

People of color are increasingly making the dream of suburban home ownership a reality, but 2000 US Census figures also show many communities are growing increasingly segregated.

While the suburban minority population increased over the past decade, census figures show the segregation of blacks and Latinos from whites and Asians also grew. And the poorer quality of neighborhoods where blacks and Latinos tend to be concentrated, researchers say, suggests that segregation is not simply a matter of choice, but a combination of discriminatory housing practices, a lack of adequate affordable housing choices, and the lingering perception that people of color are unwelcome in many neighborhoods.

"There is a very strong cost to segregation for blacks and Hispanics," said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center at the University at Albany, which studied segregation patterns in Greater Boston. Neighborhoods with densely concentrated black and Latino populations tend to be less desirable places to live, the Mumford Center found, and are likely to have higher poverty levels, struggling schools, and more crime.

"That undercuts the idea that for these groups segregation is a matter of choice," Logan said. "The option of living in segregated but well-served neighborhoods, for the most part, does not exist for these groups."

The census found that blacks are particularly segregated - 43 percent of the state's black population is in Boston, almost entirely in the Dorchester, Mattapan and Roxbury neighborhoods.

Strong patterns of segregation of black residents extend to the nearby suburbs. For example, blacks represent 10 percent of Milton's population - giving the town the sixth largest percentage of black residents in the state - but nearly all are confined to an area of less than 2 square miles, along the Mattapan border. East of Canton Avenue, blacks make up less than 5 percent of Milton's population.

Latino communities in Greater Boston also tend to be concentrated. About 60 percent of Lawrence's population is Latino, mostly people of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent, representing the largest percentage of Latinos in the state. In Chelsea, Latinos, primarily Puerto Ricans and Salvadorans, account for 48 percent of the population. No city or town in the state has a black population of more than 26 percent, or an Asian population of more than 17 percent.

The percentage of minority residents in suburban communities doubled, from 5 to 10 percent, between 1990 to 2000, but much of that increase was the result of white residents moving to communities outside of Route 128, said Nancy McArdle, a researcher for the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Communities with the largest minority population growth over the past decade also had the greatest loss of white residents, McArdle found. For example, the number of Latinos in Lawrence grew by 13,777 over the past decade, while the number of whites in the city dropped by

13,829. Quincy's Asian population shot up by 8,422, while its white population sank by 8,161. The number of blacks in Brockton nearly doubled, growing by nearly 10,000, but nearly 17,000 whites left the city during the decade.

The greatest increase in white population occurred in Franklin, Mansfield, Plymouth and Hopkinton, communities that are between 93 and 95 percent white.

Suburban communities with more balanced distribution of minority residents still tend to be segregated along town lines. For example, Randolph is one of the most integrated communities in the state, with much of its 38 percent minority population evenly distributed. Yet several of its border towns, including Braintree, Holbrook, Avon and Canton, are more than 90 percent white.

The towns neighboring Brockton, which has a minority population of nearly 42 percent, include Abington, Whitman, East Bridgewater and West Bridgewater, each of them more than 95 percent white.

Lawrence, which is 66 percent nonwhite, is bordered by Methuen, Andover, and North Andover, each with minority populations of 10 percent or less.

"Massachusetts . . . is unusual, in that it has these distinct little towns, whereas a lot of other places in the country are more county based," McArdle said. "Even towns that are very close in proximity are seen as quite autonomous, and quite different."

As a result, a city or town that is perceived as being welcoming to minorities will draw them in large numbers, while nearby communities can remain largely white, McArdle said.

"Much of it has to do with the attitudes of realtors in the town and whether they are committed to fair housing issues, and showing to people of different racial backgrounds," McArdle said.

Housing officials and researchers who have studied segregation patterns in the area say the commonly cited causes - lower income and personal choice - don't tell the whole story.

"We think that some of it has to do with choice, and some of it has to do with opportunity, but opportunity is often constrained by steering," said David Harris, executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston.

"Realtors and landlords tend to point people toward neighborhoods and exclude them from other neighborhoods."

In 2001, the center released a report detailing discriminatory rental practices in Boston and its 12 border communities. It found that more than half of minority apartment seekers were subjected to discrimination. A study of practices in home sales is underway.

But while blatant practices such as steering people to or away from specific areas still exist, most forms of discrimination are subtler, such as quoting higher rent prices, or imposing stricter leasing terms and conditions on minorities. Even the absence of people of color in real estate ads and posters can have an effect, Harris said.

"These events, while less blatant than steering, can make people feel like the community is less welcoming," Harris said.

In general, Asians are more evenly distributed in and around Boston, but many are clustered by ethnic group. Lowell has the state's largest Asian population, predominantly Cambodian immigrants and their families drawn to factory jobs in the 1980s and 1990s. The large population of Chinese residents in north and central Quincy, many of whom moved from Boston's Chinatown in the 1980s and 1990s, gives the city the second-largest Asian population in the state.

Burlington is more than 10 percent Asian, made up mostly of Indians drawn to high-tech firms dotting Route 128, giving the town the state's seventh largest Asian population.

But the lack of homogeneity, compounded by language and cultural differences, creates segregation within the Asian population, said Kao Li, executive director of Quincy Asian Resources Inc.

"If you think of Asians as iron filings, they are all over the city, the South Shore, and the metropolitan area," Li said. "But there is nothing that binds Asians together."

He said organizations like Quincy Asian Resources are needed to act as magnets, to give Asians in the area better access to housing and other resources, and to foster a sense of pan-Asian community.

Some suburbs have become markedly more diverse in the past decade. Randolph, for example, is 38 percent nonwhite, according to census data, almost double what it was in 1990. Yet the perception that mostly white communities may be unwelcoming is enough to keep minority groups away, even from those striving to become more diverse.

"There is always a gap between actual changes and perceptions of change," said Harris. "Even in communities where people want to be more welcoming, sometimes that is hard to see. And when you are talking about [minority groups] potentially putting their families at risk, they may be a little more cautious."

Harris points to a lack of available affordable housing in the suburbs as one reason behind the segregation of blacks and Latinos in and around Boston.

A state law, Chapter 40B, was designed to encourage the construction of affordable housing, but many communities have been resistant to accommodate such projects, saying they fear overdevelopment. The law allows developers to bypass most zoning

regulations if 25 percent of the project's units are classified as affordable and a community's affordable housing stock is below the state's threshold of 10 percent.

Most of the communities with the highest minority populations also had a stock of affordable housing units well above 10 percent. In 2001, nearly 20 percent of Boston's housing units were in 40B developments. And 40B units make up more than 10 percent of housing units in Chelsea, Cambridge, Lawrence, Lowell and Brockton.

"It does appear that there is a correlation between the strength of a community's resistance to 40B and the lack of diversity in those communities," Harris said.

Researchers also say income, long thought to be a primary factor in keeping minorities out of some communities, is only a minor part of the equation. Harris and Logan said their research reveals that while the average income of blacks, Latinos, and Asians lags behind that of whites, even whites with lower incomes usually have more options when it comes to choosing where to live.

"The average black person who earns more than \$60,000 lives in an area with almost double the poverty rate as the average white person earning less than \$30,000," Logan said.

"Clearly, race has a big impact in what kind of neighborhood you have access to."