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In Portland's heart, 2010 Census shows diversity dwindling

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By Nikole Hannah-Jones, The Oregonian

Portland, already the whitest major city in the country, has become whiter at its core even as surrounding areas have grown more diverse.

Of 354 census tracts in Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties, 40 became whiter from 2000 to 2010, according to The Oregonian's analysis of the 2010 Census. Of those, two lie in rural Clackamas County. The 38 others are in Portland.

The city core didn't become whiter simply because lots of white residents moved in, the data show. Nearly 10,000 people of color, mostly African Americans, also moved out.

And those who left didn't move to nicer areas. Pushed out by gentrification, most settled on the city's eastern edges, according to the census data, where the sidewalks, grocery stores and parks grow sparse, and access to public transit is limited.

As a result, the part of Portland famous for its livability -- for charming shops and easy transit, walkable streets and abundant bike paths -- increasingly belongs to affluent whites.

The change raises unsettling questions for a city that prides itself on tolerance, social equity and valuing diversity. What did Portland, a city known for planning, do as people of color were forced to the city's fringes and beyond? What role did city leaders play in the dispersal? And as the city maps its future, what steps will it take to protect the diversity that remains?

"The exodus from the central city causes me great concern; it is alarming," Portland Mayor Sam Adams said. "Whether you are a Portlander of color or a white Portlander, you should care about the fact that we offer such limited access to equal opportunities."

Striking transformation

The rate of displacement surprised even people with a front-row view.

GRAPHIC: PORTLAND'S CENTRAL CITY GETS WHITER

MORE: WHAT PORTLAND LEADERS DID — AND DIDN'T DO — AS PEOPLE OF COLOR WERE FORCED TO THE FRINGES

"I am so saddened by these numbers," said Judith Mowry, who runs the city's Restorative Listening Project, which brings people together to discuss the harms of gentrification. "This is not a healthy, sustainable city; this is not who we want to be."

The trend also runs counter to state and citywide numbers. Overall, Oregon saw significant gains in communities of color, particularly with 64 percent growth for Latinos and 40 percent for Asians. Statewide, the nonwhite population climbed from 16 percent in 2000 to 22 percent in 2010.

Portland as a whole grew more diverse, too, with its nonwhite population increasing from 25 percent to 28 percent. Still, the city showed small gains in diversity compared with most big U.S. cities and solidified its position as the nation's whitest. For the first time, Multnomah County, dominated by Portland, took a back seat to Washington County as the state's most diverse.

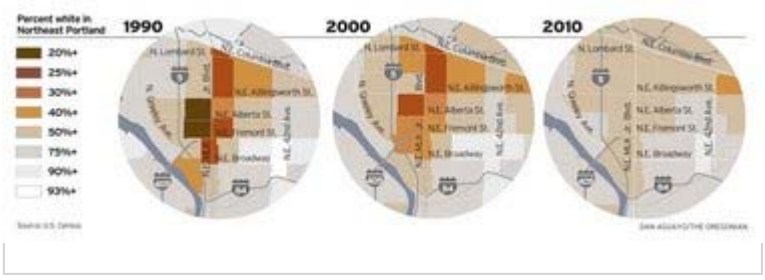
More

Lessons learned? What Portland leaders did -- and didn't do -- as people of color were forced to the fringes

The Oregonian's continuing coverage of 2010 Census

On the city's inner east side, however, most census tracts became whiter, even those already overwhelmingly white. Tracts along Southeast Stark Street, for example, climbed from 78 percent white to 82 percent, or 80 percent to 85 percent.

Inner North and Northeast witnessed the most striking transformation. The area bounded by the Willamette River, North Greeley Avenue, Northeast Columbia Boulevard, Northeast 42nd Avenue and Interstate 84 lost about 8,400 people of color, including 7,700 African Americans, or a loss of one in four compared with the population in 2000. Today, about 29,900 people of color remain in a total population of 105,500.



For people pushed from their cultural homes, the loss can be devastating. In all of Oregon, only Northeast Portland provides the cluster of churches, beauty salons, restaurants, nonprofits and political groups that signal to African Americans that they have a place in a very white state.

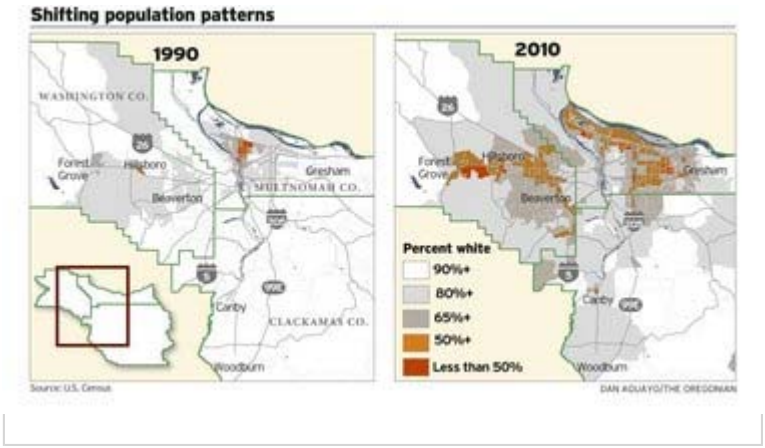
"Often residents no longer feel they have power in the community," Japonica Brown-Saracino, a Boston University ethnographer, said of such displacements. "Their social networks are gone."

North/Northeast remains home to the highest concentration of African Americans in the state. But in 2000, people of color outnumbered whites in 10 of the area's census tracts. A decade later, all of those tracts had flipped to majority white. One tract alone, encompassing the Woodlawn neighborhood, saw a net loss of 915 black residents and a net gain of 840 white residents, shifting from 33 percent white in 2000 to 53 percent white in 2010.

As Karen Gibson, a Portland State University urban planner, put it: "Those who can afford it push out those who can't."

"Fraud and deception"

How did we get here? Mowry said people like to think of what happened as completely in the past, unrelated to what we see today. But it's not history, she said. It's part of one long story of a city that today professes a live-and-let-live ethic but was once known as the most segregated city outside the South.



The seeds of gentrification were planted during World War II, when African Americans from the South flowed into Portland to take jobs in the shipyards.

Portland officials and community members, from real estate agents to bankers, pushed the black community into a small area called Lower Albina, near the present-day Rose Quarter, through redlining and other now-illegal practices. White Portlanders fled, and the city began a long pattern of disinvestment.

Street and sidewalk repairs were neglected, and the city did little to develop businesses or enforce housing codes, said Gibson, the PSU planner, who wrote a study in 2007 called "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000."

Many banks refused to make home loans in black areas. Some residents were denied loans for less money than their bank-approved car loans. Appraisers artificially devalued the area's housing stock, so even people who did own saw little growth in wealth or equity that they could tap to maintain their homes. Predatory lenders swept in, and the area became ripe for drugs and crime.

"The degree of fraud and deception perpetrated on the people of Albina was remarkable," Gibson wrote. "Hundreds rented substandard housing while others paid high rates or were swindled out of homeownership."

Beth Nakamura

Portland native Anjala Ehelebe, historian of Northeast Portland's Woodlawn neighborhood, moved there 27 years ago and has watched it undergo dramatic change. Woodlawn saw a net loss of 915 black residents from 2000 to 2010, more than any other Portland neighborhood, going from 33 percent white to 53 percent.

Anjala Ehelebe remembers the frustration she and others felt when she moved into Woodlawn 27 years ago. She'd fallen in love with a 1913 Craftsman bungalow on a double lot. Like her, Ehelebe's neighbors were black.

"There were people here who wanted to fix up their houses, but they couldn't," she said. "It's not a fair system, and people do the best with what they've got."

Ehelebe said the neighborhood got little help when gangs took hold. "We were told that (police) said, 'These people deserve the crime they get,'" said Ehelebe, who serves on the neighborhood board and wrote a book on Woodlawn's history. "Our property values just went down and down."

An investigation in The Oregonian in 1990 titled "Blueprint for a Slum" detailed the city's neglect and lenders' illegal practices. It found that Northeast Portland held one-third of the city's abandoned homes, with 26 percent in just two neighborhoods, Boise and King.

Block-by-block plan

The investigation inspired Gretchen Kafoury, then a new city commissioner, to lead a campaign to bring predatory lenders to justice and redevelopment dollars into the sagging neighborhoods.

The city and county collaborated to funnel local and federal money into the area and to transfer hundreds of tax-foreclosed properties to community development corporations created to repair and sell decrepit homes.

Kafoury led the city to adopt a block-by-block action plan in which code enforcers tracked down absentee landlords and forced them to fix up or sell their units, or face steep fines.

"We changed the whole focus with the way we dealt with the neighborhoods in inner Northeast," Kafoury

said. She also worked to shame banks that had abandoned or preyed on Northeast Portland into making loans there.

But that rush of official attention and investment had consequences after years of neglect.

Experts say Portland followed a typical road map to gentrification, which is challenging cities as demographically diverse as Seattle, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. First comes disinvestment in areas near downtown where affluent, typically white, residents have fled. Then comes an economic resurgence, drawing middle-class residents back.

Portland, with an economic boom in the 1990s, was ripe for the "new urbanism" wave in which young adults rediscovered the allure of old homes and the benefits of living close-in.

City reinvestment and the influx combined to send home prices and rents climbing. The urban-growth boundary, by restricting new construction, pushed prices even higher. Restaurants and boutiques opened, displacing longtime businesses and making the areas even more desirable to newcomers.

"We are now seeing people return to the cities, and it's an issue of personal taste and convenience," said Sabiyha Prince, an anthropology professor at American University who is writing a book on gentrification in Washington, D.C.

"The early pioneers of gentrification have been gay people, artists, empty-nesters, people who didn't necessarily have kids and didn't have to be concerned about putting their kids in the schools," she said. "But they are the ones who also have access to the loans."

Ehelebe watched her neighborhood change in ways both good and bad in the 1990s. She liked the diversity of her block as more whites and Latinos moved in, and she liked that her home value inched up.

She didn't like the assumption that white residents made the neighborhood better, or the lengthening list of closed black businesses.

But it was nothing like what was to come.

"Oh my God," Kafoury said when shown the 2010 Census figures. "We thought we were doing a good thing."

-- Nikole Hannah-Jones 

-- Betsy Hammond contributed to this report.