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Jersey's new blend isn't block by block

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BY ROBERT GEBELOFF
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New Jersey's growing diversity has had little impact on the state's historical pattern of black-white housing segregation, a Star-Ledger analysis of recently released 2000 census figures shows.

The population of non-Hispanic whites -- the majority group in New Jersey -- fell by about 160,000 in the past decade, while the nonwhite and Hispanic population increased by about 850,000, according to the census. But while most Asians and many Hispanics live in integrated neighborhoods, two-thirds of whites and blacks in New Jersey continue to live in places made up mainly of people like themselves.

Experts say a combination of factors conspired to keep the groups apart.

"There has been a small movement over time of African-Americans out of the cities. But most of the time, black suburbs become extensions of the ghetto across city boundaries," said Douglas Massey, a demographer at the University of Pennsylvania who studies segregation. "And in the case of suburbs that are truly integrated, the integration is often fragile."

In a book he co-wrote after the 1990 census, "American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass," Massey cited New Jersey as one of the most segregated places in the nation. Around the same time, researchers at the University of Michigan who studied the 1990 data declared Newark and the counties surrounding it among the 10 most segregated regions in the country.

Joseph Gaskin is one of only 75 black residents counted by the 2000 census in Park Ridge, an affluent community of 8,700 in northern Bergen County. A former head of the

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local NAACP, he has spoken out against the harassment he says he sometimes encounters as one of the few African-Americans in his neighborhood.

"You just have to have the self-confidence to be able to deal with the little subtle things that happen to you up here," he said. "If you're coming here to put your kids in a better school and you get hassled by your neighbor, hopefully you're not going to let that deter you. You can't let things distract you from the reason you moved up here in the first place."

Geneve LaRue, an executive at Saint Barnabas Medical Center, is a black New Jerseyan who chose to live in a predominantly black community. She had spent much of her adult life in the integrated Camden County community of Winslow Township, but when she was hired to run a mentoring program for young people in Essex County, she moved to East Orange.

She stayed in East Orange even after taking the job at the hospital in Livingston -- although not without reservations.

"It's a very tough question," she said. "On one hand, I do enjoy living in an African-American community. But on the other hand, I don't feel comfortable riding my bike. I mean, we have a wonderful park here, but I don't feel comfortable using it."

In 1980, the census showed about 200,000 black residents of suburban or rural communities in New Jersey. The 2000 figures released last week put that number at more than 330,000.

But the figures also revealed a number of towns where a significant increase in the black population was accompanied by a significant decrease in the white population. This change occurred in nine towns in the suburban "inner ring" of Newark, all of them west or south of the city, as well as in eight towns in Camden County.

Black population growth has integrated schools but less often neighborhoods. Most towns with substantial black and white populations have sections that are nearly all-white and all-black.

History shows that the white/black shift tends to accelerate until a town transforms from predominantly white to predominantly black -- just as segregated as before. In 1980, Irvington was 56 percent white and 38 percent black. Since then, the white population has declined by nearly 29,000, while the black population has jumped by 26,000, making the township, which adjoins Newark, 82 percent black and 9 percent white.

"The whole issue revolves around when whites no longer feel they are a comfortable majority," says Clement Price, a history professor at Rutgers University-Newark. "Social

scientists have been studying this for years, and use the 'tipping point' concept to explain it. When a community or school district approaches 33 percent black, that's usually the signal to the white majority that the town is going to tip over."

The populations of South Orange and Maplewood, less than 10 percent black in 1980, are 33 percent black now. Leaders in both communities are actively campaigning to prevent tipping.

Much of the white exodus, says Maplewood Mayor Vic DeLuca, followed a statewide pattern. In Essex County, empty nesters who found themselves with too much house and high property taxes left Essex County for other parts of the state.

"I think suburban sprawl accounts for some of that. . . . Then again, some of that white population was the elderly that moved out," DeLuca said.

Middle-class blacks moved in. When Robert Marchman got a job with the New York Stock Exchange in 1992, he looked all over the New York area for a new hometown, he said, before choosing Maplewood.

"What African-Americans often find in the suburbs is not a level playing field," he said. "For example, what you might find is your children being treated with different expectations in school because of their race. Children of color tend to be placed on a lower track. So it was important to me to live someplace where my children would be accepted for who they are, and not have race be the sole determinant of whether they'd grow up to be successful."

"Our goal is to balance demand," says Barbara Heisler Williams, president of the South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race. "We don't want to slip past integration and into resegregation."

Williams, who is white, says efforts to attract whites who want to live in an integrated community, as well as efforts to get real estate agents to show houses in all parts of the two towns, not just the neighborhoods bordering Newark, to black prospective buyers, began to pay dividends over the last few years.

"These towns are still racially stratified and economically stratified, but we're working on it," she said. "We have more balance in who's moving in than we did just four years ago."

In neighboring West Orange, the black population has grown by 7,000 since 1980, while the white population has dropped by that amount. Yet Mayor John McKeon said home values have risen 40 percent over that time -- a sign of a thriving municipality.

"I don't think it's white flight as much as, perhaps, the ability of persons of color to be able to afford a community like West Orange," McKeon said. "These are people of means who felt comfortable enough coming here, because West Orange has traditionally been a town that was religiously and culturally diverse."

While many forms of racism are fading, housing segregation has proven a stubborn force. "Housing has been, among all race relations, among the slowest to change, because it involves the most direct contact between people," said Massey. "It's not like there's a lot of panic-selling by whites when blacks move into a neighborhood anymore. Instead, it's more of a reluctance of whites that are looking for new housing to enter areas that are substantially integrated."

Russell Ben-Ali contributed to this report.

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