

Buncombe bucks housing trend

Desegregation stalled in US, up here

By Joel Burgess • December 17, 2010

People of different races increasingly are living as neighbors in Buncombe County, bucking a nationwide trend.

Though hardly a region of racial diversity, integration of neighborhoods in and around Buncombe has accelerated over the past decade, according to an analysis of population data released this week.

Parts of Buncombe and Madison counties have shown a significant amount of racial mixing in neighborhoods since 2000, said the analysis of 2005-09 information from the Census Bureau.

The opposite has been true within Asheville city limits and nationwide.

For the last decade, racial integration of U.S. neighborhoods has stalled, with whites, African-Americans and other groups moving less often into neighborhoods composed of other races.

"I'm not surprised by either trend," said Dwight Mullen, a UNC Asheville political science professor who has been active for decades trying to better race relations.

Changing attitudes by real estate agents, banks and other institutions have driven some of the change, said Mullen and Brian Stults, a Florida State University sociology professor and one of the authors of the analysis.

Potential homebuyers who are black are now more likely to be shown a house in a white neighborhood — and vice versa, Mullen said.

The move by affluent white people into traditionally diverse Asheville neighborhoods, such as Montford, also has contributed to the change. Potential homebuyers increasingly must look outside of the city for affordable housing.

The five-year data they used from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey provides the first opportunity to gauge post-2000 demographic trends all the way down to small neighborhoods.

Crunching the numbers

Though handled by the Census Bureau, the survey is taken at a different time than the census. Information from the 2010 census is expected to be released later this month.

Stults did the analysis, called "Racial and Ethnic Separation in the Neighborhoods: Progress at a Standstill." with Brown University sociology professor John Logan.

The index they use measures how evenly two groups are spread across neighborhoods.

"One hundred is perfect segregation, and zero is perfect integration," Stults said.

Sixty or higher means a high level of segregation while 30 or below means groups are integrated, he said. Nationally, the index for African-Americans and whites went from 73.6 in 1980 to 65.2 in 2000 to 62.7 in 2009.

That shows that African-Americans continue to be the most segregated minority nationally, followed by Hispanics and Asians, and the great strides in integration made since 1980 have largely stalled since 2000.

For members of minority groups, the cost of residential segregation is that the neighborhoods where they live typically have fewer resources than neighborhoods where white people live.

In Asheville, the index between whites and African-Americans went from 59.3 in 1980 to 47.1 in 2000 to 45.4 in 2009.

"That's a decline that we wouldn't consider substantial at all," Stults said of the post-2000 numbers.

The Asheville Metropolitan Statistical Area showed much more integration happening recently, going from 66.6 in 1980 to 60.2 in 2000 to 50.8 in 2009. It was difficult to talk about changes in segregation of local Hispanic and Asian populations because those numbers were so low in 1980.

Mullen, who is African-American, said some of the local changes may be due to pushes in the 1980s to get real estate agents and banks to end discriminatory practices, while little was done nationally.

"We found there had been informal discrimination in the way people would show houses," he said.

Other practices included banks not making loans for people of one race seeking to live in neighborhoods made up of people of other races.

Mullen recognized that some of the integration might be greater outside the city.

In his Asheville neighborhood of Kenilworth, the number of blacks has changed little from the core that has lived there for years, while the number of whites has grown.

The rise in housing prices may have forced many African-Americans to look for homes outside their traditional neighborhoods, possibly outside Asheville, Stults said.

“That can have a big impact, especially if its blacks moving into what might be traditionally lily-white suburbs,” he said.

USA Today writer Haya El Nasser contributed to this report.
