

## **S.F. moves to stem African American exodus Critics say effort to reverse longtime trend may be too late**

Leslie Fulbright, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Joseph Blue has lived in San Francisco for 20 years and toughed out the drastic decline in its black population, a phenomenon that persists despite being recognized for decades as a problem.

Neighborhoods that once thrived with African American culture and black-owned businesses have all but disappeared.

"San Francisco no longer has a viable black community," said Blue, an African American who lives in the Western Addition. "The middle class is gone, and what we have left is underprivileged, uneducated, poor black folks."

San Francisco officials are now calling the thousands of black people who have moved away "the African American diaspora," and the mayor's office is putting together a task force to figure out what can be done to preserve the remaining black population and cultivate new residents.

San Francisco's black population has dropped from 96,000 -- or 13.4 percent of the city -- in 1970 to an estimated 47,000 in 2005, about 6.5 percent of city residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. African Americans make up about 12.1 percent of the nation's population overall.

"The decline is phenomenal," said Hans Johnson, a demographer with the Public Policy Institute of California.

San Francisco is not alone. From 1995 to 2000, Oakland and neighborhoods of Los Angeles lost tens of thousands of black residents. Not one West Coast city made a list of the nation's top cities for African Americans compiled last year by Black Enterprise magazine based on income potential, the cost of living, proximity to employers and housing costs. Most are in the South and most -- coincidentally or not -- have black mayors.

"We don't even have any black leaders," said Blue, who unsuccessfully ran for supervisor in 2004. "When I moved here, there was a vibrant and enthusiastic black culture that brought its own ethnic mix and vitality. Now, the culture and the political influence have evaporated. The population is so low that it is beyond saving."

But Seattle and San Diego, which have reputations for being predominately white, had higher percentages of African Americans than San Francisco in 2005, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. In fact, San Francisco has the lowest proportion of black residents of any large city in the United States.

Though San Francisco is still often seen as diverse, it was 53 percent white and 33.5 percent Asian in 2005, with Chinese Americans accounting for about two-thirds of Asian residents.

"This is something the community and the mayor have been concerned about," said Fred Blackwell, director of the Mayor's Office of Community Development. "But we want to approach it in a real thoughtful way, a way that is solution focused."

Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, whose district includes the Western Addition, said the exodus has been 40 years in the making -- and the task force may be too little too late.

"There has been no plan to fix this, and any talk of a roundtable is bothersome because we are well beyond documenting the obvious," Mirkarimi said. "This exodus completely belies our credentials as a progressive city. We need to spend time organizing in the community."

Demographers cite economic success among black residents as the primary reason for the exodus. But others, including those who still live here, say that after redevelopment pushed black people out of the Fillmore district in the late 1950s, there was no longer a strong black neighborhood. The city's black population peaked about 1970, when 13.4 of San Franciscans were black.

Even the Bayview district, still considered predominately black, is not, though it is home to about one-third of the city's black residents. In 2000, Bayview-Hunters Point was 46.9 percent black; 28 percent Asian and Pacific Islander; 4.9 percent white and 16.4 percent Hispanic of any race, according to the census. Many analysts

said the Bayview's black population has fallen markedly in the last five years, but no firm count is available.

Oakland and other older cities have seen similar shifts. Oakland's population went from 46.9 percent black in 1980 -- when its proportion of African American residents peaked -- to 35.7 percent in 2000, according to census counts. The Census Bureau estimates that black people made up between 29 percent and 33.2 percent of Oakland residents in mid-2005.

Johnson, the demographer, said many African Americans leave San Francisco for outlying suburbs when they have the means, just like members of other racial groups, in search of more of the trappings of middle-class life. Although it is virtually impossible to track where people go, he said it is safe to say that Bay Area cities with growing black populations are seeing those gains because of San Francisco's loss.

Most are in the East Bay and North Bay. Vallejo's black population has doubled since 1980 to 26.8 percent. In Pittsburg, the number of African Americans jumped to 19 percent in 2005. Suisun City is 19.3 percent black, and San Leandro's black population went from 1 percent in 1980 to 12.2 percent in 2005 as the small East Bay city grew 21.3 percent overall.

"This is a concern because this city values having a diverse population," said Greg Wagner, a program director at SPUR, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association. "But even if you can identify the causes, it is hard to know what you would do to stop it. It is economics combined with cultural things that are tough to sort out. There are restrictions in this state about what you can do that is racially based."

Blackwell, of the mayor's office, is in the process of pulling together prior studies, surveys and needs assessments addressing the issue. He will look at some nationwide practices and then pick a task force, probably in May, to analyze both what is pushing people away from the city and what is pulling them toward other areas.

"We have a lot of information; we don't need to start from scratch," Blackwell said.

On the task force will be San Francisco residents, business leaders, faith groups, community organizations, activists and families who have left.

"We will not only have the established leaders but new voices," he said. "This should not be framed as just stopping the flight. We also need to put a better foot forward in being attractive to families, young professionals and low-income folks. We will look at places that are gaining African American residents, find out what they are doing policy-wise, and replicate it."

The exodus has been coming up in lots of discussions across the city recently because of current and planned development efforts in the Bayview and Hunters Point. The Bayview Reporter runs an article or commentary in nearly every edition about how a proposal for redevelopment and private development at the former Hunters Point Naval Shipyard marks the end of any chance for African Americans to remain in the city.

"All of the city agencies are working to please the big developers and rich communities," said Willie Ratcliff, the paper's editor. "The supervisors want to grab the ground without any consideration for the people who have lived here and suffered through the environment, the shipyard and PG&E."

*E-mail Leslie Fulbright at [lfulbright@sfchronicle.com](mailto:lfulbright@sfchronicle.com).*

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