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Rich '90s failed to lift all

Income disparity between races widened greatly, census analysis shows

By David Mendell and Darnell Little

Tribune staff reporters

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The economic boom of the 1990s bypassed poor minority communities in the city, as many predominantly black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides remained mired in poverty as deeply entrenched as a decade earlier, according to 2000 census data released Tuesday.

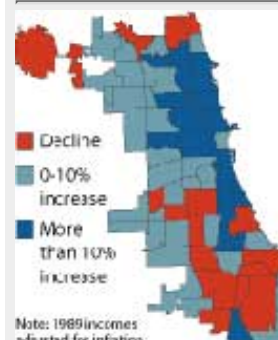
Throughout the Chicago region, the income gap between whites and blacks, as well as between whites and Latinos, widened during the decade. While blacks made clear economic gains in the 1990s, they did not keep pace with the huge income increases of whites or, for that matter, Hispanics, the data shows.



reported incomes below the poverty line.

Chicago's wealthiest communities were mostly white North Side neighborhoods: Lincoln Park (median household income: \$68,613) and Forest Glen (\$68,269). Its poorest communities were nearly all black and mostly on the South or Far South Sides: Oakland (\$10,739) and Riverdale (\$13,178).

As gentrification swept across city neighborhoods and returned white wealth to the North and Near West Sides as well as the area surrounding the Loop, the income gap between whites and blacks widened to more than \$20,000 in the city. Median household income in the city was \$49,222 for whites and \$29,086 for blacks. Chicago's Hispanic householders reported a median income of \$36,543, while Asians reported \$40,519.

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Those figures were disappointing, albeit not surprising, to those who have long voiced concerns that one of the largest peacetime economic expansions in U.S. history essentially bypassed entire communities of impoverished Americans.

"For those of us who value the richness of city life, these kinds of statistics are particularly disturbing," said state Sen. Barack Obama (D-Chicago).

"In the long term, you can't hold together the social fabric and community cohesion if the various components of that community are experiencing different fortunes," Obama said. "We are going to have to look at these numbers closely and take them very seriously. But even without them, just a walk through Englewood would tell you how much work needs to be done."

The new data was derived from the Census Bureau's long form, which was delivered to one in six households across the nation in April 2000. It asked a series of questions about income, housing, education and other subjects that were not included on the short form delivered to most households.

Long-form results for individual Illinois municipalities were released in May and show that the Chicago region and the Midwest fared better overall than much of the country during the prosperous 1990s.

But the data released Tuesday was far more detailed and allowed for analysis of the economic and social characteristics of individual Chicago neighborhoods.

Irish, Poles and bureaucrats

It included a trove of demographic information for the consumption of city planners, sociologists and trivia buffs alike:

- The neighborhood that is home to the most workers on government payrolls? Austin, by far, with 8,523, followed by South Shore with 5,282.

- West Town, riding a crest of gentrification, saw median home values soar 176 percent, to \$271,194, the steepest increase in the city.

- Lincoln Park (78 percent) and Lakeview (71 percent) held bragging rights for the most college graduates 25 and older. The city's Riverdale community ranked last with 2.7 percent of its residents attaining a degree.

- Homeowners in predominantly Hispanic Humboldt Park have the most difficulty paying their mortgages, with 37 percent devoting more than 35 percent of their incomes toward housing costs. Renters as well as homeowners in other largely minority neighborhoods, such as Burnside, West Englewood and North Lawndale, also devoted an outsized portion of their paychecks to keeping a roof over their heads.

- The neighborhood with the biggest population of ethnic Irish is Lakeview on the North Side with 16,758. Bridgeport, despite its reputation as a breeding ground for Irish politicians, had only 3,923. Beverly, home to the annual South Side Irish Parade, had 7,681.

- Honors for the most populous ethnic Polish community belong to Portage Park, with 20,850, while Lakeview was home to 19,765 residents of German background, the most of any city neighborhood.

- More than 3,300 grandparents in Austin reported that they were the primary caregivers for a child, the most in any neighborhood in the city.

The income data for the Chicago region, to some degree, mirrors racial economic trends in other metropolitan regions. But the sharp white income growth in the city surprised demographers.

That growth largely was due to widespread gentrification as luxury high-rises were constructed downtown and lofts were converted into residential apartments. For example, median household income in the West Town neighborhood, which includes the Wicker Park and Bucktown enclaves, jumped 50 percent during the

decade.

Though the overall population of whites declined in the city, trendy city neighborhoods saw an influx of whites with a degree of wealth. At the same time, many city blacks who ascended the income ladder migrated to the suburbs, particularly to the south. In fact, median household incomes of blacks in some south suburbs surpassed the median incomes of whites in those communities.

In Olympia Fields, the median household income of blacks was \$105,879, while whites reported a median of \$83,437. In South Holland, black householders earned a median \$73,471 compared to white householders' \$49,521.

And in DuPage County, the median household income for blacks fell by 9 percent, presumably because lower- and middle-class blacks arrived from the city, pulling down the overall wealth of the region's most affluent county.

Missing the boat

The income stagnation that plagued many Chicago neighborhoods is all the more worrisome to demographers and economists because they had hoped the unprecedented economic expansion of the 1990s would lift many people out of poverty. If people remained incredibly poor after the robust 1990s, they asked, what will become of them through the present bleak economy?

"You had this historic and unprecedented growth, but the size of the group that was not helped by that growth is shocking. It proves that the economy alone, as potent as it was in the '90s, is not enough of a force for dramatic social change," said Roderick Harrison, a demographer for the Washington-based Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and an instructor at Howard University. "A potent economy still is not going to solve the problems of these poor, uneducated populations and bring them into the economic mainstream."

Added John Logan, a sociologist for the State University of New York at Albany: "This period of prosperity should have been the time to close the gap, a time to lift all boats. But in the end, that didn't happen."

Indeed, the widening gap between blacks and whites can be traced to the 1970s, although experts believe it slowed to some degree in the 1980s.

Logan's initial research into the latest Chicago-area census data showed that the region, historically one of the most racially segregated in the nation, is becoming more economically divided, as well. Minorities with equal incomes to whites are not living in equal neighborhoods when these neighborhoods are evaluated using education, poverty and economic factors as benchmarks, Logan's study showed.

He said while many blacks moved up to the middle-class in the 1990s, most were largely isolated in inner-ring and southern suburbs, where median home values rose only slightly or stagnated after being adjusted for inflation.

"Neighborhood economic disparities in Chicago don't appear to be getting better--they are getting worse," said Logan, who directs the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research. "It strikes me that some individuals may be climbing up, but whole communities are being left behind."

For example, gentrifying areas such as the Near South Side saw major drops in poverty rates and leaps in household income and home values. Median household income for the Near South Side, which includes Printers Row and Dearborn Park neighborhoods, rose 275 percent after inflation during the decade. Median income for households in Englewood on the South Side rose just 6.2 percent after inflation.

Experts said various social and economic factors played into regional and race disparities. Geographic isolation from suburban jobs, a beleaguered school system and economic disinvestment have left many impoverished Chicago neighborhoods struggling decade after decade, with little hope for the future.

"These are highly complex and deeply entrenched problems. I think there is a tendency and hope that a

couple of magic bullets--greater access to a higher education, a better economy-- would turn things around in these communities," Harrison said. "But I think with this data, the evidence is now overwhelming that while that has worked for some segments of the black and Hispanic populations, it has not worked to remedy these deep-seated problems in high poverty zones."

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