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# The Cost of Segregation || Part III: Where We're Headed

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W.A. Harewood / The Associated Press

Richard Thompsen, far left, Chris Wagenseil, Tracey Wadley and Kurt Knutzon talk during lunch in midtown Atlanta. Whites are returning to the city and blacks are moving into the suburbs, improving Atlanta's level of integration.

### Lessons From Elsewhere

## Atlanta: Black-white gap shrinks

Region's rapid growth, robust economy spark improvement in racial mix

By Ron French / The Detroit News

ATLANTA -- There is a loud metal click, and the large, black gates that lead into Highland City View Townhomes swing open. Andrew Barber waits inside with a brochure, a smile and a quick description of the condominiums' security system.

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Orstein

The fence is important to the white suburbanites looking to move back into Atlanta.

"The city fought us on the gates," said real estate agent Barber. "They said it looks like you're cutting yourself off from the diverse community we're promoting. (But) the first question people ask is, 'How's the community? What's the security?'"

Whites are returning to Atlanta one gated community

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[writes are returning to Atlanta and gated community](#)  
 at a time, while blacks are moving to \$300,000 homes in majority-black enclaves in the suburbs. It is a slow, fitful step forward for a city that, not so long ago, had a reputation for racial intolerance.

The heart of the old South may be the prototype for the new integration: Blacks and whites still often do not live next to each other, but the distance between them is shrinking dramatically. Groups once separated by city limit signs now are divided by cul-de-sacs.

Detroit and Atlanta are similar in size and racial makeup. Both have majority-black central cities, majority-white suburbs created by white flight, and sad histories of race relations. Yet Atlanta is only moderately segregated today, while Detroit is the most segregated area in America.

### Fast growth helps

The progress made by the Georgia city in the 1990s is one of the success stories of integration today.

\* The number of blacks in Atlanta's suburbs doubled in the decade, according to the 2000 census, as city residents moved to the counties bordering the city. The racial mix in the suburbs is now similar to that of the metro area. By comparison, the number of blacks in Detroit's suburbs would have to quadruple to equal the racial mix for the metro area.

\* The white population in the city of Atlanta increased by almost 10 percent, as suburban residents moved into new housing complexes and gentrified older neighborhoods. In Detroit, half of the city's remaining whites, not including Hispanics, fled during the '90s.

\* The number of Metro Atlanta residents living in the most integrated neighborhoods rose a whopping 2,500 percent, according to The Atlanta Journal and Constitution. By comparison, seven out of 10 Metro Detroiters continue to live in highly segregated neighborhoods.

"It's changed. We can buy homes where we want," said Veronica Calloway, a black former Atlanta resident who moved recently to suburban Dekalb County. Her subdivision is majority black, abutting other subdivisions that are majority white.

"Most subdivisions are white or black, but I don't see it as a racial thing," Calloway said. "The South has changed."

That change has been sparked by the region's growth, as well as a concerted effort by government and business leaders.

The population of the Atlanta metro area jumped 38 percent in 10 years -- the equivalent of moving the city of San Antonio to Georgia. Fast-growing cities are almost always less-segregated -- new residents are less likely to know, or care, about traditional housing patterns, said David Rusk, a nationally known city planner and former mayor of Albuquerque, N.M.

### Close, but still apart

Meanwhile, life was changing for longtime residents. The sudden growth overloaded the region's freeway system, and the average commute time exploded to the longest in the nation. Realtors began advertising homes in Atlanta by promoting how much drive-time they could save. Highland, located on the edge of downtown, pitched its condominiums with the slogan: "Sleep late every day and have (the

condominiums with the slogan: "Sleep late every day and have (the equivalent of) another two weeks of vacation."

That condominium complex is in a neighborhood that 10 years ago was impoverished but today is dotted with sprawling, gated communities. The 107-unit Highland condominiums opened 18 months ago on the site of a dilapidated tire store noted for its billboard, "Don't cuss, call us."

It's undeniable that whites are moving back, but equally undeniable that they are keeping their distance from blacks. The new homes built near downtown are being purchased overwhelmingly by whites, as are refurbished Victorians in previously all-black neighborhoods.

Matt Orstein has renovated 45 homes in the rapidly gentrifying Kirkwood neighborhood of Atlanta. He bought each of the 45 homes from black owners, and sold each of the spiffed-up versions to white owners.

Meanwhile, buoyed by the region's robust economy, blacks are moving to the suburbs at a record pace, primarily to their own subdivisions.

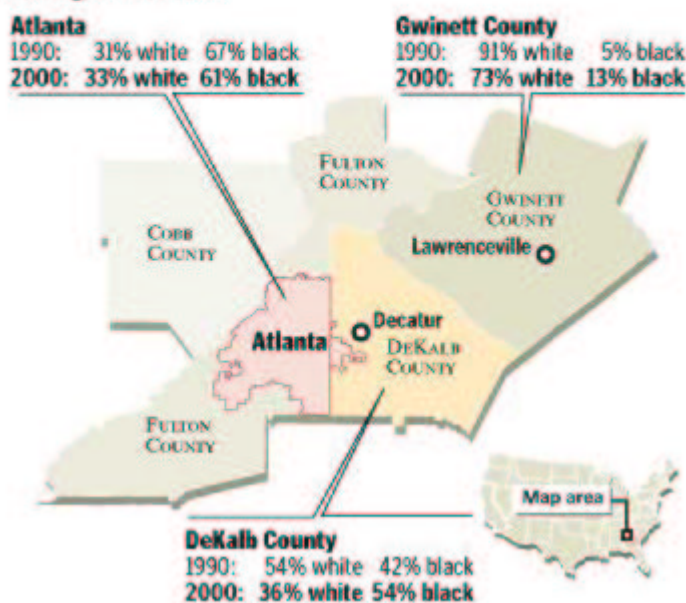
"Upper-income blacks want to associate more with their own people because they feel more comfortable," said William Boone, political science professor at Clark Atlanta University. "We may be rethinking this whole question of who wants integration and why."

Still, "the suburbanization of the black population is really quite dramatic," said Thomas Weyandt Jr., director of comprehensive planning for the Atlanta Regional Commission. "And we're not even close to seeing the full consequences of that."

Blacks and whites still in many cases live on separate blocks or subdivisions. Yet the proximity to each other is denting Atlanta's historically rigid segregated housing. That proximity is likely to increase as blacks and whites more often work, shop and go to school together.

### Change in the New South

Metropolitan Atlanta's racial makeup is similar to Metro Detroit, but whites are moving to the city and blacks to the suburbs in much higher numbers.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

The Detroit News

### 'Too busy to hate'

Mindful of the negative image that segregation could have on the region, the city decades ago began billing itself as "the city too busy to hate."

"Atlanta's business sector wanted to promote an image of a city being in harmony," Boone said.

"There's not a silver bullet out there. (But) we've done a lot of things to present our diversity as a strength, not a weakness," said Mike Dobbins, commissioner of planning and community preservation with the city of Atlanta. "Today, segregation is not perceived as nearly as big of a problem as affordability of housing."

Efforts include:

- \* Millions of dollars were poured into the downtown area to spiff up Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics, creating a sparkling, walkable business district.

- \* The Atlanta Housing Authority places low-income housing in mixed-income neighborhoods, which has the indirect effect of increasing integration.

- \* A citywide neighborhood redevelopment organization that coordinates revitalization efforts.

- \* The extension of the city's commuter train system farther into the suburbs, with money spent on redevelopment in cities where the trains stop. The idea was to relieve traffic congestion, but a side effect has been to increase the movement of blacks to the suburbs.

A decade ago, the value of homes in Atlanta's inner city was similar to that of Detroit's. Today, newspaper real estate sections are filled with ads for two-bedroom, one-bath "fixer-uppers" at \$125,000 and above; renovated homes in the city often sell for \$250,000 to \$300,000.

When Orstein was growing up in the suburbs, "it was dangerous downtown," he said. "Now, I walk everywhere."

Still, old prejudices die hard. "My grandmother says, 'I can't believe you live in the ghetto,'" Orstein said.

A few miles away, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site, B.J. Drummel is watching a tape of a speech given by the civil rights leader.

"When you say I can't live someplace because of the color of my skin, it hurts my soul," King told a crowd.

Drummel turned away, wiping a tear from his face.

"We have come a long way, but we've got a long way to go," said Drummel, who is black. "A white person still doesn't want to live that close (to blacks)."

Drummel's Atlanta neighborhood was once majority white, but now is completely black. He's glad whites are moving back to the city, and that blacks are spreading into the suburbs.

"It's better down here than it is in Detroit," Drummel said, "but there's always going to be segregation. It's in your mind."

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