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Leaving City for Long Island

Census Data Show Marked Growth in Black Population in Suburban Counties

By JOSEPH DE AVILA



Getty Images

Pedestrians walk down a city street on Friday in New York City.

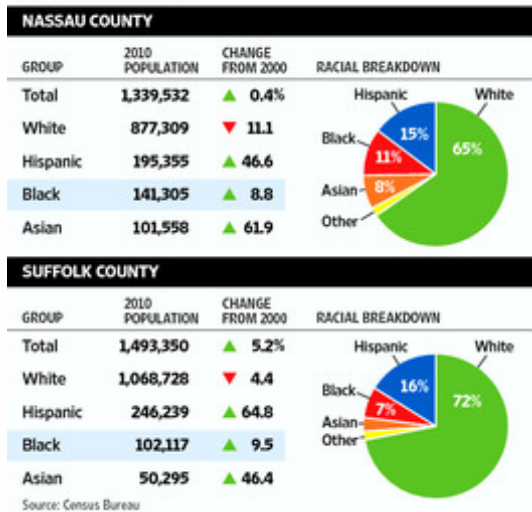
After the birth of their second child, James Leonard, a lawyer, and his wife, Lisa, a teacher, took a look around their cramped Queens house and thought: Long Island.

That the Leonards are black and Long Island is mostly white didn't slow them down.

"We needed more room and a bigger house," said Mr. Leonard, a lifelong New

Yorker until he moved to Dix Hills in 2004. "We felt like we got the most bang for the buck."

Long Island Shift



Mr. Leonard and his family are among the 20,000 blacks who moved to Long Island over the past decade, according to new Census figures. They helped drive a 9% bump in the island's black population, a small but significant shift in the demographics of the traditionally white area.

Nationwide, blacks have begun to move out of urban centers, the Census has shown. In Chicago, the black population fell while it grew in surrounding suburban counties. In

New York City, the number of blacks decreased for the first time since 1860.

"They are pretty consistent with the rest of the country's findings so far. Blacks like other groups continue to suburbanize," said Seth Forman, chief planner with the Long Island Regional Planning Council. "Now we are seeing that about 40 years after the whites made the trek to the suburbs, blacks are following in their wake."

Suffolk County is now 7% black and Nassau County is 11% black.

Much of the growth occurred in the town of Hempstead, which added about 12,300 new black residents in the villages of Elmont, Baldwin and North Valley Stream. Other historically black areas in Freeport, Roosevelt and Hempstead Village saw declines in the number of blacks as Hispanics moved in.

"It speaks to the increasing affluence of African-American families," said Peter Francese, demographic trends analyst for Ogilvy & Mather, an advertising agency in New York City. "It says they have saved enough or acquired enough assets to move to the suburbs."

Lisa Pinkard wasn't particularly affluent, but she was ready for a change.

More**City to Press for a Higher Census Population Estimate**

She lost her job at a mortgage company and thought she would have better luck finding work in New York. The solution seemed obvious: She had family on Long

Island and wanted good schools for her three children.

Ms. Pinkard, who is black, and her children moved in with her mother last year in Central Islip. She recently got a job working as a consultant and hopes to buy her own home in Riverhead. Ms. Pinkard is put off by the frenetic nature of New York City but wanted to be close to the buzz—and still have a lawn.

"The kids have the best of both worlds on Long Island," said Ms. Pinkard. "It's as suburban as you can get in New York."

For the most part, new black Long Islanders were attracted to places that already had established black communities.

Theresa Sanders is chief executive of the Urban League of Long Island, a civil-rights organization. She credited federal antidiscrimination laws with freeing up access to mortgages, which opened up new frontiers for blacks on a house hunt.

"I think making homeownership accessible to African-Americans is a direct correlation of what you are seeing in population growth," Ms. Sanders said.

Still, many parts of Long Island remain segregated.

A study out of Brown University and Florida State University of data from the 2010 Census found that Long Island was the 10th most segregated metropolitan area in the U.S.

The roots of isolated ethnic groups on Long Island go back decades. One of the most famous examples is Levittown, which was established during the 1940s and 1950s.

The town was built for whites exclusively, and deed restrictions prevented residents from selling to blacks.

Deed restrictions were used throughout Long Island to keep blacks and Jews out of many neighborhoods, said Lee Koppelman, director of Stony Brook

University's Center for Regional Policy Studies. Mr. Koppelman previously worked as a planner with Long Island Regional Planning Council.

Mr. Koppelman lamented that his biggest failure in that job was in his efforts to create more equitable and integrated housing.

While much of Long Island remains segregated, some towns appear to be slowly changing.

Dix Hills, where Mr. Leonard and his family live, had about 700 black residents in 2000. That number doubled to 1,400 in 2010.

"People have evolved and their ideals have progressed," Mr. Leonard said.

Upwardly mobile blacks in the past used to flock to the cities, but times have changed, Mr. Leonard said.

Now, they are seeking the same quality-of-life improvements as whites and other groups.

"Moving out to the suburbs is more accepted today," Mr. Leonard said. "It's just looking for a better lifestyle."

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