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### **Census Fuels Debate Over Integration**

- Demographics: Experts clash over the degree of black assimilation.

By ROBIN FIELDS, Times Staff Writer

After 10 years of waiting for new census data and three months of analyzing it, the nation's demographics experts are sharply divided on whether segregation of blacks eased in the 1990s.

Three main factions have emerged, offering up the same numbers as proof that (1) integration reached historic levels, (2) integration stalled or (3) what looks like new integration is a temporary mirage.

On their debate turns a fundamental notion of American progress.

Integration has been the goal of 40 years of activism, civil rights law and public policy. Nevertheless, decades after segregation became illegal, blacks remain the nation's most isolated racial or ethnic group and white flight continues to undermine the formation of stable mixed neighborhoods.

The demographers' dueling racial portraits also show how the seemingly mechanical task of sorting census numbers can become infused with politics and emotion.

The March release of the first, most basic racial and ethnic breakdowns from the 2000 census triggered an avalanche of scholarly analysis, unveiled at a series of conferences around the country.

The computations showed unequivocally that African Americans are slowly moving to the suburbs, continuing a steady trickle that began in the 1970s.

In the Los Angeles area, thousands of blacks left their historic communities in Compton, Inglewood and Watts in favor of affordable outlying cities such as Hawthorne, Palmdale and Long Beach and the Inland Empire's boom towns. Similarly, blacks moved from Chicago into a belt of classically white suburbs south of that city and from Boston into a host of surrounding towns.

But demographers disagree sharply over whether this migration has yielded or will result in long-term, stable integration.

One bloc, led by the heavyweight Brookings Institution think tank, sees clear-cut incremental progress in the numbers.

In a report titled "Racial Segregation in the 2000 Census: Promising News," Brookings concluded that 272 of the nation's 291 metropolitan areas became more integrated in the 1990s, with the fast-growing West and South changing more swiftly than entrenched parts of the Midwest and Northeast.

Census tracts with less than 1% black population have dropped nationwide from almost 40% in 1960 to 23% in 2000, the report found. Far fewer blacks live in tracts that are 80% or more black.

"I just can't understand how you can look at the numbers and not see this is the third decade of progressive change," said Edward Glaeser, co-author of the report.

But demographics guru John Logan at the State University of New York in Albany argues that the Brookings analysis focused too much on smaller metropolitan areas, where few blacks live. In the urban areas where the vast majority of African Americans reside, they are less isolated from other minorities, but as isolated or more so from whites, Logan contended in a rival study.

"It's a mistake to talk about the breakthrough," said Logan, director of the State University of New York's Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research. "The only evidence of it comes from places where there are few minorities to incorporate. In the other America, where 80% to 90% of minorities live, there's been very small change, if any."

USC demographers came to similar conclusions in their comparison of segregation benchmarks in Los Angeles County from 1940 to 2000.

In 1940, whites in Los Angeles County had a 1% chance of having a black neighbor in their census tract; in 2000, the USC report found, that had risen only slightly, to 5%. By contrast, the probability that blacks will have Latino neighbors increased from 11% in 1970 to 41% in 2000.

"Their exposure is to Latinos," said Philip Ethington, one of the USC study's authors.

A third faction of academics agrees with Brookings that suburbs became more integrated by blacks in the 1990s--but only less desirable ones with weak schools, few jobs and declining tax bases, they contend.

This group, headed by Gary Orfield, Glaeser's colleague at Harvard University and a director of the school's Civil Rights Project, says the 2000 snapshot captured these places midway through a transition that ultimately will leave them as ghettoized as city cores.

Most tellingly, school systems in some suburbs are already majority minority, presaging what will come in future censuses among adults, Orfield said.

"What you're actually seeing is very rapid transition that looks like integration at one particular point in time," he said. "You could really misinterpret this."

The more optimistic Glaeser called Orfield's interpretation "nonsense." In the 1990s, the biggest shift was in communities that became 1% to 10% black, rather than in those communities that experienced larger spikes that might indicate white flight, he said.

Glaeser said the transition Orfield is describing is akin to "Cleveland in 1940," when "27 or 28 of the communities that looked mildly integrated flipped [to majority black]. This looks totally different. The guys who are pushing that there

is no change are doing a disservice."

Ingrid Gould Ellen, a New York University professor who studies integrated neighborhoods, sees the seeds of more stable racial balance in the Brookings analysis. Still, she said, formidable attitudinal forces weigh against blacks making extensive headway into much of suburbia, even as white flight has softened into what she terms "white avoidance."

"We have seen a greater willingness to live in integrated neighborhoods, but it is the white households without children or who are renters," she said.

USC's Ethington suggested that some of the demographers' differences may be rooted in the historic concerns of their regions.

The Brookings report divides the racial universe into blacks and nonblacks. The State University of New York report takes the same data and charts interaction between whites and nonwhites.

USC's research reflects the viewpoint of a place with four major ethnic groups, none a majority, where whites and blacks are in the strangely parallel position of being displaced by upsurging Latino and Asian populations, he said.

"Some of the difference is the perspective of the researchers, but the other difference is the territory," Ethington said. "The regions have very different characteristics."

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