

Posted on Sun, Mar. 27, 2011

Census finds Wichita, suburbs more diverse

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The Wichita Eagle

Wichita and its suburbs have grown more diverse over the past decade, new Census figures show. The city's minority population rose from 28 to 35 percent during that time, and one national expert said the four-county metropolitan area — Sedgwick, Butler, Harvey and Cowley — is more integrated than most cities around the country.

The new data showed that:

* Of the 7,746 blocks in Sedgwick County, 12 percent were all-white in 2010. A decade earlier, 18 percent of the blocks in the county were 100 percent white.

* Of the 39 area cities with 500 or more residents, all but two saw their minority populations increase during the decade. In one of the two, Eastborough, the minority population stayed at 3.8 percent.

* Diversity is not spread evenly across the metropolitan area, though. Three-fourths of Sedgwick County's minorities live east of the Arkansas River. On the east side of Wichita, 38 percent of the residents are minorities. On the west side, the figure is 19 percent.

* The city's Hispanic population grew by 76 percent during the decade, but the growth spread far beyond the traditionally Hispanic neighborhoods of north-central Wichita. In 2010, 46 percent of Sedgwick County Hispanics lived south of Kellogg.

National perspective

John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University and director of the U.S. 2010 Census Project, uses Census data to track integration trends in cities such as Wichita.

Black and white Wichita aren't as segregated as they once were, a trend that's been continuing since 1980, he said.

Black Wichitans and white Wichitans are far more likely to live in the same neighborhood today, he said. "Black-white segregation was on the high side in 1980 — at around the national average," Logan said. "But it's been coming down substantially and steadily."

He said black people also are moving into smaller cities in the four-county metropolitan area.

A report released last week by the U.S. 2010 Census Project attributed the integration of black Americans to the growth of the black middle class, the lasting effects of the Fair Housing Act and the fact that white Americans appear in surveys to be more tolerant of black neighbors.

Logan said Hispanic growth during the past decade was strong throughout the Wichita area.

"A lot of areas have become more Hispanic," he said. "They really did spread out across the city as their numbers grew."

In some areas of the country, Logan said, racially diverse cities are surrounded by nearly all-white suburbs. That's not the case in Wichita, he said, where the entire metropolitan area is growing more diverse.

"Sometimes the difference between cities and suburbs turns things around, but I'm seeing almost the same exact trend in black-white segregation in the whole metropolitan area as I do in city."

As a whole, Logan said, "I'd say Wichita is a place that's providing a wider range for neighborhood opportunities for both blacks and Hispanics than the rest of the nation."

In the neighborhood

The latest Census figures show that one of the most diverse Wichita neighborhoods was Planeview, which saw its Hispanic population grow from 37 to 53 percent from 2000 to 2010. The neighborhood was 22 percent non-Hispanic white last year, 14 percent Asian and 6.5 percent black.

"The diversity of this neighborhood is just unbelievable," said Janet Johnson, a neighborhood assistant who works out of the Colvin Neighborhood City Hall in Planeview.

Among those shopping last week in Planeview were Maria Lopez and her three children. They looked at produce at the Super Del Centro just south of Pawnee on Hillside.

The store was full of Mexican products, including cuts of meat, fresh corn tortillas and treats by Bimbo, which is essentially the Hostess of Mexico.

She said she enjoys having the comforts of Mexico, where she grew up, close to her home in the Oaklawn neighborhood.

"But it's not the same," she said.

Still, having lived in Aguascalientes, Mexico, and Atlanta, she appreciates life in Wichita.

It has provided her husband a construction job. She's close to her parents and knows many people who are also from Aguascalientes.

"Life is cheaper here," she said in Spanish. "And it's very relaxed."

Jeremy Hill, director of the Center for Economic Development and Business Research at Wichita State University, said it's not surprising to find minorities living in the poorer areas of a city.

In Wichita, he said, that includes many neighborhoods close to I-135 as well as Planeview and nearby Oaklawn.

Henry Salome, 31, has lived in his home in Planeview, just west of Hillside and south of Pawnee, for three years. His family immigrated from central Mexico.

He said he spent the first few years of his life with his mother in Chicago, but she decided to move to Wichita for more opportunities.

She met Salome's step-father in Wichita, and they lived on the west side of town for about 25 years.

Salome said he moved to south Wichita three years ago for cheaper housing, better opportunities and cultural comforts.

"It's changed a lot," he said of his neighborhood.

Salome said gang violence seems to have declined, and the ever-growing Hispanic population has led to more stores that provide the products he's looking for.

"Now instead of going to Checkers or Walmart, I can just come here and get what I need," he said at the Super Del Centro.

Johnson, the neighborhood assistant, said many recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America have moved into low-rent homes, and many others have purchased cheap houses in the neighborhood.

The families have renovated homes and converted duplexes into larger, single-family dwellings, she said.

"They are making investments in this neighborhood," she said. "And they're helping this neighborhood."

During a brief tour last week, she showed off several homes that once had failing siding and are now covered with nearly flawless stucco and have extensive brickwork on their front patios.

Still, she said, many of the new residents struggle. They come to the branch city hall holding up utility bills asking how to pay for them, she said, and they have trouble understanding the city's neighborhood housing codes.

Johnson, who knows dozens of people in the neighborhood, said the city is finding new ways to reach Hispanic residents.

Instead of relying on traditional media, she and others walk the neighborhoods with fliers for events and notices.

The fliers explain things in English on one side and Spanish on the other.

Planeview is also home to a lot of Vietnamese and black Wichitans. Officials in the city building attached to the school there have encountered 13 different languages.

Generally, when the local economy performs poorly, the population of Planeview increases. That shows up in enrollment figures at Colvin Elementary and Jardine Middle School.

Rhonda Arrington, a 45-year-old black woman, has lived in Planeview most of her life.

Census figures show the demographics of the neighborhood are changing. But to her, the most noticeable change is that she used to know most of the families near her home on the north end of Planeview. Now she sees more unfamiliar faces.

"I just go with the flow, I guess," she said. "You just have to learn to get along with everyone. They're probably more like us than we think."

She's picked up a few Spanish phrases, but has to ask to make sure what they mean. She said she's glad younger generations, including her daughter, are learning Spanish.

"The more you know, the more you grow, that's what I tell the kids," she said.

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