

Census: East Bay more diverse, and black residents less isolated, but segregation by neighborhood persists

By Matt O'Brien
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The increasing diversity of the East Bay makes the region appear like a melting pot, but many of its avenues, blocks and cul-de-sacs remain surprisingly segregated, according to an analysis of how people are grouped by neighborhood.

The East Bay's average white resident still lives in a majority-white neighborhood, and Latinos and Asians, as their numbers have grown, have become more clustered in ethnic enclaves. In contrast, African-Americans have seen a drastic change in the complexion of their neighbors over the past three decades, according to a demographic study of newly released census data.

In 1980, the typical African-American resident of the East Bay lived in a neighborhood that was 56 percent black. The typical African-American in the East Bay now lives in a neighborhood that is 28 percent black, among the lowest rates for any metropolitan area with a sizable black population.

That is a "striking change," said Brian Stults, a professor at Florida State University who co-authored the study that looks at segregation nationwide, but the causes and significance are not clear-cut.

One small Contra Costa County neighborhood where black-white racial strife made headlines in the 1980s appears to be a microcosm of how the East Bay has changed.

Thirty years ago, African-Americans were a small but growing minority in the predominantly white subdivision of Tara Hills, an unincorporated community between San Pablo and Pinole. Many black families who had moved there for better homes and schools felt unwelcome after white youths targeted them with vandalism and slurs.

Tara Hills looks a lot more diverse today, according to the census estimates released last week. So do many of the suburbs that were built across the East Bay in the decades after World War II.

It was not, however, a drastic growth in black-white integration that made the difference. Latino and Asian immigrants flocked to Tara Hills, creating a community where no group is a majority, and where the white-vs.-black dynamic of the early 1980s seems like distant history to the young.

"For us, that's considered a fancy area for Latinos, but for the (older) African-American community it has a whole different connotation," said Marin Trujillo, a school district official who is in his 30s and grew up nearby.

Codes that excluded minorities from the suburbs were taken off the books, and many African-American families sought new opportunities outside the big cities. Latinos joined them, bypassing the traditional urban immigrant gateways for places such as Concord and Antioch.

"I believe the affordability is the reason why more people of color, and different cultures, are moving into the areas that were once considered taboo," said Richmond real estate agent Bob Robinson, who is black and had just started his career at the time of the highly publicized tensions in Tara Hills. "The diversification, in my opinion, is a result of the economy."

A few people didn't like it, he said, but they moved out long ago.

"There's a lot of evidence that racial attitudes, especially about where people live, are softening," Stults said. "Whites have become more willing to live in neighborhoods that are more integrated."

Yet despite evidence of changed attitudes, Stults said, a surprising level of geographic divisions persist. One thing is clear: Black families in the East Bay are less concentrated in starkly delineated neighborhoods. But if the census estimates are correct, East Bay black and white residents are only slightly more likely to be neighbors than they were a decade ago.

"It just means the average black person's neighborhood is becoming more Hispanic and Asian," Stults said.

Among the 50 metropolitan regions in the country with the highest black populations, the East Bay ranks near the middle in black-white segregation, far less segregated than the metropolitan regions of Chicago or Detroit but about the same level as Houston or Washington, D.C.

Demographers caution that it may be too early to jump to conclusions because the census estimates used for the studies were collected over a five-year period from January 2005 to December 2009. The surveys are sent to one in 10 households each year.

In contrast, the once-a-decade census taken in 2010 sought to count every American, and immigrant and African-American community groups poured resources into making sure everyone was counted. The official census numbers, when they are released next year, will offer more definitive answers.

That has not stopped many organizations from beginning to speculate about the 11 billion statistics the U.S. Census Bureau released last week. The estimates suggest that the black populations of Oakland and Richmond might have dropped to below 30 percent of the total population of each city, continuing a decline that began in 1980.

"People anecdotally had surmised that there was something significant going on," said Junious

Williams, executive officer of the Urban Strategies Council, an Oakland-based research and advocacy group. The latest estimates seem to show that black residents have continued to move out of historically African-American neighborhoods in the past decade.

Black families seeking new opportunities elsewhere contributed to that movement, but so did gentrification, when higher-income residents chose city life and some black families were priced out of their old neighborhoods, Williams said.

"Oakland became a more popular place," he said. "You saw increasing prices, not enough affordable, family-suitable housing being built, and competition for what was already there."

That change played a part in the gradual decline of residential segregation by race. But a bigger phenomenon regionwide appears to be the growth of the Latino and Asian communities.

"The problem is a lot of integration studies are based on black and white," said Oakland Mayor-elect Jean Quan. "In Oakland, that just doesn't work."

Quan recalled canvassing one East Oakland street this fall where she ran into people who were African-American, white, African immigrants, and of Guatemalan, Mexican, Filipino and Southeast Asian descent. Some black-majority neighborhoods are doing well, and some are not, she said, and she is more concerned about concentrations of poverty and unemployment.

"Most of our neighborhoods are pretty multicultural," said Quan, who next month becomes the first Asian-American mayor of any large U.S. city. "The vast majority of Oakland is really integrated."

But like many city officials and scholars around the country, she said she will be looking closely at the 2010 census results when they come out in a few months, revealing a clearer portrait of how cities have changed in the past decade.

"I think it's a very dynamic situation," Quan said. "It's hard to read all the trends and where we're ending up."

To read the study on neighborhood segregation, go to www.s4.brown.edu/us2010.