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Donna Terek / The Detroit News

James Lumzy, who has lived in Southfield since 1990, has watched white families move out as blacks moved in. He recalls seeing the same pattern in the Detroit neighborhood where he grew up.

A Changing Community

Dramatic racial turnover alters face of Southfield

In 20 years, suburb changes from overwhelmingly white to more than 50% black

By Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD -- For 50 years, James Lumzy has watched white families climb into moving vans. From the Detroit neighborhood where he grew up to the leafy Southfield subdivision where he's lived for three years, the retired auto parts worker has seen whites move away as he and other blacks have moved into the bigger, nicer, safer homes all families want.



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Ben Lewkowicz, left, with his son, Murray Levin, has lived in the

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"They think blacks bring property values down," he said -- before ticking off the thousands of dollars he's plowed into a new roof, furnace and air conditioning system since moving in. "I don't know what to think."

Lumzy is at the center of Metro Detroit's latest wave of white flight and rapid neighborhood turnover. Southfield -- a pioneer of the auto-friendly, subdivision-and-office-tower lifestyle that signifies the American suburb -- is now more than 50 percent black, a rapid transformation for a city that in 1980 was 88 percent white.

What's happening, historians and demographers say, is a collision of all the factors that combine to make Metro Detroit the most segregated region in the country: white reluctance to live in areas with large black populations; black demand for cities and neighborhoods seen as less hostile to their presence; and black reluctance to move into neighborhoods without a significant black presence. Southfield helps explain why, despite large increases in the suburban black population in the 1990s, Metro Detroit's segregation level dropped only slightly.

City leaders downplay the significance of the change, eager to halt speculation that Southfield faces the same decline that has struck Detroit. An enormous tax base and a willingness to embrace diversity, they say, will keep Southfield strong whatever its demographics.

But some experts on segregation say Southfield should not be so confident, that similar suburbs in other metro regions have faced a host of problems as the costs of segregation become more acute.

White flight

"It's been going on years and years," said Gail Davis, Lumzy's companion of 19 years. "Every time blacks try to improve themselves, try to move to something better, it seems like whites don't want them around, don't want their children going to school with white children."

Lumzy recalls the Detroit neighborhood where he grew up: "When my dad moved in during the '50s, it was almost all white. I went to a school that was almost all white."

Now, it's almost entirely black. When he moved from his home in Detroit in 1990, he bought a home in a Southfield neighborhood in the midst of a rapid transformation to majority-black; the same is true of his new home where he arrived in 1998

neighborhood for more than two decades. "It's still a nice area," he said.

Shattered myths?

Whites often believe integrated neighborhoods bring social ills. Southfield proves that those myths don't always hold up.

Crime: Southfield's crime rate is about the same as mostly white Dearborn's, and while Southfield's black population was rising in the 1990s, crime was falling, according to FBI statistics.

Poverty: Many whites say they'd be willing to live with blacks of equal socioeconomic status. In 1990, Southfield's blacks had higher incomes than the city's whites.

Schools: White parents sometimes fear integration will damage education, but Southfield schools received a B in The Detroit News' most recent report card, higher than dozens of mostly white districts. Its score is improving over time.

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new home, where he arrived in 1970.

As he explained, the scene around Davis and Lumzy screamed modern American suburbia: She stood and talked with a visitor while Lumzy washed her car in the driveway of a large two-story brick home, on a winding, tree-lined street.

The neighborhood of about 2,500 people, just north of I-696 between Lahser and Evergreen, was 98 percent white in 1980. By 1990, it was very much reflective of Metro Detroit as a whole: 74 percent white and 24 percent black, within a few points of the metro area's makeup.

A decade later, 62 percent of the neighborhood's white population was gone.

And it's not alone. The heart of Southfield's transformation is a T-shaped stretch, loosely centered on Telegraph and 11 Mile roads. It includes 10 census tracts -- geographic areas averaging about 4,000 people mapped out by the Census Bureau.

In 1990, those 10 tracts were an average of 75 percent white, 22 percent black. In 2000, they averaged 38 percent white and 53 percent black.

Looking out for others

A closer look at Lumzy's Southfield neighborhood makes clear the trends -- some not at all connected to race -- that have led to its rapid turnover.

Through land records and other research, The News contacted more than a dozen former residents of the area. Many current and former white residents are Jewish members of nearby Orthodox synagogues, which continue to be the neighborhood's biggest draw for whites.

Several former residents chose not to talk to The News about why they left. Of those who did, only one mentioned race as a factor.

Deanna Moser's story may be more typical. She and her husband, Barry, moved to the neighborhood in the early 1970s, seeking more room for their growing family. They left in the late 1980s for a lakeside house in Oxford.

"The kids were grown and gone, and we just said, 'Let's do it,' " she said.

"We noticed the neighborhood was changing, sure. But we had a good neighborhood association, people got along fine. ... The black families that moved in, heck, they were a lot better-educated than I was, very nice, just like everybody else."

She still drives through the neighborhood occasionally, she said. "Still nice. Flowers by the entrance. It still looks the same to us," she said.

The Mosers are still friends with Gloria and Norman Little, a white couple who remained in the neighborhood.

"This is an older neighborhood, and there's lots of people whose kids have grown up and moved away," Norman Little said. "Everybody's friendly; we look out for one another whether you're black or white or Chaldean. ... I'm not in a position where I want to move. It takes a while to get a house to where you like it and it's comfortable."

Ben Lewkowicz, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than two decades, agrees. "It's still a nice area," said the retiree. "And at my age, where'm I gonna go?"

where in the area go:

While whites say race had little to do with their leaving the neighborhood, it may still explain why so few whites have chosen to move in.

Experts such as the University of Michigan's Reynolds Farley see two factors at work: Whites are less likely than blacks to want to live in diverse neighborhoods, and blacks are more likely to move into communities they see as welcoming.

For years, Farley has polled Metro Detroiters about their neighborhood preferences. Clearly, he said, communities such as Southfield are seen as much more desirable by blacks than suburbs that have reputations for more race-based hostility.

"Southfield is viewed by blacks as welcoming; places like Dearborn and Warren are viewed as hostile," he said. And so, when middle-class blacks living in Detroit look for new homes in the suburbs, Southfield is near the top of their list.

Whites, meanwhile, continue to show less willingness to live with substantial black populations. "From our studies, it's clear that a number of whites would downgrade Southfield," Farley said. "A majority still see it as desirable, but to many it is undesirable, and when asked why, in a fairly substantial proportion, whites would say the problems of Detroit were spilling into Southfield."

A Detroit News/WDIV poll shows similar attitudes: Just 20 percent of whites surveyed said they thought people they knew would move into a neighborhood without regard to its racial makeup.

Southfield's transformation

In parts of Southfield, the black share of the population has increased as much as 44 percentage points. This map shows the census tracts coded by the percentage-point increase in the black share of the population.





One neighborhood's transformation

The Census Bureau calls it Tract 1612, Block Group 2. To James Lumzy, Gloria Little and about 2,500 others, it's home, a shady neighborhood of large suburban homes. But the neighborhood has undergone rapid racial change in the last two decades, as census data show:

YEAR	POPULATION	PCT. WHITE	PCT. BLACK
1980	2,850	95.8%	3.0%
1990	2,448	73.2	24.0
2000	2,530	27.0	67.8

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

The Detroit News

We 'welcome all'

"It's not by accident," Southfield City Councilman Myron Frasier said, that the city is seen as welcoming not only to blacks, but Jews as well, and now the Chaldean families who have become another marker of the city's diversity.

"The council and leadership back in the 1960s made a conscious decision that Southfield would welcome all folks," said Frasier, who is black.

While other Oakland County communities tried, through restrictive deed covenants and other means, to bar blacks, Southfield welcomed them. The city and Southfield schools founded the Oakland County Open Housing Center, which promoted equal housing opportunity for eight years before closing in 1998. Other communities, Frasier said, weren't willing or able to contribute to the center, and, "Southfield couldn't support it by itself."

To Frasier and many other political leaders, the city's racial transformation has been overblown.

"I don't think it's anything to be alarmed about," said Sylvia Jordan, a councilwoman who also is black. The biggest challenge, she said, is overcoming media overanalysis of the trend. "As long as the city continues to provide strong services and keep taxes low," she said, "it will remain vital."

To researchers who have studied similar suburban transformations in other areas, the future doesn't seem so promising.

First, it's unlikely the city's racial makeup will stabilize.

"I'm not a believer in the inevitability theory, that whites will sort of evacuate," said W. Dennis Keating of Cleveland State University. "On the other hand, I'm trying to think of a community that had something like a 50-50 (black-white) split, that didn't continue to turn over, and I can't think of any. It would be unique."

Suburban communities in places like Cleveland and Chicago have started intensive public-policy initiatives to try to keep whites from

fleeing as blacks move in. Without such a plan, Keating said, it's likely the transformation will continue.

And if that continues, Southfield may face the same costs other majority-black communities have seen: low white demand for real estate, pushing home values lower; a loss of jobs; and a declining tax base that makes it more difficult to maintain the quality of service that keeps and attracts residents.

While home values and other factors in Southfield remain positive now, some researchers wonder if that can continue. The University of Minnesota's John Powell points to Prince Georges County, Md., a wealthy majority-black county just outside Washington, D.C.

"The richest concentration of African Americans in the country is in Prince Georges County," Powell said. "There, the tax base is eroding. It may take a few years for it to happen, but the reality is that if you can't make it work in Prince Georges County, you can't make it work in Southfield."

Frasier objects to such talk. The giant office towers that form the backbone of Southfield's tax base protect the city from such effects, he argues.

"Southfield," he declares with confidence, "is a different community." The coming decades will tell.

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