

In Middle-Class Queens, Blacks Pass Whites in Household Income

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Body

Driven by striking gains in the 1980's among working wives and immigrants, the median income of black households in Queens has surpassed that of whites.

A fresh analysis of 1990 census results found that the economic progress by blacks in Queens, New York City's quintessential middle-class borough, was built largely on a traditional foundation of family solidarity. Married couples, whether born here or abroad, typically made the greatest strides, while households headed by individuals generally lagged.

The median income for all black households in Queens was \$34,300, just above the \$34,000 for non-Hispanic whites. For married couples born in this country, the median was \$50,000 for black households, or slightly more than the \$49,900 reported by white couples born here.

Among immigrant families, so common in Queens, black couples earned a median household income of \$48,800, or appreciably more than the \$40,500 median reported by whites born abroad.

Blacks had higher household incomes than whites in more than 130 cities and counties in the United States. But unlike Queens, they were mostly localities where the median income was below the national average, on or near military bases or where blacks constitute either a small proportion or an overwhelming share of the population.

Only nine of those communities have, like Queens, racially diverse populations of more than 50,000 people. (Non-Hispanic blacks constituted just over 20 percent of Queens's 1990 population of 1,951,598.)

How did blacks surpass whites in median income? In black households, both husband and wife were more likely to have jobs than in white households, and they worked longer hours, as well. And sons and daughters in black households were more likely to remain at home and help support the family, rather than leave and live on their own.

"It's a function of family structure," Joseph Salvo, director of the city Planning Department's Population Division, said of the differential between blacks in Queens and less well-off blacks elsewhere. "You are, in effect diluting the influence of female-headed households."

Married couples accounted for 4 in 10 of the households headed by American-born blacks in Queens and about half of the households headed by black immigrants, roughly the same proportion as among whites. The median

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income of American-born blacks lagged behind the median for foreign-born blacks in virtually every type of household other than married couples.

The census analysis, conducted for The New York Times by Dr. Andrew A. Beveridge of Queens College, found that much of the prosperity among blacks in Queens was enjoyed by Caribbean immigrants, many of whom came to the United States with the savings and skills that quickly qualify as middle-class. Many joined relatives who arrived here earlier.

The census analysis suggests that when American-born blacks have stable, traditional families, they do a bit better than immigrants do. But because American blacks are less likely to form such families, blacks born abroad generally fared better than those born here and, for the most part, better than white immigrants.

The latest analysis goes beyond an earlier finding by The Times, which, from preliminary census results, suggested that the median income for black households in Queens virtually matched that of white households. That analysis did not elaborate on the jobs, ages, place of origin, family makeup and other variables that accounted for the gains. Nor did it hint that the income of blacks in some categories had surpassed that of non-Hispanic whites.

Queens as Haven Before the Suburbs

Queens remains pockmarked by poverty, but it has, historically, thrived as a haven for aspiring middle-class refugees from other boroughs -- often as their last stop in the city before moving to the suburbs -- and, more recently, for newcomers from abroad. An infusion of Koreans, Chinese, Indians and other immigrants has revitalized aging neighborhoods in Queens into prosperous middle-class enclaves; so, to some degree, have people transplanted from South America.

The number of non-Hispanic whites in Queens, wealthier ones included, declined during the 1980's. But by distinguishing white Hispanic people from other whites, the more recent analysis dispels the suspicion that the statistical parity in incomes between blacks and whites was simply a consequence, in good part, of poorer Hispanic immigrants depressing the median among whites generally.

"It's pretty striking," said Richard P. Nathan, provost of the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York at Albany.

"This is the untold story of the cities," he said. "If you look at all the blacks in metropolitan areas of the United States, 24 percent live in extreme poverty areas, where 40 percent or more of the people are poor. But the flip side is, 76 percent don't. And even the 24 percent who live in extreme poverty areas are not all poor."

"It's the flip side of the underclass," Dr. Nathan said.

Black household income approached or exceeded the median reported by whites in a range of smaller and mostly suburban places in the region. They include Mount Vernon in Westchester County; Uniondale, Elmont and Westbury in Nassau County, Brentwood in Suffolk County, and Linden and South Orange in New Jersey.

(The Census Bureau defines a household as all people living in an apartment or a house, including families, people living alone, two or more families living together and any unrelated individuals living with them. The median is the point at which half the incomes are greater and half are less.)

Middle-Class Blacks: Expanding Number

Dr. Salvo of the city Planning Department said he was so stunned by Dr. Beveridge's findings about Queens that he conducted his own analysis of 200,000 married couples in the borough. Dr. Salvo's findings were even more pronounced: In the households of white married couples, median income was \$47,500; among comparable blacks, it was \$49,300.

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"Statisticians might argue that both figures really represent a range of several thousand dollars," Dr. Salvo said, "but it is amazing that they're even close."

Among married-couple families, twice as many **blacks** as **whites** had three or more workers; twice as many **white** as **black** married-couple families were headed by a person older than 65. Still, Dr. Salvo said, even among couples between the ages of 25 and 44, earnings were about the same regardless of race.

Focusing on two overwhelmingly **black** census tracts in Laurelton that are home to about 4,000 people, Dr. Beveridge found that between 1980 and 1990, the proportion of adults in the civilian work force climbed from two-thirds to three-quarters. The proportion of college graduates among people 25 and older rose from 30 percent to 52 percent, the share of people living below the poverty level had plunged from 13 percent to 3 percent and the average family **income** had more than doubled.

"No one could argue that this is not the picture of a **middle-class** community," Dr. Beveridge said.

Michael Owens, a 24-year-old doctoral student who works for the Rockefeller Institute, typifies the emerging second-generation of the **black middle class**.

"If you were to start in Hollis and head south through Cambria Heights, Laurelton and Rosedale there's a spine of affluence," said Mr. Owens, who grew up in South Jamaica, **Queens**, and plans to return to the borough after graduation.

His father was from Saint Kitts-Nevis in the Caribbean. His mother, a nurse, was from Virginia, where she has retired. Still in **Queens** are an uncle, a retired bus driver; and two aunts, one a teacher and the other an administrator with the city Social Services Department.

For Immigrants, A Base of Skills

April Green and her husband, Anthony, live in a private house in St. Albans, not far from the nail salon they own on Linden Boulevard. Ms. Green, 34, is a lawyer and practices in an office across the street from the salon. Mr. Green, 38, is a plate-maker for a printing company in Manhattan. Together, they earn more than \$75,000.

"Quite a few of the businesses on Linden and Merrick Boulevards are owned by African-Americans or Caribbeans," Ms. Green said, describing herself as emblematic of an expanding **black middle class**.

"My cousin is a vice president at Chase Manhattan and her mother is a school librarian," Ms. Green said. "My cousin's husband is a Ph.D. in molecular biology. I have a friend working on her Ph.D. and her husband is a real-estate broker. A woman who worked in my salon has opened her own salon and her mother is an accountant."

Dr. Barbara W. Emerson, dean of the Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge program at **Queens** College, said, "**Queens** is where **blacks** move from Brooklyn and from other parts of the city."

"Whereas **whites** who can afford to would move farther out on Long Island, **blacks** with **income** to move and buy a house can afford **Queens** better," said Dr. Emerson, a single parent, who is **black** and who lives with her son, Weusi, a college senior, in St. Albans.

"When my son graduates from college, he will probably stay at home," she said. "The houses here are single family, often containing extended families, and the **income** for the **household** is high because several working adults are pooling their resources."

"I have seen a change in terms of the number of immigrants, particularly from the Caribbean, who came here with an economic base to build on," Dr. Emerson said. "They're often skilled in areas where they can get good employment, like nursing."

Still, Race Remains Barrier to Integration

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For many **blacks**, finding satisfactory housing remains a challenge, she and others said, because of the high cost and of enduring racial segregation. Particularly among **blacks**, studies have found, race remains a greater barrier to integration than **class**.

An earlier census analysis by Dr. Beveridge found that poor **blacks** and rich **blacks** in New York City are segregated from **whites** at about the same level. Among **households** with a family **income** of \$100,000 or more, he found, 9 in 10 **blacks** would have to move to be integrated with non-Hispanic **whites** of comparable **income**.

"Part of it is an artifact of segregation," Dr. Beveridge said. "They can move to Mount Vernon, the northern Bronx, Laurelton, St. Albans and, increasingly, to Canarsie, but they're not able to go to Levittown, Eastchester, places that are good but not great places to move."

During the 1980's, the non-Hispanic **white** population of **Queens** declined by about 230,000; the **black** population rose by about 50,000. Median **household income** rose for both groups, though -- by 31 percent for **black households** in **Queens** and by 19 percent for **white households**.

Compared to **whites**, **black** couples were more likely to consist of two wage earners. Their **income** was more likely to be supplemented by their children's earnings. Nine in 10 **blacks** said their **income** came from wages, compared to 3 in 4 **whites**, who were more likely to have retirement, Social Security and investment **income**.

Black wives typically worked longer hours and, consequently, earned more than their **white** counterparts. About the same proportions of **black** women and **white** women held professional specialty, executive, administrative and management jobs. Relatively few **black** men held these sorts of jobs.

"The success of the civil rights revolution has had its effect particularly in the public sector," Dr. Nathan said, referring to the large proportion of **blacks** who work for the government, for hospitals and in education -- the same gateway to the economic mainstream that many other groups entered.

Graphic

Photo: "Quite a few of the businesses on Linden and Merrick Boulevards are owned by African-Americans or Caribbeans," said April Green, who described herself as emblematic of an expanding **black middle class**. She stood outside the nail salon she owns on Linden Boulevard in St. Albans, **Queens**. (Monica Almeida/The New York Times)(pg. B7)

Graphs: "COMPARE AND CONTRAST: Tracking **Household Income** in **Queens**" shows 1990 **household income** figures for **whites** and **blacks** in **Queens**. (pg. B7); Graph showing household **income** figures for **Queens** in 1990 for **blacks** and **whites**. (pg. A1)(Source: Dr. Andrew Beveridge, Sociology Dept., **Queens** College)

Map/Diagram: "DEMOGRAPHICS: **Black** Household **Income**" shows **black income** in the five boroughs. (Source: Dr. Andrew Beveridge, Sociology Dept., **Queens** College)(pg. B7)

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