Brookings, Detroit was the most segregated major metro area in 2000, followed by Milwaukee. San Jose and Phoenix were the least segregated.

"It does not mean the ghettos are disappearing," said economist Glaeser, "but if you stay focused on the Detroits and the Chicagos, you will miss the important shifts occurring across the Sun Belt."

Metro Atlanta was the 12th-most integrated among the 25 largest metro areas nationwide. "Atlanta is so young compared to places like Chicago, with its older, entrenched neighborhoods," said University of Georgia demographer Doug Bachtel.

"We have this new housing and jobs, and a New South image as a place too busy to hate. That attracts middle-class families of all races."

Because Sun Belt cities are changing, they quickly reflect Americans' evolving attitudes on race, according to demographers and sociologists. So, as whites have grown more comfortable with minority neighbors, integration has proceeded relatively quickly in the South.

According to the massive General Social Survey compiled by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, when U.S. whites were asked in 1990 if they would object to living in a half black neighborhood, 47 percent of respondents said yes. By 2000, that share had dropped to 32 percent. Whites indicated even more acceptance for Hispanic and Asian neighbors

City and suburb

Another factor affecting Atlanta's integration is an internal population upheaval. Many blacks and whites have traded places.

Thousands of whites have abandoned the suburbs for intown housing --- or moved intown from another city --- seeking to escape traffic- clogged expressways and ever-lengthening commutes. In the process, they have driven real estate prices sky high in what used to be working-class, black neighborhoods.

"For a lot of middle-class blacks, especially those coming right out of college, the intown neighborhoods are prohibitively expensive," said Gallagher of Georgia State. "This displacement pushes first-time homebuyers into the suburbs, where housing is cheaper."

That's why Johnny Blake, 37, who is black, took his family to Lawrenceville. He was part of a trend in Gwinnett: The county went from 5.2 percent black in 1990 to 13.3 percent in 2000.

"The reason I moved here, for one, was the amount of house I could get for my money," Blake said. "The next reason, I was in the process of getting married and we were preparing for children, and I understood it had quite a good school system."

Initially, Blake said, he felt a bit uncomfortable. "When you move to a predominantly white area, you get this type of feeling like people are watching you --- not like a rudeness, but like, 'Who is this person and what is he doing here?'"

In Blake's subdivision of close to 50 homes, only two other black families lived there when he moved in five years ago. Over time, though, his discomfort eased, and then more minorities joined him in the area.

"Now you probably have about 40 percent who are minorities --- black, Hispanics, some from India, Asian." Still, Blake said, he's not aware of any white neighbors moving to avoid the growing diversity.

True integration?

Researchers will continue to debate whether real integration is occurring or just a form of racial balkanization. Clark Atlanta University sociologist Robert Bullard says that in many cases, blacks and whites may be living in the same census tracts, but they still live apart.

For example, minorities in south Cobb still live in separate neighborhoods, he argues. "They've just resegregated in sections that used to be white."

But the numbers show that, while people of different races may not always live next door to each other, they live much closer than they used to, close enough to shop at the same stores and attend the same schools. The change is most striking in the suburbs, especially in Gwinnett. In 1990 in Gwinnett, 73 percent of residents lived in the most segregated census tracts. By 2000, the percentage had plummeted to 17 percent.

Doreen Arnett, who is white, moved with her husband to Gwinnett a few months ago from Florida. She says the clientele at the upscale Lealand Place apartments, where she is property manager, is definitely diverse, as is her neighborhood. And the whites aren't pulling up stakes.

"I really don't care what race my neighbors are," Arnett said. "Frankly, I think white people worry more about traffic in this city than about having blacks and Hispanics as neighbors. . . .

"It's a different world now."

Did your county become more integrated in the '90s? Find out on: ajc.com

Photo Sunlight streams through the multicolored skylights at the Lindbergh Center MARTA station last week, casting a rainbow of color on people awaiting trains. The most integrated census tract in 2000 was around the station in Buckhead. / JOEY IVANSCO / Staff Map BECOMING MORE DIVERSE Increasing integration during the '90s was most dramatic in Gwinnett County, but the trend was seen throughout most of metro Atlanta as well. Map uses a Diversity Index of Little, Moderate, Considerable or Much in comparing Gwinnett 1990 and Gwinnett 2000. Note: The index is based on the odds that two randomly chosen people will be of a different race. Sources: USA Today; analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by MAURICE TAMMAN / Staff / CHUCK BLEVINS / Staff Photo At the Wal-Mart on Pleasant Hill Road in Duluth, Dorothy Enyenihi (left) of Nigeria waits at the checkout counter with 1 1/2-year-old Haley and 3 year-old Eric Morabito of Lawrenceville. The store's staff is integrated, with a spectrum of races represented. / JOEY IVANSCO / Staff Map INTEGRATING METRO ATLANTA Metro Atlanta neighborhoods grew substantially more integrated in the 1990s. The change was particularly pronounced in the suburbs, but was obvious throughout almost the entire area. Only in the prosperous, predominantly black neighborhoods of southeast Dekalb and southwest Atlanta/Fulton did diversity decrease. ABOUT THE INDEX The USA Today Diversity Index calculates the odds, from 0 to 100 percent, that two randomly chosen people will be of

a different race or ethnic background. The index does not measure the minority population. For example, a tract that is almost all white could have an equally low diversity index as a tract that is almost all black. The closer to 100 percent, the more diverse the tract. Each category is an equal range of 25 percent --- "little" indicates a percent range between 0 and 25, "moderate" indicates a range between 25 percent and 50 percent, and so on. Maps show changes in racial diversity in the metro Atlanta area between 1990 and 2000. METRO ATLANTA Percentage of geographic and racial groups living at various levels of diversity:

GEOGRAPHY.....
RACE Inside.... Outside.....| Perimeter..Perimeter.. Overall..|
White..Black..Asian..Hispanic| 1990.....| Little /
50% / 60%..... 57%.....|.63%....45%....35%.... 37% Moderate / 39% / 31%....
33%....|.30%....39%....42%.... 37% Considerable / 10% / 9%..10%....|..
7%....16%....21%.... 20% Much / 1% / 0%.....0%....|. 0%.... 0%.... 2%.....5%
.....| 2000.....| Little / 40% / 32%.....
33%....|.34%....36%....11%.... 10% Moderate / 29% / 39%....
37%....|.42%....29%....37%.... 23% Considerable / 23% / 24%
23%....|.19%....29%....36%.... 34% Much / 8% / 6%.....7%....|. 5%.... 6%....16%....
33%| Source: Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by MAURICE
TAMMAN / Staff Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.
/ CHUCK BLEVINS / Staff



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