

# **Background Issues and Summary of African American Quality of Life in Austin, Texas**

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**A Narrative Discussion  
of Background Issues and Data Trends**

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**City Demographer's Summary**

**November 9, 2004**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

Austin is well-known as a vibrant, thriving city--boasting a quality of life that has caught the attention of peer cities across the country--a quality of life that has become one of the city's major economic engines. Cities compete with each other. They compete for jobs, creative people and entrepreneurial talent—Austin enjoys a competitive edge that is largely the result of its quality of life.

Austin is also rapidly becoming a diverse urban place, both in terms of ethnicity and socio-economics. The Hispanic population has skyrocketed from 15% in 1970 to about 35% today. Furthermore, Austin was recently recognized as one of the best cities in the country for Hispanics to live. The Asian community, which has doubled since 1990, is gaining a reputation as a great place to do business for Asian entrepreneurs.

However, the African American story in Austin has been very different. For example, the African American share of the total population is in decline and is now less than 10%. Additionally, over the past two years, we experienced a series of serious incidents that raised community concerns about race relations and eroded trust with our African American population. In ensuing community discussions, a contradictory picture of Austin began to emerge. It was clear that African Americans were describing a disparate quality of life experience in our city.

### **Objective**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the background issues and current dynamics affecting quality of life for African Americans in Austin. This paper seeks to answer two fundamental questions:

- Is the quality of life in Austin different for African Americans than for other Austinites?
- Is the quality of life in Austin markedly different for African Americans than the quality of life African Americans experience in other cities?

### **Evaluation Methodology**

To answer these questions, we created a scorecard and looked at 10 indicators, both direct and indirect measures of quality of life. These measures are commonly used to evaluate quality of life and include:

- Family Income
- Educational Attainment
- Home Ownership
- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Business Ownership
- Ethnicity Shares
- Housing Patterns
- Incarcerations Rates
- Social and Cultural Infrastructure

Census data serve as the primary foundation of analysis because they offer the ability to compare topics between ethnic groups and benchmark differences against other cities, the state, and the nation as a whole.

The first comparison deals with data native to Austin--comparing the ten indicators between the African American population and the community as a whole. The second level of analysis compares data on the ten indicators from peer cities including all large Texas cities and peer cities from across the nation, places like Portland and Columbus.

Information on Austin's quality of life was augmented with an informal survey of African Americans in Austin. Additionally, there were some issues for which comparative data from other cities are hard to come by. In some cases, the existing situation in other cities will be discussed but may only be supported by anecdotal information. An ethnic community's access to cultural arts programs, for example, is one issue where comparative data points from other places are difficult to obtain, and yet the issue is important enough to warrant the attention of this paper.

### **Key Findings**

Highlights for each of the indicators are described below.

- **Family Income.** Compared to African Americans in other cities, African Americans in Austin have one of the higher incomes at

\$35,685. However, in Austin, African Americans make only half that of Anglos, who make \$69,989 on average, making this disparity one of the highest in the nation.

- **Educational Attainment.** In Austin, 19% of African Americans over 25 hold a bachelors or higher education degree, making this one of the highest educational attainments in the country. However, compared to the rest of Austin, which has a very high educational attainment rate of 40.4%, African American education attainment is relatively low.
- **Home Ownership.** Locally, the African American home ownership rate is 37.3% compared to the Austin average of 44.9%. The City's large college-involved population is one obvious factor in keeping Austin's overall rate of ownership low, one of the lowest in the nation for African Americans.
- **Poverty.** Locally, the overall poverty rate is 14.4% and the African American poverty rate is 19.5%, a low level of disparity when compared to poverty disparities in other places. African Americans in Austin have one of the lowest poverty rates in the nation.
- **Unemployment.** At 7.9%, the unemployment rate for African Americans in Austin has little disparity with overall unemployment rates and is one of the lowest in the country. At the same time, the Anglo unemployment rate, at 3.2%, is less than half that of African Americans.
- **Business Ownership.** Austin has a low level of African American business ownership (2.5%) compared to other urban regions. While that share of African American business ownership in Austin is low, the discrepancy between the ownership rate and the African American population share is not deep when ranked against other cities.
- **Ethnicity Shares.** The African American share of the total population has been declining for 40 years and is now estimated at 9%. In contrast, the Latino and Asian share of the population has been skyrocketing. The Latino share jumped from 23% in 1990 to nearly 35% today. The Asian share has doubled during that same time to 6%.
- **Housing Patterns.** Housing concentrations based on race for African Americans have dropped steeply over the past 30 years in Austin.
- **Incarceration Rates.** African Americans in Travis County account for almost 32% of the County's inmate population—while the share of total county population for African Americans is only 9%. African

Americans are even more disproportionately represented in the state's incarcerated populations than they are in Travis County.

- **Social and Cultural Infrastructure.** While it is difficult to gather hard data on the scope and extent of something as dynamic as a cultural social fabric, strong anecdotal information along with data from an informal survey suggests that Austin does not have viable social and cultural infrastructure for working and middle class singles and couples.

### **Background Issues and Discussion**

The City of Austin is experiencing profound demographic change and Austin's African American community is at the nexus of this change; undergoing a transition that has been in the making for decades and one that will continue to play itself out in the foreseeable future. Several macro-level trends are significantly affecting Austin's African American community. It is important to describe these changes and set the background for a discussion of quality of life issues.

**Population Trends.** At the heart of the matter is the relatively new smallness of the local African American population, currently comprising only 7% of the regional population and 9.8% of the City's, with shares trending decidedly downward.

The City's share of total population that is African American has been flat for decades but is now on a gradual decline, not only because of a slow absolute growth in total population but also because of surging shares coming from the Hispanic and Asian communities. In 1990, African Americans made up 12.0% of the City's total population, by 2000, the share of total dropped to 9.8%.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the magnitude of change in the City's ethnic shares over a span of only ten years.

The City's ethnicity shares have certainly continued to change during the past five years since the decennial census was conducted in April 2000. Austin is now a well-establish port of entry for international immigrants, an emerging immigrant gateway into the United States from places like Mexico, Central America, China, India and Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> The flow of

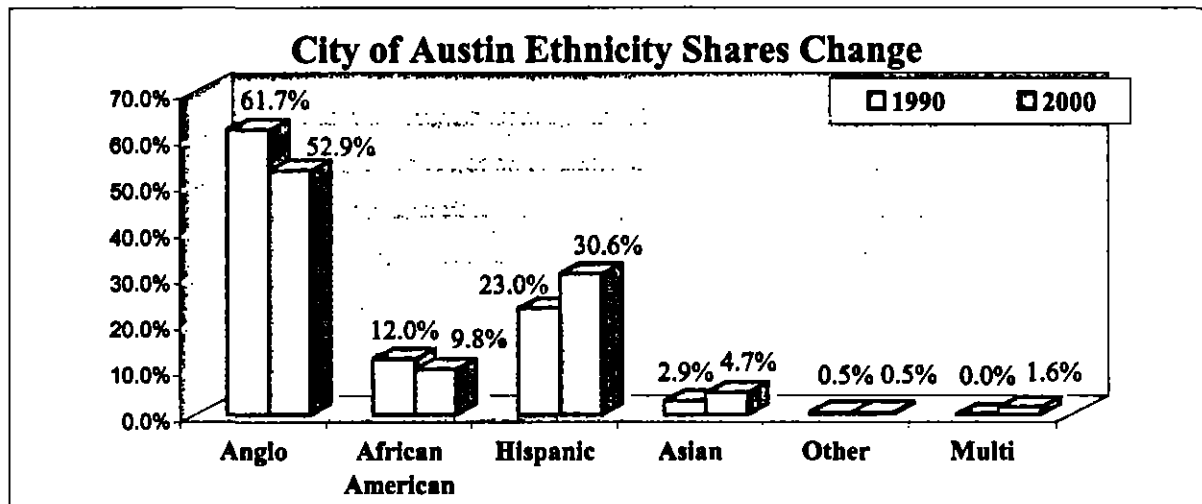
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<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau; 1980 Census, 1990 Census, Census 2000; Tables P1 and P4 from SF1.

<sup>2</sup> Audrey Singer, "The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways" Washington: Brookings Institution, February 2004) p. 5.

international immigration into Austin should continue for the foreseeable future, having a pronounced effect on the demographic nature of the City. Austin's African American share of total population could continue shrinking, becoming City's smallest ethnic minority group (behind Hispanics and Asians) in a little more than 15 years.

Figure 1



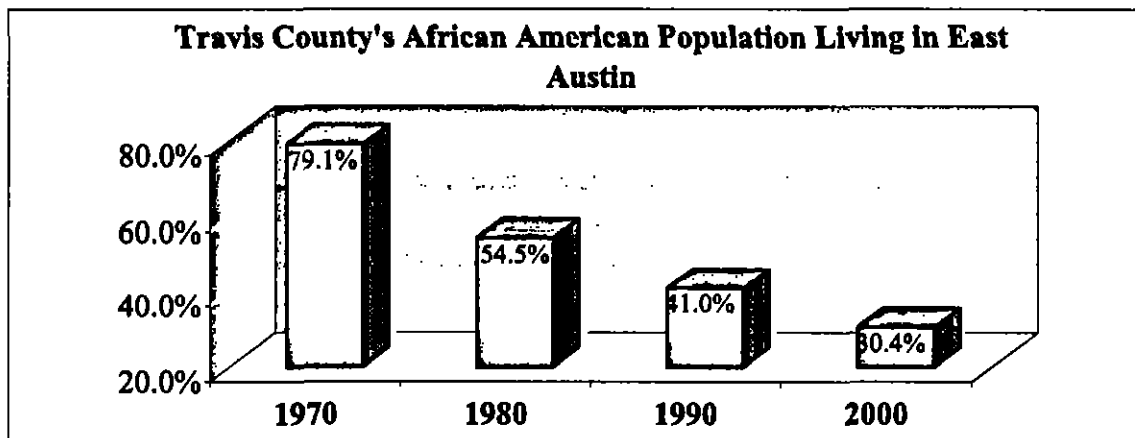
**Housing Patterns.** Austin's African American community is currently undergoing a long-term transition from being a highly segregated, socio-economically disadvantaged community to one that is radically less segregated, more affluent, and better educated. Here are the big trends:

During the local economic booms of the 1980s and 1990s, many middle-class African American households left east Austin for the suburbs, places like Pflugerville and Round Rock. For a variety of reasons, some being "push" factors and others being "pull" factors, African Americans left east Austin during the 1990s in large numbers. "Push" factors for families include long-standing issues with educational parity, both real and perceived, across the school district. "Pull" factors include the basic housing stock characteristics of the suburbs versus the inner city--larger, newer houses in younger communities with plentiful and accessible lifestyle amenities such as playscapes and nearby swimming pools--the same factors that precipitate households of all types moving to the suburbs in most metropolitan areas of the country.

The east Austin share of total population that is African American dropped from 38.1% in 1990 to 27.9% by 2000.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, not only did the African American share of total population drop markedly, but the overall absolute number of African Americans in east Austin decreased as well--by almost 900 households containing some 2,800 individuals. This trend has more than likely continued over the past five years since census data were gathered.

Another way to show just how precipitously racial segregation has decreased for African American households in Austin is to measure the concentration of African American population within the metropolitan area. Figure 2 graphs the share of total Travis County African Americans that reside within east Austin over time (Travis County is used here as the metropolitan spatial unit because the time-series goes back to 1970).<sup>4</sup> The down sloping trend is pronounced. In 1970, eight out of ten Travis County African Americans lived within east Austin, thirty years later, that share had plummeted to 30.4%.

Figure 2



African American households in Austin have largely shifted from being concentrated in urban enclaves to living in broadly dispersed suburban neighborhoods. Regional maps of African American population patterns show this phenomenon clearly; please see Maps 1 through 3 in the

<sup>3</sup> East Austin Demographic Profile: Change from 1990 to 2000; City Demographer, Department of Planning, City of Austin, November 2001.

<sup>4</sup> East Austin is defined here and throughout the remainder of the report as follows: IH 35 on the west, Colorado River on the south, US 183 on the east and north until the intersection of such with IH 35.

addendum. In other words, Austin's African American households and families have not simply traded being segregated in the urban core for being segregated in the suburbs.

African American east Austin was created through an act of manipulated segregation, the City's master plan of 1928--today, African American east Austin is disappearing. As African American middle class households and families have left east Austin, poorer and less mobile households have been left behind.

African American community leaders articulate a possible future worst case scenario in which expatriate middle class families build new suburban churches and civic centers in their new suburban communities and stop coming back into their former neighborhoods on Sunday mornings--the stranded poorer households might then lose the safety net and support provided by long-established east Austin churches and civic organizations.<sup>5</sup>

**The Young African American Professional's Map.** One of America's foremost demographers, William Frey, chronicles what he calls the "The New Great Migration" of African Americans returning to the South, reversing a 35-year trend.<sup>6</sup> Frey points out, however, that Austin is not one of the urban areas attractive to these returning migrants, many of who are college-educated professionals. Places like Atlanta, Washington, D.C. and Dallas have a critical mass of African American professionals, African American-owned businesses, and growing African American middle classes that act to attract migrating African American households<sup>7</sup>. For a variety of reasons, Austin is simply not on the map used by young African American professionals when choosing an urban destination. Frey writes,

"The 1995 to 2000 period solidified southern metropolitan areas' dominance as magnets for African American migrants, at the same time that the nation's largest north and western metropolises assumed the lead in the net out-migration of the African American population. Atlanta was far and away the largest migration magnet for African Americans, with net migration nearly triple that of the second ranking area, Dallas."

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<sup>5</sup> From conversations with Dr. Sterling Lands, October and November 2002.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Frey, "The New Great Migration: African American Americans' Return to the South, 1965--2000" (Washington: Brookings Institution, May 2004) p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.5.



There is a direct connection between Austin's inability to retain or attract African American professionals and the almost total absence of viable African American social and cultural infrastructure in the city. A critical part of a city's urban personality is defined by the notion of a social and cultural infrastructure--this includes everything from music venues catering to African American crowds to arts museums that specialize in promoting and showing off African American art work. While it is difficult to quantify and measure the scale and scope of city's ethnic social scene, it is clear that something is lacking in Austin with respect to an African American social and cultural infrastructure, an environment that fosters feelings of cultural isolation. Local African American community leader Pastor Joseph Parker articulates this belief:

"In my conversations with many young African American professionals and several local business/corporate leaders who seek to attract these professionals as employees, it is a consistent concern that Austin does not provide social venues that these professionals find appealing. Accordingly, corporations find it a challenge to attract them to our city and those who do come find themselves on the weekends traveling to cities like Dallas and Houston for entertainment and social outlets they would like to exist in our city."