

African Americans Moving South—and to the Suburbs

By John Sullivan

The U.S. Census Bureau released findings from the 2010 Census this month that reveal a dramatic migration underway within black America. Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of black people have relocated to the South and around the country, have moved from the cities to the suburbs.

Nearly 60 percent of the black population now lives in just 10 states, six being in the South, with the black population in Florida, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina growing by more than 20 percent in the past decade. Overall, between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of the nation's black population living in the South grew (from 53.6 percent to 55 percent),* while the percentage living in the Northeast and Midwest shrank (to 17 percent and 18 percent, respectively). The number living in the West remained about the same (8.8 percent).

Much of this growth is due to black migration to the South from other regions of the country, according to the Brookings Institute. The numbers are clear: black people have been gradually migrating below the Mason-Dixon Line.

They are also moving from inner cities to suburbs.

The proportion of the black population living in the biggest city of a given metropolitan area decreased in all 20 of the nation's largest metro areas in the past decade.

For example, the percentage of the Detroit area's black residents living in the city of Detroit itself dropped by 16 percent. Other major cities home to large black populations, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Oakland, have all experienced large black population losses as well, as residents have left these places for suburbs or the South—or both. Notably, Southern metro areas top the list for national gains in suburban black residents.

The movers—like migrants worldwide—also tend to be strivers. A few studies have found that among them is a sizable cohort of first-time Southern dwellers who tend to be younger, wealthier, and more educated than the larger black population.

So what do these striking trends mean for black communities, both those that are growing and those that are shrinking? Patterns of residence and migration are shaped by many complicated factors. There are institutional forces, like housing and labor markets, government incentives, and neighborhood characteristics. And there are individual and interpersonal factors, like age, education, and family relationships. But there are also important consequences. Where one lives can affect access to housing, employment, social services—and to the basic structure of a community that so



Graphic:

Population count includes residents who identified themselves as black in combination with another race/ethnicity.

Source: 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, September 2011. Courtesy of Colorlines.com.

Black Belt Power: African Americans Come Back South, Change Political Landscape

By Chris Kromm

Much of the media buzz about the 2010 Census has focused on the role of Latinos and new immigrants in changing the face of the country.

It makes sense. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about half of the nation's growth over the last decade was driven by growth in the Latino community, much of it in Southern states.

But equally influential in the South's rapidly-changing demographics is another story with a longer historical arc: The return of many African Americans to Southern states after a decades-long exodus during the Jim Crow era.

The Great Migration of some 6 million African Americans from the South between World War I and 1970 is one of the most significant demographic upheavals in U.S. history. According to author Isabel Wilkerson, at the turn of the last century, 90 percent of all African Americans were living in the South. By the end of the Great Migration, nearly half were living outside the South, mostly in the cities of the North and West.

The civil rights movement did not end racism, of course, but it did change the

South enough to entice many African Americans to come back, igniting a reverse migration movement that continues to gain steam.

As a result, the South's share of the black population—57 percent—is now the highest it has been since 1960.* That is still less than the 90 percent mark before the Great Migration, but as the *New York Times* reported earlier this year, it is a dramatic change.

During the turbulent 1960s, black population growth in the South, and Southern states was less than 10 percent of the national increase. Since then, the South has increasingly claimed a greater share of black population growth—about half the country's total in the 1970s, two-thirds in the 1990s, and three-quarters in the decade that just ended.

The shift could significantly strengthen the political power of African Americans in the South, especially in the historic Black Belt stretching from the mid-Atlantic to East Texas. (See map on page 16 showing where the South's African American communities are concentrated, according to the latest Census data.)

A glimpse of the political force this represents was seen in 2008, when record-

breaking African American turnout helped push Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia into blue territory.

It's also seen in Georgia, the epicenter of the Black Belt, where the African American community grew by more than 579,000 since 2000—the leading ingredient in making it the seventh fastest-growing state in the country.

The 2010 Census also offers a glimpse of how Southern African American communities are changing. Atlanta echoes a trend found across the South and the country, where suburban black neighborhoods are growing at the expense of the urban core. The *New York Times* notes that “just 2 percent of the black population growth in the last decade occurred in counties that have traditionally been black population centers.”

African Americans moving South also tend to be young: 40 percent were ages 21 to 40, meaning that the political force of the latest phase of African American reverse-migration to the South will be felt for years to come. ■

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many families depend upon to survive and combat hard times like the ones in which, we now live.

Southern Discomfort

For decades, major cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West have suffered from de-industrialization and the associated job loss, residential segregation, infrastructure decay, and cost-of-living increases. The impact of these changes have been especially strong in black communities. Before the 2008 recession even began, the black populations of many big Midwestern cities had double-digit unemployment. “Folks are moving here for the lower cost of living,” says Sendolo Diaminah, who recently moved from New York to North Carolina and founded the community organization, People’s

Durham. “Some had family who were here. There are tons from New York. Some wanted to get their kids out of a situation of violence and drugs.”

But families fleeing the economic collapse in Rust Belt and Northeastern cities have likely found similar troubles in the South, which has suffered some of the hardest blows in the current downturn. The South used to outpace the nation in economic performance, due to in-migration and development. That trend has ceased. And while the South may have entered the recession with low unemployment rates, those rates have since risen dramatically, exceeding even some of struggling post-industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest. Black unemployment in Atlanta hit nearly 16 percent in 2010—twice the rate of 2007.

* The U.S. Census definition of “the South” includes Alabama, Arkansas, Washington DC, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Varying differences in defining “southern states” result in different totals in these reports.

On top of the job loss, suburban metropolitan areas in the South, like Atlanta, Miami, and Houston have high rates of job sprawl, in which jobs are neither centrally located nor equally distributed throughout the metro area. That makes job opportunities harder to find and jobs more difficult to manage once found. In fact, suburban poverty rates find their peak in Southern metro areas. And once-enticing housing markets have been damaged by high rates of foreclosure, which disproportionately affects blacks in Georgia and Florida (though other Southern states with large black populations, including Texas and North Carolina, have not been as severely affected).

The same dynamic is playing out in many suburbs. Desires for better employment opportunities, affordable housing, safer neighborhoods, and better schools are surely drawing many black families to the suburbs. But the trend of relocating to the suburbs may not always be driven by choice. Gentrification is likely pricing black families out of their homes in places like San Francisco, Oakland, and Washington, DC, cities that have seen significant black population loss paired with an influx of whites. Meanwhile, poverty is rapidly expanding in suburban communities and black population rates have grown fastest in lower-income suburbs, according to the Brookings Institute.

Furthermore, blacks are less likely than whites to live in suburbs with high job availability and suburban social service organizations often lack the capacity and funds to address increasing need. Many suburban governments have also been unwilling to accommodate new lower-income residents,

reluctant to build multi-unit housing, and opposed to the construction of shelters and social service centers. It is difficult to say that the suburban dream is being fulfilled for black America, especially when predatory lending and foreclosure rates continue to disproportionately impact black families and the nauseating wealth gap between blacks and whites further deepens.

The Cities Left Behind

Inner city neighborhoods that have lost black residents also face new challenges as a result of this migration. In cities across the country, community schools have been shuttered as the number of school-aged children has dropped. Inner cities, which still have high levels of need, can expect fewer federal funds as Census results inform the distribution of money for community development, utility assistance, Head Start programs, and senior housing.

The increased dispersal of black families across municipal boundaries may also impact the election of politicians most willing to address the unique concerns of black constituents. Black concentration in major cities allowed for the election of black mayors, city council members, and congressional representatives in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. With the black population spreading beyond central city neighborhoods, will black voting power be weakened? This is of specific concern now as states are redistributing and redrawing political districts based on the Census.

Connections to family, friends, and organizations in old neighborhoods will likely change as well. Will congregations

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**By the Numbers:
Black Flight in the S.F. Bay Area**

By Frank Lopez

- There were 480,000 African Americans living in the Bay Area’s nine counties, accounting for 6.7 percent of the area residents.
- The three counties with the largest share of African Americans were, Alameda (190,000), Contra Costa (97,000), and Solano (60,000), which accounted for nearly three-quarters of all African Americans living in the Bay Area.
- The three counties with the smallest African American populations were, Napa (2,600), Marin (7,000), and Sonoma (7,600).
- Only two counties had African Americans making up more than 10 percent of their total population: Alameda (12.6 percent) and Solano (14.7 percent).

Income Levels for African Americans

- The median household income for African Americans in the nine counties was \$48,000.
- The lowest median household income reported was in San Francisco County (\$29,000), followed by Alameda County (\$38,000).
- The highest median household income for African Americans was in Solano County (\$60,000), followed by Sonoma County (\$58,000).
- Counties with the lowest median household income had the largest percentage

decrease in their African American population since the 2000 census.

African American Transit Ridership

- On average, 14 percent of the Bay Area’s African Americans used public transportation to get to and from their jobs.
- Transit ridership was the highest in San Francisco County (39.9 percent), followed by Alameda (15 percent) and Contra Costa (12 percent) counties.
- Transit ridership was the lowest in Santa Clara County (2 percent), followed by Solano (3.5 percent) and San Mateo (7 percent) counties.
- Counties with the largest percentage increase in their African American population also showed the lowest transit ridership.

shrink? How will personal relationships be maintained or strained?

N'Tanya Lee, a former director of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, a grassroots organizing and policy advocacy organization in San Francisco, reflects on how housing stability and relationships stretched from city to suburb are impacting San Francisco Bay Area families. “A black high school student goes to school in San Francisco, stays with an auntie, but their mom lives with her boyfriend in Richmond and grandma lives in Hayward. She kind of lives here; kind of doesn't,” Lee says, painting a hypothetical picture of the instability. “What’s the anchor? Where’s the ‘home’ to organize around? Parents move to Sacramento and kids still go to school, crash with friends, or live with grandparents. Families are constantly traveling by BART and highways to visit core members of their families, who are spread out.”

As Lee suggests, with more black families spread across the metropolitan landscape, the strategies of progressive and grassroots organizers must adapt, too. How will organizing efforts arise from growing black communities themselves, as residents strive to add their voices to communities that may be experiencing racial diversity for the first time? Looking closely at the causes and consequences of black migration to the South and the suburbs, we can see there are new challenges to building power to make fundamental change.

Despite these challenges, it is important to remember that the growth of strong Southern black communities and the loosening of urban segregation are exciting events. Black



■ Photo: N'Tanya Lee, former executive director at Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, makes a point during the State of Black San Francisco presentation at the University of San Francisco. ©2011 Jane Philomen Cleland/Bay Area Reporter

America has responded to migrations that were both larger and more culturally significant than those we see today with adaptation and redefinition and renewed vitality.

The Applied Research Center is exploring black population shifts with an intent to serve organizing efforts and also reflect them. We are following and supporting a number of community organizations to learn more about movers and their communities and also to capture the trends and strategies they will use to organize in the midst of these population shifts. By looking up from Census reports and directly engaging community organizations, researchers can better compile, tailor, and disseminate clear and persuasive pictures of population change to support fights for powerful communities. ■

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Black Flight Between 2000 and 2010

- Overall, African American populations in the nine Bay Area counties decreased by 30,000 or 5.8 percent since the 2000 census.
- Five out of the nine counties—Santa Clara, Marin, Alameda, San Mateo, and San Francisco—showed a decrease in their African American populations.
- Three counties showed the largest percentage decrease in African Americans even as they showed an overall increase in populations. They were San Francisco (-19.2 percent; +3.7 percent), San Mateo (-17.7 percent; +1.6 percent), and Alameda (-11.7 percent; +4.6 percent).
- Alameda County had the highest absolute drop in the numbers of African Americans (-25,000), followed by San

Francisco (-11,000), and San Mateo (-4,000) counties.

- The four counties with the smallest percentage growth in population over the last 10 years—San Francisco, Marin, San Mateo, and Alameda—were also the counties with the largest decrease in their African American populations.

Black In-Flight Between 2000 and 2010

- Three of the four Bay Area counties with the largest percentage growth in overall population also had the largest percentage increase in their African American populations: Napa (+62 percent); Sonoma (+16.7 percent); and Contra Costa (+9.4 percent).
- The three counties showing the largest absolute growth in the numbers of

African Americans were: Contra Costa (+8,300), Solano (+1,900), and Sonoma (+1,000).

- The four counties—Napa, Solano, Sonoma, and Contra Costa—showing an increase in their African American populations were primarily suburban or rural.
- The counties with the highest percentage growth in their African American populations also had the highest median household income and lowest transit ridership in the region. Conversely, counties with the largest percent decrease in African Americans had the lowest median household income and highest transit ridership.

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