

County race barriers fade

By Mark Houser
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

After decades of entrenched racial segregation, Allegheny County neighborhoods made greater strides toward integration in the past decade than ever before, a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review analysis shows.

The county's suburban black population grew more in the past 10 years than in any previous decade. At the same time, persistent color barriers in the city of Pittsburgh continued to crumble.

But figures from the 2000 U.S. census also hint that the trend of "white flight" from increasingly black areas could be spreading.

CITY, EASTERN SUBURBS MOST INTEGRATED

More blacks than ever now live in Pittsburgh's suburbs, the latest census figures show.

The 129 municipalities outside Pittsburgh had 68,000 black residents last year, 14,000 more than in 1990. That decade-long suburban influx was the largest for blacks in the county's history.

Although its population of both whites and blacks fell, Pittsburgh saw the most pronounced erosion of black-white boundaries in decades.

Some city neighborhoods - including Squirrel Hill, Shadyside, Carrick and Overbrook - continue to be predominantly white.

But compared with 40 years ago, when only four city wards were more than one-quarter black, much of the city has become racially integrated.

"If every city in America had a decline (in segregation) in the last decade, then I'd feel that we were on our way to some solution of this question," said John Logan, director of the Louis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the State University of New York at Albany.

The center is studying national trends in residential segregation revealed by the latest census data.

"Pittsburgh, I think, can be proud," Logan said.

Sociologists measure segregation with a tool called the dissimilarity index. It shows how closely the racial balance of a large area is mirrored in each neighborhood within it.

An index of 0 indicates full integration - blacks and whites living in the same proportion in every neighborhood. A 100 means total segregation - strictly black-only and white-only neighborhoods.



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Segregation indexes for most metropolitan areas in the Northern United States have hovered in the 70s and 80s for decades, with little change. Indexes in more integrated Southern and Western areas rarely dip below 50.

After holding at the mid- to high 70s for three decades, the index for Pittsburgh fell sharply from 1990 to 2000, dropping from 74 to 67, according to a Trib analysis of census data.

The index for the entire county also declined, from 74 to 69.

But those numbers, while encouraging to advocates of desegregation, don't tell the whole story. For one thing, the move to the suburbs by blacks is chiefly in one direction: east.

Four eastern municipalities - Penn Hills, Wilkinsburg, Swissvale and North Braddock - accounted for half of the increase in the suburban black population over the past decade.

Meanwhile, most neighborhoods in the northern and southern suburbs remain overwhelmingly white.

Blacks make up 12 percent of Allegheny County's population. But in a third of the county's municipalities, they make up fewer than 1 percent of residents.

CITY HAS HISTORY OF DIVERSITY

Most blacks in Pittsburgh lived side by side with whites as the 20th century began.

As late as 1930, when the Hill District had emerged as a thriving black cultural district rivaling New York's Harlem, the average black Pittsburgher still lived in a ward that was nearly three-quarters white, according to census research by sociologist Stanley Lieberson at Harvard University.

Sterling Smith, 61, a retired Westinghouse technician and lifelong Hill District resident, remembers boyhood schoolmates and neighbor children who were Italian, Jewish and a mix of other ethnic groups.

"Everybody played together," Smith said.

But as white city residents began moving to bigger, newer homes in the suburbs, blacks found the same options closed to them.

Until the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, it was legal to refuse to sell houses to black families or deny them mortgages simply because of race.

Legalized prejudice - along with rising ethnic intimidation after a wave of lynch mobs swept Northern cities in the 1920s - drove blacks in Pittsburgh and other cities into predominantly black neighborhoods. After the Great Depression, these ghettos suffered from concentrated poverty, chronic neglect and rising crime.

As the segregated city ghettos filled up, some blacks were granted entry into selected suburbs. Those, in turn, were quickly deserted by their former white residents, who were either uncomfortable with their new neighbors or worried about falling real estate values.

"White flight" transformed Wilkinsburg.

The borough was 97 percent white in 1960. But as blacks began moving in during the 1960s and '70s, whites left in droves.

From 1990 to 2000, the white population dropped by nearly half, dwindling by nearly 4,000. Wilkinsburg, which saw its black population increase by 1,692 over the past

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decade, is now two-thirds black.

Neighboring Penn Hills is following a similar pattern. The black population there grew by more than 3,400 because of new residents and births. Simultaneously, the number of whites dropped by 9,000 from deaths and departures.

The municipality is now 25 percent black, up from 15 percent black 10 years ago.

AFFORDABLE HOMES DRAW RESIDENTS

Six years ago, welder Alonzo Johnson, his wife and two children moved to Penn Hills from Homestead.

The color of his neighbors' skin didn't matter, said Johnson, 46, who is black.

"I was just looking for the best buy." Race, he said, "never entered into it."

"A lot of black people are getting good jobs so they can afford houses like these," said Johnson, whose large three-bedroom home sits on a corner lot.

As more blacks call Penn Hills home, the community becomes increasingly attractive to those looking to move.

Frances Redman, 52, bought a house on Frankstown Road in Penn Hills in 1994. She said she was attracted by the relatively high level of racial integration.

"Once you find one or two blacks start landing in a nice place to live, then all the blacks want to move there," Redman said.

Fred Solomon, 35, choose Penn Hills a year and a half ago, lured from Bloomfield in part by the relatively low prices of the attractive suburban homes.

Solomon, who is white, said he thinks that is at least partly a result of white unease about the neighborhood.

"I think there are a lot of people who aren't as comfortable as they could be with the way the racial makeup of the community is going," he said. "I think that's too bad that they feel that way."

Even if white residents don't leave en masse, a neighborhood's racial balance can change dramatically if new white families don't want to buy homes there, said sociologist Douglas Massey. He co-wrote "American Apartheid," a 1993 book about residential segregation.

"What really is happening in these places is white avoidance and black attraction. It may reflect just the desires of home seekers, but evidence strongly suggests that it's also affected by real estate practices," said Massey, chairman of the sociology department at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

"Steering" - guiding black home buyers to integrated neighborhoods and white homebuyers to predominantly white areas - persists in the real estate industry, Massey said.

"You can't do it without breaking the law," he said, "but that doesn't mean you can't do it."

Because blacks have higher rates of unemployment than whites, predominantly black neighborhoods typically suffer from more concentrated poverty.

"First and foremost, the effect of racial segregation is that it is also economic segregation, and that has a major adverse effect upon educating the next generation of the labor force,"

said David Rusk, an urban planning consultant and former Albuquerque mayor. He serves as an adviser to the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh.

Rusk and Massey both support more government involvement and tougher enforcement of fair-housing laws to eliminate vestiges of "steering" and promote more neighborhood diversity.

Rusk pointed to Montgomery County, Md., where 15 percent of the units in every new housing development must be priced for low-income tenants or homeowners.

Allegheny County Executive Jim Roddey said he would be willing to look at such a plan, although he is wary of interfering with the private sector.

WILKINSBURG PLANS FOR REVITALIZATION

Roddey said he would like to use the county's influence and resources to help revitalize part of a predominantly black suburb such as Wilkinsburg, hoping to attract professional whites and blacks alike.

Wilkinsburg Mayor Wilbert Young said that plan is already on the drawing board.

Young previously headed the Hill Community Development Corp., a nonprofit partner in the Crawford Square development in the lower Hill District. The new upscale apartments and homes next to the Mellon Arena have brought white residents back into what had been an all-black neighborhood.

Now Young wants to do the same for Wilkinsburg in a neighborhood called Hunter Park. The borough already has secured \$525,000 from the Sanders Task Force and is seeking additional state and county money. The Sanders Task Force was created as the result of a federal consent decree that required desegregation in some Allegheny County neighborhoods.

"Sometimes when you do inner-city planning, you really have to create a whole new neighborhood because you have to change the perception of that neighborhood," Young said.

Mark Houser can be reached at mhouser@tribweb.com or (412) 320-7995.

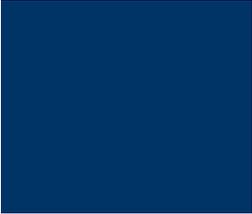
Measuring segregation

To quantify residential segregation over the past 40 years, the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review used an established sociological measure called the dissimilarity index.

The index shows how much of an area's minority population would have to move to another neighborhood to make the racial makeup of each neighborhood identical to that of the whole area.

For example, blacks make up 27 percent of Pittsburgh's population. An index of 0 for Pittsburgh would mean every neighborhood was also 27 percent black, while 100 would mean blacks lived strictly in black-only neighborhoods. In 2000, Pittsburgh's dissimilarity index was 67, the lowest in at least 40 years.

The neighborhoods used in the Trib's analysis are census tracts, which average about 3,000 residents each.



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