



In Chicago, even wealthy black families live in poor neighborhoods

By Megan Cottrell, 8/8/2011

Unlike the Jeffersons, affluent minority families aren't always "movin' on up." A new study of recently released census data shows that wealthy black and Hispanic families often live alongside much poorer neighbors.

White families in Chicago making more than \$75,000 a year live in neighborhoods where only 7.6 percent of their neighbors make considerably less money--\$40,000 a year or less. But black families at the same income level have more than twice as many neighbors--17.9 percent--making less than \$40,000, and wealthy Hispanic families have nearly double the white percentage at 12.7 percent.

In Chicago, wealthy white families have fewer poor neighbors, and black families more, when compared with New York and Los Angeles. Sociologist John Logan, director of the US2010 project at Brown University did the study, looking at 2005-2009 census data. He says the trends underlie existing segregation patterns.

"Separate translates to unequal even for the most successful black and Hispanic minorities," Logan says. "African Americans who really succeeded live in neighborhoods where people around them have not succeeded to the same extent."

Logan says white families at these income levels have many options to move into neighborhoods where everyone is like them--same race, same income level. But wealthy African-American families don't have as many options. If they move into a neighborhood where people are the same race, they'll likely have poorer neighbors. If they go by income level, they'll likely be one of the few black families living there.

It seems to be closely related to the wealth gap data that we've talked about recently--showing that minorities have significantly less wealth than white families, and that gap has grown since the recession. When this gap reinforces where you live, it can lead to significant problems for families, even ones who have a higher socioeconomic status, says Roderick Harrison, sociologist at Howard University.

"Even though they have income comparable to whites, they don't have access to schools or other neighborhood amenities that would be comparable to those available to white families," Harrison says. "Some better-off black and Hispanic families are nevertheless living with the same problems poor blacks and Hispanics are living with."

Of course, Chicago has been trying to encourage this kind of settling--"mixed-income communities"--where the poor live alongside the rich, with often much larger disparities than \$75,000 to \$40,000. I've always wondered how realistic it is to create these communities. People want to live in neighborhoods where people are like them, right? Where they fit in. The trouble for wealthy minority families is that they don't quite fit in anywhere. That's sad when successful families don't have a place to belong.

Does the income or race of your neighbors matter to you? Take our online poll.