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Segregation Hits Historic Low

Flight From Rust Belt Cities, Immigration Boost Integration in Cities, Study Says

By **MIRIAM JORDAN**

An exodus of African-Americans from struggling industrial cities such as Detroit and the growth of Sunbelt states have pushed racial segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas to its lowest level in a century, according to a new study.



Getty Images

Children watch a parade in New York's East Harlem neighborhood this month. A report finds U.S. cities more integrated than at any time since 1910.

The report, released by the conservative Manhattan Institute, said U.S. cities are more integrated now than at any time since 1910, based on analysis of census data from neighborhoods.

Fifty years ago, nearly half the black population lived in a ghetto, the study said, while today that proportion has shrunk to 20%. All-white neighborhoods in U.S. cities are effectively extinct, according to the report.

Immigration and gentrification have helped convert ghettos into racially mixed communities and contributed to diversifying suburbia, said economists Edward Glaeser of Harvard University and Jacob Vigdor of Duke University, who co-wrote the study. "Segregation is as low as we have ever seen it," said Mr. Vigdor. "It's an unprecedented scenario."

Some scholars said the report, titled "The End of the Segregated Century: Racial Separation in America's neighborhoods, 1890-2010," paints too rosy a picture and argued the country is far from being fully integrated.

"That segregation is declining in most places is a real plus," said John Logan, a Brown University sociologist who has published research on the topic. "But it is declining at a rate that will leave the country with a very high level of segregation for a long time."

Mixing It Up

Metropolitan areas with large African-American populations have become more integrated in the past 40 years, according to an index measuring how evenly two groups are spread across a neighborhood.



From around 1910, rural blacks began moving in large numbers to urban centers in search of work, in what became known as the Great Migration. Government policies and discriminatory practices in areas such as mortgage lending promoted residential segregation, which peaked in the 1960s. The civil-rights movement then paved the way for integration, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act specifically banned housing discrimination.

By the 1980s, blacks were moving to suburbs, which both altered the face of the urban areas they left behind and created racially mixed neighborhoods where they settled.

Using the most common measure of segregation, the "dissimilarity index," the authors found that segregation is lower now than it was in 1970 in all but one of the 658 housing markets tracked by the Census Bureau. Between 2000 and 2010, segregation declined in 522 out of 658 housing markets, the report said.

The index of dissimilarity measures how evenly two groups are distributed in a neighborhood. The score indicates what share of the members of one group would need to move neighborhoods to enable the two groups to be equally distributed.

In 2010, Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston were the country's least segregated large cities. Atlanta's index fell 28 points to 54.1 in 2010 from 82.1 in 1970; Dallas-Fort Worth's fell to 47.5 from 86.9 over the same period.

Still, segregation hasn't been eliminated. The typical urban African-American still lives in an area where more than half the black population would need to move to achieve overall integration.

"There are still segregated places, like the South Side of Chicago, the East Side of Cleveland and Detroit," said Mr. Vigdor. "But those places have fewer people."

Many of the people leaving industrial cities moved to the Sunbelt, which stretches from California to North Carolina and has experienced rapid growth in recent decades. As cities such as Phoenix, Houston and Charlotte expanded to accommodate the new population, many neighborhoods became more racially mixed than those left behind in the Rust Belt, Mr. Vigdor said.

The beacon of economic opportunity is luring ambitious young African Americans such as Willie Payton Jr., 28 years old, who left Cleveland for Houston a year and a half ago for a promotion in the Veterans Administration. He now manages outpatient care at Houston's Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center.

"It was a good promotion, and with the economy being the way it is, it was too good to pass up," said Mr. Payton.

Royce Hardin, 59, who moved to Phoenix from Racine, Wis., in 1987 to run a janitorial business, said: "Everybody here came from somewhere else so they are not just living next to their own kind."

Immigration has been a factor in desegregation. The Hispanic population has climbed and spread across the U.S. since the 1990s, with Latin American immigrants settling in both predominantly black and white neighborhoods, the report says. The typical African-American now lives in a neighborhood that is 14% Latino.

Access to credit has also fostered mobility and integration. Minority home buyers were affected by the subprime mortgage crisis, but many buyers were able to stay in their homes, the report said.

But the decline in desegregation in residential areas hasn't meant an end to racial inequality. Minorities at every income level tend to reside in poorer neighborhoods than whites with comparable incomes, according to Mr. Logan, the scholar at Brown.

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