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Deepening Divides

Economic gap between LI classes, races grew, census shows

By Erin Teixeira
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In the 1990s, Long Islanders generally moved up in the world. No matter their racial or economic background, the average person earned more money, was more educated and was more likely to own a home.

Even so, gaps between rich and poor and between minorities and whites persisted - and grew - according to new census figures. The data show that more people were in the work force but more also were living in poverty, with many workers not earning enough to make ends meet.

And, even if they earn generous incomes, minorities are more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where poverty is higher than average and education and income are lower, the data show. Experts said the widening gaps in neighborhood inequality are complicated to explain, but they are partly the result of high housing costs and discrimination that keep many minorities out of more affluent neighborhoods.

In predicting patterns of inequality, "the effect of race is actually greater than the effect of class, which is quite extraordinary," said John Logan, director of the Mumford Center, an urban research center that analyzed the census data. "You might assume that affluent blacks should be catching up, but the gap that affluent blacks and poor blacks face [with whites] is about the same."

In November, Marie and Irving Hodge and their four children left Oceanside for Pennsylvania in search of less expensive housing and landlords more receptive to blacks. When the Hempstead natives returned to Nassau in July, they were unable to afford the Island's higher-than-ever rents.

"Things are getting worse," homemaker Marie Hodge, 36, told Connie Lassandro, who administers Nassau's Section 8 low-income housing program. "I just need to get stable again."

After living in a motel about a month, Marie Hodge and Irving Hodge, 37, an auto detailer, found an \$1,800-a-month, three-bedroom house in Elmont-an area with lower rents, more racial minorities and poorer residents than the average Long Island neighborhood.

The Hodges reflect a regional trend: Long Island's lack of affordable housing is partly to blame as many full-time workers, made to pay high rents, stay poor. Nearly one in three Island residents spend more than one-third of their household income on rent, 2000 census figures show.

On Long Island, African-Americans, Asians and Latinos - regardless of education levels or income - live in neighborhoods where, compared with whites' neighborhoods, more people are unemployed or living in poverty, and where fewer people own homes.

In Amityville, for example, the average per capita income in African-Americans' and Latinos' neighborhoods - \$16,000 and \$15,800, respectively - was less than half the \$29,000 earned in whites' neighborhoods. "It's always been hard, but it seems like it's gotten worse," said Donnell Lewis, 42, an African-American maintenance worker in Amityville.

In North Amityville, the Rev. Eugene H. Purvis of Shaw Temple AME Zion church said he is "shocked" at the number of members who request help. "So many families are really in need," he said.

In 1990, Latinos lived in neighborhoods where the median household income lagged behind those in white neighborhoods by about \$8,800. In 2000, that number had jumped to \$11,500.

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That gap has grown, experts said, in part because Long Island's newest Latino residents often arrive with little education or English language skills, and many work low-paying jobs. Many immigrants from Central America "are underpaid, with no union protection, [often in] very difficult living circumstances," said Michael Zweig, an economics professor at SUNY Stony Brook who studies working-class Americans.

The study also shows that blacks tend to cluster in relatively few neighborhoods. Many blacks acknowledge they choose to live separately because they want black neighbors and playmates for their children. But blacks often aren't welcome in some neighborhoods, even if they can afford higher prices, due to racial prejudice and historical patterns, said experts and some African-American residents. Similar though less entrenched patterns hold for Latinos, the experts added.

Long Island Housing Services, a nonprofit agency, receives about 150 complaints a year about housing discrimination, most racially motivated, said executive director Michelle Santantonio.

As a result, Logan said, affluent Latinos and African-Americans often contend with a diminished quality of life, including higher crime and flat or shrinking property values, even if they are highly educated.

Other results from the Mumford analysis included:

Although the percentage of whites with college education grew by 5.6 percent between 1990 and 2000, the number for blacks grew by only 2.2 percent and for Latinos by 2.8 percent.

The education levels, professional status and income in the average Asian American's neighborhood were the highest of any group. In 2000, the median household income in their neighborhoods was \$76,857.

Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, whites and blacks lived in the most segregated neighborhoods on Long Island: On average, whites lived in neighborhoods where about 83 percent of other residents also were white. About 40 percent of blacks' neighbors were black.

One of the few patterns that cut across all lines of race and class was growing poverty and the small but steady shrinking of the middle class. In 1990, about 27 percent of African American households were middle income, earning between \$22,500 and \$45,000. By 2000, the middle income group had dropped to 24 percent.

The patterns, which mirror the nation as a whole, are the result of decades-old federal policies that made it easier for companies to freeze wages, said Zweig, author of "The Working Class Majority."

"You see it in ... people's real pay - it doesn't go up as fast as prices go up," he said. "You see it in people working longer hours and more people working in a family than used to."

Racial Equality? Racial Equality?

A look at key social and economic indicators to measure racial differences in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Households have been classified by race/ethnicity of the household head.

White Black Hispanic Asian

Non-Hispanic Non-Hispanic

1990 2000 1990 2000 1990 2000 1990 2000

Median

Household \$70,677 72,861 \$56,646 67,162 \$61,846 61,317 \$75,591 76,857

Income

Percent

Below

Poverty 3.8% 4.8% 9.5% 10.9% 6.3% 8.5% 4% 5%

Level

Percent

Foreign 9.7% 12.3% 16.6% 25.5% 14.4% 21.2% 13.4% 17.7%

Born

SOURCE: Census 2000 / Mumford Center

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