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Census: Fewer black children in biggest US cities

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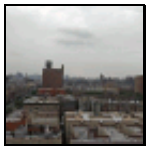
Thursday, June 30, 2011

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(06-30) 09:30 PDT New York (AP) --

A catastrophic flood emptied New Orleans of much of its black youth. Powerful social forces may be doing a similar thing to places like Harlem and Chicago's South Side.

Over the past decade, the inner-city neighborhoods that have served for generations as citadels of African-American life and culture have been steadily draining of black children.

Last year's census found that the number of black, non-Hispanic children living in New York City had fallen by 22.4 percent in 10 years. In raw numbers, that meant 127,058 fewer black kids living in the city of Jay Z and Spike Lee, even as the number of black adults grew slightly.

The same pattern has repeated from coast to coast. Los Angeles saw a 31.8 percent decline in its population of black children, far surpassing the 6.9 percent drop in black adults. The number of black children in Atlanta fell by 27 percent. It was down 31 percent in Chicago and 37.6 percent in Detroit. Oakland, Calif. saw a drop of 42.3 percent, an exodus that fell only 6 percentage points below the decline in flood-ravaged New Orleans.

Overall, the census found nearly a half-million fewer black children living in the 25 largest U.S. cities than there were a decade earlier. By comparison, the number of black adults living in big cities has hardly budged.

Demographics experts said a combination of factors appeared to be at work. Americans in general are having fewer children than they once did, due mostly to increased use of birth control. That has been true, too, among black mothers. Teen pregnancy rates among blacks have also plummeted.

But the more significant trend, experts said, may be a migration by young black parents to the suburbs.

For many, that pull of a place with safer streets, higher-achieving schools and more housing space for the dollar has apparently simply overridden any desire to stay in flawed inner-city neighborhoods, simply because they are black capitols.

"I'd been in Harlem for 16 years, and when I first came, I was young, and I was excited and it was a

Mecca. But progressively each year, it got rougher and rougher to be here," said Rachel Noerdlinger, a publicist whose clients include the Rev. Al Sharpton. "The violence. The profiling by the cops. I just started to get really, really frustrated."

Finally, she decamped across the Hudson River to the suburban quietude of Edgewater, N.J., taking her 14-year-old son with her.

"He misses Harlem. He's a teenage boy who, unfortunately, grew up here. Edgewater is quiet and slow. He's constantly complaining," Noerdlinger said. But as for herself, she said, "I'm in heaven. I just love it. ... If I had done this 20 or 16 years ago, I would be a completely different person."

In several cities, the change has come just as historically black neighborhoods have been making a steady recovery from decades of horrific decay and neglect.

Oakland, a city fraught for years with violence and high poverty rates, has at last been experiencing a renaissance, but the number of white hipsters, Asians and Hispanics moving in has been outpaced by the number of black families that have disappeared.

That decline has been led by the 42.3 percent drop in the number of black children, from 38,765 a decade ago to 22,377 last year. By comparison, the number of black adults dropped by just under 17 percent.

Oakland Mayor Jean Quan blamed the departures on a lack of affordable housing. Quan, who became the city's first Asian mayor (and only the city's second non-black mayor since 1977) when she took office in January, said she runs into African Americans all the time who have given up the city for suburbs as far away as Antioch, Calif., a small city that has seen its share of black residents grow from 2.6 percent in 1990 to 17 percent last year.

"I ask them, `Do you live in Oakland?' They say, `No, but I used to.'"

That drop has been a source of dismay among some in Oakland concerned about the city losing its cultural identity.

The Harlem of the past 10 years has been another place where drops in violent crime and a gradual erasing of decades of blight have brought an influx of new residents and concerns about the neighborhood's heritage.

It would be easy to blame gentrification for pushing young families out, yet Census data shows that the sections of the neighborhood with the steepest drops in the number of black children are those where economic recovery has been more sluggish.

Consider census tract 232, an eight-block area of tenements and public housing projects in Central Harlem that saw its population of black children fall by 830, or 38 percent, over the past 10 years:

Yes, the neighborhood now has a Starbucks and two new supermarkets close by, but gunmen shot up the playground on 143rd Street in 2006, wounding three adults and a 6-year-old girl. City officials tried to

close the local elementary school two years ago for poor performance. At the public housing project on Frederick Douglas Boulevard, a police officer had to rappel down the side of the building in 2003 to tranquilize a 400-pound tiger living in a resident's apartment.

Last summer, officers patrolling a late-night block party fired a fusillade of bullets at two men struggling over a gun, killing one of them, severely injuring the other and wounding three innocent bystanders (plus two fellow officers). It all took place a block from Sharpton's headquarters.

Carnetta Clark, a retired tenant leader in one of the two large public housing projects in the neighborhood, said she has noticed fewer children in the area now than when she first moved in nearly 20 years ago. But she doesn't think it is because violence is frightening parents away.

If anything, she said, the neighborhood has gotten safer and more stable over the years.

"There are a lot of older people in the neighborhood now," she said. "There are less people hanging out on the corners. The police are watching, taking care of things. I've always felt safe. Even when I was working nights. I never feared living here."

Indeed, there are still plenty of kids in the neighborhood — more, in fact, per adult than the national average.

State Assemblyman Keith Wright, whose district covers Central Harlem, has noticed fewer children in the area as well, but he, too, thinks the phenomenon has less to do with flight from crime or decay, and more to do with the high price of city living.

"You don't see those big families anymore," Wright said. "A lot of our younger folks, I find, are moving to New Jersey. They think the city life is too expensive. It comes down to a matter of economics," he said.

Some black city residents, he said, are also migrating "back down South, where they think the dollar will go farther."

That migration has been evident in places like Henry County, Georgia, an area of suburban Atlanta that has seen its black population more than triple in the past decade. Blacks now make up 37 percent of the county of nearly 204,000 people.

The trend has also been showing up in a less visible way in countless mostly white suburbs like Livonia, Mich., outside of Detroit. Just a decade ago, there were 951 black people living in the entire city, out of a population of around 100,000. Now there are 3,309. The same trend has repeated in white suburbs across the country.

"Face it: In a lot of suburbs, there was a distinct effort to keep blacks out," said David Bositis, a senior researcher at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and former Census Bureau demographer.

Those barriers have now been falling, he said, opening the door for blacks to follow in the footsteps of

white families who had their own diaspora to the suburbs after World War II.

"More African Americans are going to college. There were big income gains during the Clinton administration," Bositis said. "Now they are moving to the suburbs where they have better schools ... They don't want their children in inner-city schools."

Even cities that saw a large rise in their overall black population saw their numbers of black children fall, or grow at a much slower rate. In Phoenix, the number of black adult residents grew by 44.8 percent over the past decade, but added fewer than 4,000 black children, for a growth rate of 18.6 percent. Houston added 21,324 black adults, but had 23,219 fewer black children.

On a national level, the number of black children has inched down by only 2.3 percent, compared to a much larger 9.8 percent drop for white children.

Fewer children in a city isn't necessarily a sign of abandonment. After all, one of the hallmarks of poverty is an overabundance of children, packed into overcrowded apartments and schools, with a paucity of adult oversight.

"There is nothing inherently bad," about a city having fewer children, Bositis said. "On one level, it is a big plus for the cities. People without children are much cheaper than people with children. Especially young people. They are making very little in way of demands on city services."

Associated Press writer Terry Collins in Oakland, Calif., contributed to this report.

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