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Front Page News

Minority income gap narrowing, census shows

But there's still a long way to go in N.O. area to reach white levels

09/24/02

By Coleman Warner and Matt Scallan

Staff writers/The Times-Picayune

Households of all major racial and ethnic classes in the New Orleans area enjoyed economic growth during the 1990s as Louisiana recovered from the oil-bust years, with African-Americans and Asians trimming the earnings gap between themselves and white residents, U.S. Census figures released today show.

But the median income for white households remains nearly twice that of black households in the New Orleans area, according to results of the long-form survey given to one in every six homes in early 2000.

The 1999 median income for black households, \$23,127, was 53 percent of the median income for white households, which stood at \$43,717. That percentage is better than the 46 percent a decade earlier, data from 1990 and 2000 census reports show. The median is the point at which half the people earn more and half earn less.

"It's positive when you're talking about closing things up, but it's still weak," said George Neely, chairman of Xavier University's department of business. "It's tied to the types of jobs (many black) people are in. Folks are in service jobs that are paying barely minimum wage, and they're probably having to put together two or three of those jobs to make ends meet, and they don't have any benefits."

Income levels

Median income in 1999 for Asian households was \$36,333, or 83 percent of the white median income, up from 77 percent in 1989, census figures show.

Hispanics, who can be of any race under the Census Bureau's decennial count, may have lost ground in closing the income gap with non-Hispanic white people. Their \$33,806 median household income in 1999 was 77 percent of the white median income, down from 78 percent in 1990.

National comparisons from the 2000 census aren't yet available, but John Logan, a sociologist for the State University of New York at Albany who is analyzing data from metropolitan areas, said a narrowing of white and minority income levels is happening in much of the country. Even considering the

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NOLA.com: Minority income gap narrowing, census shows

7-percentage-point gain made in the '90s -- along with a 5-percentage-point gain in the 1980s -- the gap between white and black earnings in the New Orleans area remains striking, he said.

"It's clear it would take a very long time at this rate for blacks to catch up with the white level," he said.

New data from the 2000 census in Louisiana offer details on median income, poverty rates, educational attainment, employment and other subjects, sorted by racial group and at small geographic levels -- down to clusters of city blocks.

Positive movement

In the New Orleans area, as well as across Louisiana, positive trends were evident, with African-American, Asian, Hispanic and non-Hispanic white incomes rising at rates that topped inflation.

Economic diversification, with growth in tourism and medical sectors, is cited by experts among influences in swelling paychecks.

Many workers, meanwhile, are seeking training for new careers, contributing to large enrollment increases recently at local community colleges.

After taking a federal inflation rate into account, the median income for black households in the New Orleans area rose 28 percent from 1990 to 2000, followed by 20 percent for Asians, 11 percent for non-Hispanic whites and 10 percent for Hispanics, data show.

Comparisons between 1990 and 2000 census reports are flawed slightly because the Census Bureau in 2000 added two parishes -- St. James and Plaquemines -- to its definition of the New Orleans metro area. Other parishes in the region are Orleans, Jefferson, St. Tammany, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist and St. Bernard. Also, starting in 2000, residents could report multiple-race ancestry, although those classifying themselves so barely exceeded 1 percent locally.

Trends in the region

While they make up just 2 percent of the metro region's population, Asians, especially Vietnamese, have made waves in the economy, moving steadily from the ranks of laborers and employees to that of small-business owners.

During the '90s, more Asians opened or took over nail salons, groceries, gas stations and shrimp fishing ventures, and a steady number now are securing college training to become pharmacists or business executives, said Sandy Nguyen, program coordinator for Vietnamese Initiative in Economic Training, a nonprofit that organizes business workshops. The pooling of money to launch businesses is customary, she said.

"The thing about Vietnamese, the Asian folks, friends will help friends and family will help family," Nguyen said.

"We're a very hard-working and determined people," she said. "We can buy a business and work hard at it, very focused, and make it go up."

People citing Hispanic ancestry, 4 percent of the metro population in the 2000 census, are found among builders, bank officers and doctors. But new immigrants from Central America and Mexico fill low-paying, entry-level jobs, thereby holding down income increases for the Latino community overall, said Romi Gonzalez, a lawyer and Hispanic Chamber of Commerce member.

There is deep concern that faster-growing Hispanic enclaves in Florida and Texas are more vibrant, and that the loss of Latin American direct-flight airline links fits a pattern of weakening business prospects, Gonzalez said.

"Everybody is seeing friends and relatives moving out of New Orleans to be able to compete in markets that are international. I know I've lost clients that have moved to Miami or Houston," he said. "Everybody is living and surviving, but nobody is saying, 'Let's all get into this because it's really hot.'"

African-Americans around New Orleans, who represent 38 percent of the metro-area population, have more to be upset about than just their standing relative to white incomes, said Logan, the New York researcher.

The numbers show that affluent African-American families are less likely than

other racial and ethnic groups to move to neighborhoods where the median income is close to their own, Logan said.

"Even when they have the same income (as white families), they live in much worse neighborhoods, with fewer resources," probably facing a higher neighborhood crime rate and public schools of lesser quality, he said.

Logan sees housing discrimination as the culprit.

Xavier's Neely said that while some forms of housing discrimination, in loan practices or sales tactics, may indeed be at work, many black families may opt to live in a mixed-income setting because it is more heavily black.

Neely sees disparities in the education levels of white and black New Orleanians as a leading reason for the concentration of African-American workers in lower-paying service jobs. But he also is hopeful about the future because more black young people are enrolling in college and taking jobs in sales, education, business and health care.

"We've got to paint a picture of optimism for our kids, let them know they can be a part of closing that gap," Neely said. "If we don't, we're in big trouble."

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