

KC among top 10 cities seeing less segregation

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The Kansas City metro area ranks among the 10 fastest-changing places nationwide in an analysis of the rise of racially integrated neighborhoods.

The city and its surrounding communities had plenty of company across America, where blacks and whites are moving more evenly — and at a historic pace — between urban centers and the suburbs.

Roughly three-fourths of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas saw decreases in recent years in segregated living patterns among the two racial groups, according to a broad array of census-tract data released Tuesday and reviewed by the Brookings Institution.

By one measure, only seven other cities since 2000 posted steeper declines in residential segregation than the Kansas City area.

There remains room for improvement, experts noted: The latest analysis makes Kansas City the 28th most segregated U.S. metro, down from 16th place in 2000.

“It’s progress,” said Frank Lenk, director of research services for the nonprofit planning organization Mid-America Regional Council. “We’re approaching a moderate level of segregation where we were at a high level before.”

The shifting racial patterns are “a continuation of a trend we’ve seen going back to 1980,” when rising income levels spurred many minority residents into newer homes in mostly white neighborhoods ringing the central city.

The figures charted by the Brookings Institution come from previous censuses and the Census Bureau’s 2009 American Community Survey, which samples 3 million households. Survey data from 2005 to 2009 were averaged to help compensate for otherwise large margins of error in low-population neighborhoods.

Changes in residential patterns were measured by so-called “dissimilarity indices” across census tracts. In the Kansas City metro, for instance, researchers found that about 66 percent of black residents would have to move to be distributed exactly like whites in the area. That’s down from 71 percent in 2000 — and the eighth-biggest drop among 100 cities examined.

Milwaukee, Detroit and New York were deemed among the most segregated cities. There, as many as 80 percent of black residents would need to move for optimal racial integration to be attained.

On the other end of the scale, cities that were least likely to be segregated included Las Vegas, Honolulu, Raleigh, N.C., and Albuquerque, N.M.

“It’s taken a civil rights movement and several generations to yield noticeable segregation declines for blacks” as reported for the past several years, William H. Frey, a Brookings demographer, told The Associated Press. “But the still-high levels of black segregation in some areas, coupled with uneven clustering patterns for Hispanics, suggest that the idea of a post-racial America has a way to go.”

Hispanic integration was mixed. There was less Hispanic-white segregation in cities and suburbs in many large metros such as Buffalo, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, according to preliminary census figures. But in many smaller neighborhoods, large numbers of more recently arrived Hispanic immigrants are believed to be clustering together for social support, experts said.

In showing relatively sharp reductions in residential segregation, Kansas City defied the stagnant racial demographics in many other large communities across the Midwest and Northeast.

“One of the assets of Kansas City, compared to other Midwest and northeastern cities, is the diversity of its economy. That acts as a buffer against a downturn,” said Kevin Fox Gotham, a Tulane University sociologist who has studied the development along the city’s old racial dividing line, Troost Avenue, in the 1950s and ’60s.

“If you’re seeing a lessening of patterns of segregation, it could be due to a diversified economy in which those most likely to be hit hard — ethnic and racial minorities — have fared a little better there” than in other cities, he said.

Lenk of MARC cited the development of downtown lofts and condos and said: “We also could be seeing some movement here of the white population back to the urban areas. That’s speculation, but it’s one of the things we’ll be looking at” as detailed 2010 census figures roll out in the spring.

The race trends nationwide hint at the upcoming political and legal wrangling over those 2010 figures. The data will be used to reallocate congressional districts, drawing new political boundaries. New Hispanic-dominated districts could emerge, particularly for elected positions at the state and local level. States are required under the Voting Rights Act to respect the interests of minority voting blocs, which tend to support Democratic candidates.

While residential movement out of ethnic neighborhoods has been increasing, the outflow of Hispanics and Asians into suburbs has generally been surpassed by the arrival of new immigrants into traditional enclaves, said Brown University sociologist John Logan.

“The political implications of these trends are great in the long run — majority black districts will become harder to sustain, while more majority Hispanic districts will emerge, especially for state and local positions,” Logan said.

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