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Study: Income does not explain segregation patterns in housing

By Carol Morello, Published August 2, 2011

Affluent blacks and Hispanics live in neighborhoods that are noticeably poorer than neighborhoods where low-income whites live, according to a new study that suggests income alone does not explain persistent segregation patterns in housing.

Washington and Atlanta were the only two major metropolitan regions in the country that followed a slightly different pattern. In these two cities, the study found that the situation for high-income blacks and Hispanics was equal, but not worse, than that of low-income whites.

Prince George's County near Washington and DeKalb County outside Atlanta are home to many African Americans with college degrees and good incomes, pushing up the average for their regions.

As a result, blacks and Hispanics in both cities who earned more than \$75,000 lived in neighborhoods that were virtually the same as neighborhoods populated by whites earning under \$40,000, as measured by average income, poverty rates, education levels, home values and housing vacancies.

"Income, and being successful in class terms, does not necessarily put you in a different kind of neighborhood," said John Logan, a Brown University sociologist who analyzed census data in his study released Tuesday.

His is the third study in the past week to document how minorities have fallen behind whites in both income and wealth.

The Pew Research Center reported that the wealth gap between whites and minorities is at a historic high, largely because of the slide in housing prices.

A study by the National Urban League found that 30 years of economic gains for blacks were lost in the recession.

The Brown study compared 308 metropolitan regions, but did not contrast individual neighborhoods, which can vary widely. It defined affluence as households with incomes over \$75,000 and low-income households as below \$40,000.

Officials with groups representing the interests of blacks and Hispanics said the study confirmed what they frequently see around them.

“Where the 20th century was marked by a narrowing of divides, the trend is going back in the wrong direction, and the recession exacerbated it,” said Marc H. Morial, president of the National Urban League.

The study used census data from 2005 to 2009.

In almost every measurement, the affluent black and Hispanic households earning more than \$75,000 lived in neighborhoods that were in as bad or worse shape than neighborhoods where poor whites and Asians lived.

In the Washington region, for example, affluent Hispanics lived in places where the median income was \$90,000 — about the same as middle-income whites. And well-off blacks had neighbors whose median income was \$83,000 — less than the comparable figure for poor white households.

Poverty rates were about 7 percent in places where well-paid Hispanics and blacks lived — the same as in poor white neighborhoods. Affluent whites and Asians lived in places where it was 5 percent.

Bob Ross, head of the NAACP’s Prince George’s County branch, said the disparity for the region would be greater if it weren’t for the leavening impact of the majority-black county that in 2009 had a median household income of \$70,000, among the highest in the state.

“As a whole, African Americans don’t want to move from Prince George’s,” said Ross, who moved to the county in 2005. “We don’t want to go through the hassle of going to another community.”

Although the study does not take into account amenities such as schools, libraries and grocery stores, the census data suggests that even highly paid minorities live in communities without the same resources available in communities where their white counterparts live.

“We know affluent white neighborhoods have more supermarkets,” Logan said. “They have more private doctors. They have much lower crime rates. Home values have increased at a higher rate, and the rate of foreclosures is lower.”

Hilary O. Shelton, director of the NAACP’s Washington office, said African Americans were disproportionately steered to subprime mortgages and in turn have experienced more foreclosures.

“The disparities are more than likely to persist,” he said. “There are very stubborn crevices that make it difficult to lift everyone out of poverty.”

Janis Bowdler, head of the Wealth-Building Project of the National Council of La Raza, said the foreclosure crisis has forced many Hispanic families back into neighborhoods they left.

“We’re seeing a shake-up in neighborhoods, with the impact of communities being resegregated as people who moved up and out have had to move back in,” she said.

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