



Black populations fall in major cities

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By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

The black population is declining in a growing number of major cities — more evidence that the settlement pattern of African Americans is changing as they disperse to suburbia and warmer parts of the nation.

2010 Census data released so far this year show that 20 of the 25 cities that have at least 250,000 people and a 20% black population either lost more blacks or gained fewer in the past decade than during the 1990s. The declines happened in some traditional black strongholds: Chicago, Oakland, Atlanta, Cleveland and St. Louis.

The loss is fueled by three distinct trends:

- Blacks — many in the middle or upper-middle class — leaving cities for the suburbs.
- Blacks leaving Northern cities for thriving centers in the South.

Shrinking numbers

- The aging of the African-American population, whose growth rate has dropped from more than 16% in the 1990s to about 10% since 2000.

"In the Northern cities, a lot of young blacks who might have grown up in cities are leaving maybe the entire region," says William Frey, demographer at the Brookings Institution who analyzed the data. "They're going to the Sun Belt and particularly the South. The ones who stay in the area want to move to the suburbs."

Atlanta's loss of blacks tripled since 2000 to almost 30,000. The percentage of blacks in the city shrank to 53% from 61%. But in Atlanta's vast metropolitan area, the black population soared 40% to 1.7 million, a clear indication that many spread out to suburban counties. The Atlanta region has the second-largest black population after New York.

The trend is playing out differently in Chicago. The city lost more than 200,000 residents, and more than 180,000 of them were African-American. In the metropolitan area, the black population fell 3.5% to 1.6 million, pushing it 66,000 below metro Atlanta's.

"Sadly for Chicago, I think in large part it's the weather," says Chinwe Onyeagoro, CEO of O-H Community Partners, a Chicago-based economic development consulting firm.

Sunny skies and warm temperatures are luring not only retirees but also young professionals who may have friends or relatives in the Sun Belt — Atlanta and Houston in particular, she says.

Suburbs anywhere are a huge draw.

"Typically, middle-class African-American families make the same kind of choices that white families have made for some time," Onyeagoro says. "As soon as kids are school-age, they move to the suburbs."

Suburbs are also luring lower-income blacks who are leaving neighborhoods that don't have supermarkets and other retail, she says.

Recent Census surveys show that the District of Columbia's black population declined since 2000. Census data will be released this week for Washington and other major cities, including New York.

The drop also can be partially attributed to a declining black fertility rate and the aging of the black population, says John Logan, director of US 2010 Project at Brown University, which studies trends in American society. "We're starting to see the graying not only of the white population but of the black population," he says.