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**STATE**

## Buffalo Niagara minorities fall further behind in economic race

By JAY REY  
News Staff Reporter  
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Local minorities are moving up the economic ladder, but they still have many rungs to climb to catch up with whites.

Median household income for local minorities inched up during the 1990s, but it's still only half of what it is in white households around the region, recently released census data shows.

And while the number of African-Americans and Hispanics living in poverty dropped slightly over the past decade, the poverty rate in the metro region is at least four times higher in minority communities.

What's worse, minority incomes here aren't keeping pace with those of minorities across the state, the new data shows.

In other words: new figures, same story.

"If anything," said Lumon Ross, president of the Black Chamber of Commerce of Western New York, "things appear to be stepping backward."

These economic indicators - which come from Census 2000 data released by the U.S. Census Bureau last week for five states, including New York - show the 1990s have done little if anything to help close the gap between most whites and minorities throughout Erie and Niagara counties.

Median income in white households was \$41,744 across Buffalo Niagara in 1999. Compare that with \$20,676 for African-Americans and \$21,727 for Hispanics.

Or look at it this way: 41 percent of the region's white households have incomes of more than \$50,000, compared with 22 percent of Hispanic homes and 18 percent of black households.

"The disparities are quite sharp," said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research in Albany. "And it really hasn't changed much over the past 10 years."

### Inequity a national problem

The inequities are by no means unique to this region and have been a long-standing problem throughout the country.

As a whole, New York State has higher median household incomes than Buffalo Niagara, but the racial disparities still persist throughout.



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John Logan, urban researcher



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The problem, however, seems to be more dramatic in Buffalo Niagara's sluggish economy: Median income for African-American households across the state is \$31,364, nearly \$11,000 more than black households in this region.

Joining Buffalo are some other troubled upstate areas. Among the state's lowest median household incomes for minorities are the metro areas of Binghamton, where the median household income for African-Americans is \$21,274, and Syracuse, where it's \$20,681.

"Minorities haven't had much of an opportunity to catch up with their white peers," Logan said. "And Buffalo's less buoyant economy really has created less opportunity to make up that difference over time."

In tough economic times, minorities are hit the hardest, said Robert Mootry Jr., president of the Buffalo Chapter of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

"This is no secret. There's been a gap for a long time," Mootry said. "Minorities have decided to look elsewhere for better-paying jobs, particularly down South, because the job opportunities just aren't available."

The median household income represents the point at which half the incomes are above and half the incomes are below.

Median income in white households across Buffalo Niagara was \$41,744 in 1999, up more than \$2,500 over 10 years, after adjusting for inflation. In comparison, median incomes in local African-American households rose \$2,551 to \$20,676, and \$1,704 to \$21,727 in Hispanic households.

Going hand in hand with income inequities are higher poverty rates for minorities, though there was a slight drop in those rates during the 1990s, the census figures show.

More than 34 percent of the city's African-American population was considered poor in 1999, a decrease from more than 38 percent in 1990. Likewise, 45 percent of Buffalo's Hispanic population was living in poverty, a decrease from 52 percent 10 years ago. Poverty for whites in the city stayed relatively flat at about 18 percent.

## Explaining the disparities

Economists and sociologists point to a number of factors that come into play when trying to explain such income disparities. For example, household composition - the number of wage-earners in the home - plays a role.

But the income differences are typical in Northeastern regions, where there has been a history of segregation, educational inequities and fewer job options available in recent years, said Logan, who analyzed the new data for the five states.

Access to education is one of the largest obstacles to closing that gap, said Maria Whyte, executive director of the Coalition for Economic Justice. And a welfare reform program, which has a work-first approach without an educational component, isn't helping.

"Getting an education has shown over and over and over again (to be) the way to get people out of poverty," Whyte said. "Until we make education a priority - and equal access to education a priority - then this is not going to be a surprising statistic, and we're going to see the same trend in the 2010 census."

That's one of the biggest issues for Hispanics as well, said Adrian Rodriguez, president of the Hispanic Coalition of Western New York. While he sees a younger generation of Hispanics choosing to further their education, the community has to continue to reinforce that educational message.

"I'm not going to blame the system," said Rodriguez. "We need to learn how to take advantage of the opportunities available. If we don't, then we'll never close that gap."

## Racism remains a factor

And while people don't like to hear it, institutional racism is still a factor creating these disparities, said Ross, of the Black Chamber of Commerce.

Qualified minorities are still getting passed up for promotions, he said. There are still few minorities in government inner circles and leadership positions to help turn this problem

around, Ross said.

Mootry's coalition is trying to bolster historically low numbers of minorities involved in the construction trades to open that door for better-paying jobs and opportunities.

"Those are some of the areas we're trying to address in the minority community to level the playing field," he said. "It's a long struggle, but I think the groundwork is being laid."

*News researcher Andy Bailey contributed to this report.*

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