

Blacks leaving the Bay? New report on black population trends in Oakland reveals 'alarming' results

Published on Wednesday, November 24, 2010

Last updated on 06:55AM, Tuesday, November 30, 2010

Figure 3 Map of Change in Total and Black Populations by County from 2000-2008



Map of Black Population Trends in the Bay Area, 2000-2008

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For decades, Oakland was what George Clinton would refer to as a "chocolate city" — one with a majority-black population.

However, "State of Blacks in the Bay," a recent study by Urban Strategies analyzing the Bay Area's overall diversity, as well as the state of its African American residents, confirms what many have suspected: Oakland is no longer a chocolate city.

In 2010, Oakland still claims the largest percentage of African-American residents in the region. However, the city has become a melting pot of multiculturalism, a destination for diversity encompassing an ethnic stew of black, white, Asian and Latino peoples — both natives and immigrants. Yet the much-touted Oaktown renaissance, which has seen a development boom over the past decade, has coincided - perhaps not coincidentally - with a significant drop in its black population, suggesting that many longterm residents have indeed been displaced by newcomers.

Gentrification isn't the only factor in the black exodus, Urban Strategies maintain; in addition to displacement due to development, the lack of affordable housing, foreclosures and underemployment have all played a role. So too, has the proximity of the black population to violent crime and the cycle of incarceration and recidivism, which has resulted in young black adult males declining at a faster rate than other age groups.

A quick review of the study's data reveals that overall, diversity is up throughout the Bay Area, yet the black population is steadily declining in urban cities, which have had the largest number of African-American residents historically, like Richmond, Oakland and San Francisco. Furthermore, in the past decade, cities such as Berkeley and Daly City have experienced a significantly greater decline in African-American population than other cities in the region. Conversely, suburban or bedroom communities such as Antioch, San Leandro and Mountain View have seen as much as a triple-digit rise in the number of blacks.

Specifically, the study found that:

--"At a county level, Alameda, San Francisco, San Mateo and Marin all experienced declines in the proportion of Blacks among their populations, while the other five counties saw a rise in Black population proportions.

--"In AlamedaCounty, the proportional drop in Black population was a result of increased proportions of Latinos and Asians. In San Francisco, the drop in Blacks as a proportion was offset by an increase in the proportion of White, Latino, and Asian people.

--"In Oakland and Richmond, the drop in Black population was offset almost completely by Whites, while in Berkeley the decline in Black population (and for Multi-Race persons) was a result of increased proportions of Whites and Asians. In Daly City, the decrease across all ethnic groups was a result of an increased proportion of Asians. In Vallejo, the drop in Black and White proportions was matched

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by increased proportions of Asian and Multi-race persons."

The study also found what is characterized as an "alarming" drop in the populations of 20- to 29-year-old black males, which could be attributed to "more troubling factors like incarceration, homicide and premature deaths as possible contributors to this reality."

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So, what does this study mean for the future of diversity in the Bay Area and the future of Oakland's black community in particular?

We asked Urban Strategies' Junious Williams and Steve Spiker to comment on their findings. Here's what they had to say:

Oakland Local: Regionally speaking, your data suggests we're seeing an overall drop in diversity as well as a drop in black populations, which is epidemic in a few places, most notably Berkeley and San Mateo. The black population also has lessened considerably in San Francisco. In general, can we attribute this to housing and economic factors?

Steve Spiker: As the report notes, there are a variety of factors that influence regional population trends. Economic factors surely play a major role with many families seeking more affordable housing in outer suburbs and with jobs moving to larger corporations setting up in these ring suburbs also. Other factors include families seeking safer communities and better schools. Foreclosure has had an added impact although not enough research has been done into where foreclosure victims are moving across the region.

Junious Williams: Regarding diversity, the data indicate a trend towards increasing diversity in about half the cities in the region, although a shift in the composition of the ethnic minority groups that contribute to the diversity.

OL: In your executive summary, you characterize the underrepresentation of black males between 20 and 29 as "alarming" and suggest "we must consider other, more troubling factors like incarceration, homicide and premature deaths as possible contributors to this reality." What led you to this conclusion?

SS: Our deep connections with our community and a long history of working in the black community as well as extensive data and research that shows disproportionate levels of incarceration amongst black males both leads us to correlate these things with the 'gap' in black populations you refer to.

OL: Looking at Oakland specifically, it retains the highest numbers of black people, but that population is still trending downward. Your report states, "The Black population in Oakland decreased in proportion by 6.6 percent, while White residents increased by 6.2 percentage points," And you cite a 25 percent overall decrease in Oakland's African-American population over the last decade. Is there a connection between this decline and the much-touted Oakland renaissance? In other words, has the perception that Oakland is on the rise come at the expense of its African Americans?

SS: This is a difficult question to answer. We see much of the appeal of our city as being driven by and a product of a rich black history and culture. At the same time, one cannot ignore the much more recent influence and visibility of the hipster influx. However, the diversity and strength of this city is also reflected in the growing Asian and Latino culture of our residents and their significant impact on our food, art and business culture.

JW: Much of the decline appears to be connected to issues such as a lack of affordable housing for families and the apparent attractiveness of affordable family size homes in the outer suburbs and the northern towns in the Central Valley.

OL: Your study suggests "many Black (and other races) families are moving even further from the Bay Area in search of newer and lower cost housing in cities such as Tracy, Lodi, and Stockton." So, in effect, we are seeing reverse white flight back to dense urban areas and a black exodus from these same areas, correct?

JW: Not necessarily migrating back. It is more likely that people who are moving from rental tenure to ownership find some of the lowest cost ownership housing (condos and single family) in Oakland and drawing people from San Francisco and San Jose who want ownership, but an urban culture and amenities.

OL: Given this statistical data, is it fair to say that fears of gentrification by longtime black residents of Oakland are well-founded?

SS: There is both anecdotal and statistical evidence of gentrification in Oakland, yes.

OL: Is there any way to reverse this trend? Or, in your opinion, will this trend become even more prevalent, barring an influx of new jobs, a reform of the public education system and a drop in incarceration, recidivism and homicide rates — all of which seems unlikely?

JW: The city of San Francisco has probably been the most active in focusing on the pattern of black population decline and has attempted to address it through its certificate program for black families who were displaced due to redevelopment in the historically black neighborhoods of the city. Their efforts include trying to rebuild the database of those who received the certificates as well as active outreach to

locate families with certificates and advising them of their rights to housing as a result of those certificates. The SF Redevelopment Agency has been active in leading this process.

For more info, visit [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

The complete study is below. Spiker and Williams say Phase II of their study, expected in 2011, will address the cultural, economic and social impact of their findings.

[State of Bay Area Blacks Report Part I](#)

About Eric K Arnold



Eric K. Arnold has been writing about urban music culture since the mid-1990s, when he was the Managing Editor of now-defunct 4080 Magazine. Since then, he's been a columnist for such publications as The Source, XXL, Murder Dog, Africana.com, and the East Bay Express; his work has also appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, Vibe, Wax Poetics, SF Weekly, XLR8R, the Village Voice and Jamrock, as well as the academic anthologies Total Chaos and The Vinyl Ain't Final. Eric began his journalistic career while DJing on college radio station KZSC, and remembers well the early days of hip-hop radio, before consolidation, and commercialization set in. He currently lives in Oakland, California.

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