



Cities moving beyond segregation

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

December 7, 2011

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – The old residential neighborhoods spread across a 150-block area off majestic The Paseo Boulevard were mostly white before they became mostly black. Now, many are deserted.



Anita Maltbia heads the Green Impact Zone, a city-funded effort to revitalize neighborhoods recently abandoned by blacks through housing rehabilitation, job training, urban gardening, youth programs, transportation and conservation. (Chris Cummins for USA TODAY)

Sitting vacant are about 1,000 lots along tree-lined streets east of Troost Avenue — a legal line of segregation for decades under Jim Crow laws enacted before the civil rights movement. A sixth of the buildings in neighborhoods such as Ivanhoe Park, Manheim, Troostwood, Blue Hills and Townfork Creek are unoccupied.

The emptying out of African-American neighborhoods in the heart of this city is bemoaned by many who are battling the decline. But in an unexpected twist, the flight of blacks to other city neighborhoods and nearby suburbs in Missouri and Kansas has created an unforeseen result that is generally greeted with optimism: desegregation.

Blacks' move to suburbia has accelerated in the past decade, shifting the racial make-up of urban and suburban neighborhoods across the nation. The change is particularly striking here because of the area's long history of racial segregation.

Black-white residential segregation plummeted from 2000 to 2010 in the Kansas City metropolitan area after rising during each of the previous three decades, according to one analysis of Census data.

Kansas City last year was the 36th most segregated metropolitan area among the 100 largest, down from 18th in 2000.

"It's as much the fact that city ghettos are being broken up as the fact that suburbs are beginning to integrate," says Kansas City native John Logan, a Brown University sociologist who did the analysis. "It's one of the places that I would describe as a success in the making, after a long history of intense segregation."

The decline in segregation here is even more striking than drops in Detroit and New Orleans, areas with similar racially charged histories that are losing black populations. Detroit may be less segregated because blacks have left the area in search of jobs in the Sun Belt. Segregation has declined in New Orleans partly because many blacks were displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Kansas City's black population is growing. The metropolitan area's non-Hispanic black population climbed to 272,469, up almost 16% since 2000. Their share of the metro area's 2 million people went from 12.8% to 13.4%.

"In the last decade, a lot of places that had very small black populations in 2000 now have 7% or 10% or 12% black populations, and that's the range you can say they're really becoming integrated," says Logan, director of the US2010 Project at Brown University, which studies trends in American society.



Joann Boyd, one of the first blacks to move to Overland Park, Kan., welcomes the growing diversity in race and income in her community. (Chris Cummins for USA TODAY)

Not every expert sees these changes as significant.

"I don't think it's any different than what's been going on in other cities for a long time," says Linwood Tauheed, an economics professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City who specializes in African-American political economy. "Kansas City seems to be 20 years behind the times."

Logan's research shows that African Americans are more likely to move to neighborhoods that were once predominantly white after other minorities have knocked down racial barriers and settled in. This could be because Asians and Hispanics are more easily accepted at first or because whites in those neighborhoods are more accepting of diversity, Logan says.

He found that almost 40% of the population in the nation's 20 most multiethnic metropolitan areas now live in "global neighborhoods" populated by a substantial number of whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians. That's up from less than 25% in 1980.



Ron Grover has built 70 affordable homes in the area. "The more development you turn around, the more you turn around empty neighborhoods, that's going to reduce segregation." (Chris Cummins/USA TODAY)

Whites, on the other hand, still rarely move in to minority neighborhoods except in some urban areas where development has launched a wave of gentrification. In most cases, whites leave neighborhoods as they get more diverse and move farther from central cities, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, Logan says.

Black flight

Kansas City has not experienced the busting-up of large inner-city housing projects such as the Cabrini-Green high rises in Chicago that once housed 15,000 people, mostly poor blacks. These demolitions forced the dispersal of black residents in the past decade and attracted whites to the mixed-income developments that replaced them.

Here, black flight has more to do with the dismantling of the public schools.

The Kansas City, Mo., school district lost its accreditation from the Missouri Board of Education in 2000 and has been operating under a provisional accreditation since 2002. In September, the Missouri Board of Education said the district has not improved academic performance and had such leadership turmoil that it would yank its accreditation in January, paving the way for a state takeover within two years.

Once the schools lose their accreditation, families will be able to send their kids to other schools that border the district and the Kansas City district will pay transportation costs. This final blow to local schools may drive more people to suburbia.

"The quality of the school district is certainly something that caused whites and blacks as well to move out," Tauheed says.

Already, enrollment at the Shawnee Mission School District in Shawnee, Kan., a western suburb just over the Missouri state line, is dramatically different from just a few years ago. In the 2010-11 school year, black enrollment was 8.1%. In 2003-04, it was 6.7%. Hispanic and Asian enrollment also grew while white enrollment fell from 82.9% to 67.7%.

Former teacher Joann Boyd, 61, is a retired guidance counselor for the Kansas City, Mo., school district. She was one of the first blacks to move to Overland Park, Kan., in a neighborhood of duplexes in a suburb that was among the nation's fastest-growing in the late 1990s.

"You're going to see more of that," Boyd says. "Everybody wants the best for their children. Parents, even though a lot of them are on welfare, a lot of them have low-paying jobs, they still have the same goal. They want their child to have the best education and a safe place to live."

Boyd welcomes the growing diversity in race and income in her community.

"It's good," she says. "In the '70s when I first moved here, it was almost like I was the only one. I wasn't as comfortable then. It's like home now. There are more people like me here."

Bust follows boom

The economic highs of the past decade also contributed to the movement of blacks to other areas. The Kansas suburb of Johnson County became one of the region's main economic drivers in the 1990s, attracting companies such as Sprint, which has its national headquarters there. Jobs lured people and more housing was built. A similar pattern is developing north of Kansas City, in a corridor stretching to Kansas City International Airport.

"We're still predominantly a white community," says John Rod, manager of community planning and services for the city of Overland Park. But Hispanics and Asians, the two largest minorities, now each make up 6.3% of the population. Blacks, at 2.5% in 2000, grew to 4.3% by 2010.

A more negative fallout of Kansas City's suburban explosion, especially for lower-income residents, was the lax lending practices that preceded the housing collapse. Unqualified buyers were granted mortgages, foreclosure rates soared and many families were evicted and went in search of affordable housing, often in older suburbs.

That dispels the notion that this movement to suburbia reflects rising incomes for African Americans, Tauheed says.

Aside from affluent black suburbs of Atlanta and Washington, D.C., "There's been no increase (in incomes)," he says. Tauheed calls the decline in segregation a momentary change triggered by blacks settling into older suburbs close to the city.

Logan says it could be longer lasting.

"What impresses me about Johnson County is the tremendous diversity in the kinds of housing and neighborhoods within short distances of one another," says Logan on a recent visit through the suburbs where he grew up. "There are older two-bedroom bungalows near new apartment complexes near Section 8 (government subsidy) housing near expensive new subdivisions. I think that creates extra possibilities for new groups to move to a range of neighborhoods in the county."

What happens next?

Anita Maltbia is not quite ready to pop the champagne. After more than 27 years working for the city — the last eight as assistant city manager — she now heads the Green Impact Zone, a 2-year-old, city-funded effort to revitalize neighborhoods recently abandoned by blacks through housing rehabilitation, job training, urban gardening, youth programs, transportation and conservation.

A park was built. An abandoned school is being "repurposed" into a complex of affordable apartments and town homes. Another will be an incubator for training contractors.

"That neighborhood has some of the worst statistics," Maltbia says. "When people left, services left. Then came the migration of the black middle class (to the suburbs). That was the death knell."

Local developer Ron Grover, with minority-owned Midwest Development Associates, has built 70 affordable homes in the area. Some are for sale and others are rentals with options to buy.

"You have to do it in a cluster," Grover says. "Building one house here and one house there is not going to work. Who's the first one to move in? If you build in a block, there's value there and people take ownership."

His clients? Mostly black. Some are victims of foreclosures.

"We can restore these inner-city neighborhoods for families and that will address a lot of the other ills," Grover says. "The more development you turn around, the more you turn around empty neighborhoods, that's going to reduce segregation."