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Business**LATEST NEWS**

DAY 1

Blacks Find Affluent Suburban Niche

September 7, 2003

By MIKE SWIFT, Courant Staff Writer

Floyd Bagwell Jr. has always loved his neighborhood in southwestern Windsor. He and his wife, Ethel, have lived here for about 30 years; they raised two children and built two successful careers.

It's a place, said Bagwell, an administrator at Eastern Connecticut State University, where people know the difference between being neighbors and being friends.

"You don't find folk crawling all over each other," Bagwell said. "We shed tears together when tears are called for, but we maintain a safe distance for people to have their space, for people to be who they are."

Utterly unremarkable from the outside, a collection of 1970s-era raised ranches and cul-de-sacs, of joggers and gas grills and swing sets, Bagwell's neighborhood is in fact exceptional: It has the largest number of prosperous African American households in Connecticut - those with incomes topping \$100,000, or roughly double the median household income for the state.

In the 1990s, cities such as Atlanta and Washington, D.C., and, increasingly, their suburbs, emerged as beacons for the nation's growing black middle class, with Atlanta being called a modern-day Harlem by some. And yet black households in metropolitan Hartford are more likely to be affluent than black households in the metropolitan areas of Atlanta, Chicago, Boston, Providence, New Haven, Philadelphia or Raleigh-Durham, according to an analysis of data from the 2000 Census by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research.

The focus on poverty in the central city, much of it black poverty, has long obscured the size of the region's affluent black population. For whites, wealth is concentrated in Fairfield County. But the latest census shows that, by far, Connecticut's largest concentration of black middle-class and affluent families is in and around Hartford.

Since 1980, Greater Hartford's middle-class blacks have made a significant geographic switch, from predominantly urban to principally suburban. The urban exodus cost Hartford about a quarter of its black middle-class population during the 1990s alone, with significant ramifications for the city's political power structure.

"You hear the talk in the street that blacks have had their time, their time has come and gone," said Steve Harris, a former member of the Hartford City Council. Harris doesn't believe that talk, but said there is a political byproduct to the move to the suburbs: "As you move out, maybe you do lose strength at your core. But as you move out, your influence spreads."

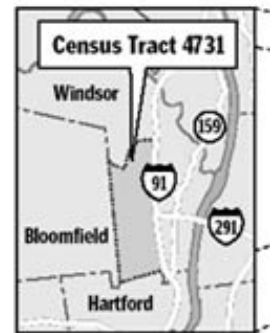
In fact, a large black middle-class enclave has been gaining strength to the north and, to a lesser degree, to the east of the city. In Windsor, the new census estimated the median household income of black households in Floyd Bagwell's neighborhood at greater than \$78,000 in 1999, a figure that put blacks in southwestern Windsor virtually on par with the median income of towns such as Haddam, Glastonbury and Granby.

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To listen to Bagwell and some of his neighbors speak about their neighborhood is to hear a wellspring of pride in how they live, maintain their homes and raise their families.

"One of the strengths that you find in that particular community is the example people set for others," Bagwell, 55, said. "I think to a person, we all tried to be law-abiding citizens, above censure or reproach. I just can't think of anybody who would bring dishonor to the neighborhood."

Bagwell is part of a circle of black educators who, attracted by the proximity of work, culture and churches in Hartford, combined with the living space and quality schools of the suburbs, bought homes in southwest Windsor during the 1970s, '80s and '90s. They are one reason for the notable black prosperity on streets like Longview Drive, Windbrook Road and Lincoln Way.

Yet, to have lived in Bagwell's prosperous neighborhood - known in government nomenclature as Census Tract 4731 - is not always to have felt that class trumps race. Not even in the suburbs.

Some neighborhood residents believe they came to live here as a result of racial steering by real estate agents. When it came time for Windsor to racially balance its elementary schools in the early 1990s, Bagwell and others wanted to know why their children had to ride the bus to the northern part of town, instead of the children of white parents in the Poquonock section riding south.

Sometimes they wonder whether services are delivered equally in all parts of town. Sometimes they wonder whether the quality of education their children receive is as valued by the community as that of the white children. Others felt the sting when whites fled as blacks moved in during the 1970s and 1980s.

Despite the relative affluence of blacks in Bagwell's neighborhood, the nearby Windsor Shopping Center is dominated by discount retailers such as All For A Buck, and a discount Price Rite grocery store where food is sold from cardboard boxes and you have to bring your own shopping bag.

"I think people are totally oblivious to the fact that you have a potential market there," Bagwell said of the neighborhood's black affluence. "It's that whole 'we don't want to know,' because the color of money is different this time, and the concentration of the color of money is different now."

Black Exodus

In 1980, about 60 percent of the region's middle-class blacks lived in Hartford, and the city's middle-class black population grew substantially over the ensuing decade.

The 1990s, however, were a different story. Hartford lost roughly 2,000 middle-class black households between 1990 and 2000 - exact comparisons are difficult because the government changed its racial definitions for the new census and because there is no objective definition of middle class.

For the first time in its history, Hartford's black population declined over the course of a decade during the 1990s.

By 2000, more than two-thirds of the region's middle-class blacks lived outside of Hartford. Most families didn't move far from the city. Nearly half the region's suburban blacks live in just two towns: Bloomfield and Windsor.

The District of Columbia experienced a similar exodus during the 1990s, as black middle-class residents moved out of the district to adjacent Prince George's County, Md., said Roderick Harrison, a demographer with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, an African American think tank in Washington. Blacks are a growing majority in Prince George's, a once-white county that recently elected its first African American county executive.

"It's clearly deeply rooted in the American aspirations that suburbanizing, moving to better neighborhoods and better schools, is the way to improve one's life and the opportunities for their children," Harrison said. "What it does point out is that it's a

two-edged sword. It solves some of the problems for some of the people who are able to move out. But it makes the neighborhoods from which they moved out all the poorer."

For the District of Columbia and Hartford, the black middle-class exodus meant decreasing population and increasing poverty. The suburbs have been the beneficiaries: In both Bloomfield and Windsor, blacks have higher median household incomes than whites.

And, as in Washington, the fact that Hartford is a center of government may be one reason for the relative prosperity of blacks in metro Hartford.

"State capitals are very good places" for black workers, Harrison said. "I think the consensus is, in fact, that governments are accountable, or feel accountable, to population pressures. That means they have been more aggressive, and more open, in hiring and promotions" of black workers.

That is also true for Hartford's insurance industry, which moved faster than large employers in many other cities to reduce discrimination and to actually recruit minority workers, said Andrew Walsh, an urban historian at Trinity College.

"Before the 1960s, virtually everywhere in New England, only a few blacks were allowed to hold jobs beyond menial jobs," Walsh said. "It's pretty clear ... that the business community in Hartford in the '60s moved faster than in other places to remove absolute barriers of discrimination."

Indeed, many blacks migrated to Hartford from other parts of the country because they viewed it as a place of economic opportunity.

Ruth Colvin moved from North Carolina to teach in the Hartford schools in 1968, after her sister, Francis, who was already living here, wrote that she could earn a much better salary teaching in Connecticut. The Hartford schools were actively recruiting black teachers at the time, and Colvin became the first black regular classroom teacher at Burr School.

Colvin first lived in Hartford, on Niles Street. But after growing up in a small town in the South, Colvin never really felt comfortable living in the city. After moving to Bloomfield, she later relocated to southwestern Windsor, in Census Tract 4731, to be in the same neighborhood as her sister.

"My sister and I being close, I followed her over here," Colvin said.

Proving Yourself

"I can honestly tell you, I love Windsor," said Jeanette Cave, welcoming a visitor into the neat kitchen of the home where she's lived since 1978.

Back then, the Caves were among the first black families in the neighborhood, but hundreds of middle-class families have followed over the past 25 years. Census Tract 4731 is now 40 percent black, according to the 2000 Census, up from 28 percent a decade earlier. Black households in the neighborhood, home to about 6,000 people in southwest Windsor between I-91 and the Bloomfield line, have a median income 27 percent higher than the median for the neighborhood's whites.

Perhaps the most notable characteristic of Census Tract 4731 is its modesty. Income and temperament here don't support the ostentation visible in some of the state's richest neighborhoods, among things like stone walls framing a three-car driveway or manicured landscaping. One of the Windsor neighborhood's big collective projects is the placement, each Christmas Eve, of candle luminaria lining the neighborhood's streets.

About 36 percent of the neighborhood's adult workers are in management, professional and related occupations, with the most common jobs being in education, health and social services and in manufacturing, according to census data. It's not a neighborhood of young people: The median age is 42.3 years old, nearly five years older than the median age for the state.

Like many neighborhood residents, Cave left Hartford for the suburbs in search of better schools for her three children. Her son now has a college degree; her older daughter has a master's degree, while her youngest daughter attends the University of Pittsburgh.

Cave, a senior center director, believes Windsor is a racially tolerant place. But that doesn't mean she hasn't encountered bias. Once, when one of her daughters was very young, she got locked outside by mistake. A white neighbor refused to let the crying girl into their house; Cave can only think of one reason why the family, who quickly moved out of the integrated neighborhood, would do that.

"It's very subtle," Cave said. "When you're making \$10,000, people just tell you what they think. When you're making \$75,000, people don't. You learn the signs and you just say, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' And you let it go."

Looking South?

Even as they praise the place where they live, some of the families in Census Tract 4731 feel a sense of restlessness.

Invariably, their children graduate from college and decide to live out of state, frequently in the Sunbelt. Some of the parents increasingly think about following.

Unlike metro Atlanta and many other cities with large middle class or affluent black populations, Greater Hartford's middle class black population experienced only modest growth during the 1990s.

The region's slow economy during the 1990s is almost certainly one reason, experts say. The loss of manufacturing jobs in the Hartford area also may have disproportionately hit blacks, who tend to be heavily represented in those jobs.

Southern states - led by Georgia, Texas, Florida and North Carolina - saw the greatest jump in middle-class black households during the 1990s, with each state gaining at least 70,000 middle-class black households. Connecticut, meanwhile, gained only about 4,000 middle-class black households.

Retirement may also be playing a role. Like baby boomers of all racial groups, many blacks see their impending retirement as an opportunity to make a move, and many are returning to the region where they grew up, said Harrison, the demographer.

"I think for blacks, the evidence is that this return to the collective ancestral home is attractive," he said. "A lot of the migration of college-educated young people is to the South, and I think some of these people [entering retirement] are following their children."

Colvin is one who plans to return to the South for her retirement. The teacher already owns a home in North Carolina, where she taught for 10 years before coming to the Hartford public schools.

"You can do much more with your money down there when you retire," she said. She added: "It's home. Good, fresh air. You never forget the place you grew up in. As far as me, there's no place like home."

Even Roxie Gordon, a local Realtor who said Windsor "sells itself" to middle-class black families, finds herself looking south as she looks toward retirement. Her daughter, a tennis star at the University of Florida, recently told her she has no intention of coming back to Connecticut when she graduates.

After visiting her daughter in Gainesville this year, Gordon found herself contemplating a move south, too.

"The pace, that's what I gravitate toward," Gordon said.

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