

Akron blacks faring worse in downturn

Income down 42 percent in 10 years, as middle class moves from city to escape crime. High incarceration rates contribute to cycle of poverty

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Jamie Patterson (center) with his children Iriel 24, (left), and Jamie III at their home on Thursday, Dec. 16, 2010, in Akron, Ohio. (All last names are Patterson) (Phil Masturzo/Akron Beacon Journal)

Looking out from her porch on a quiet street in the mostly black neighborhood of West Akron, Earline Eaton has seen good economic times.

She has seen bad times.

These are the worst times, she says.

"I see a lot of foreclosures — even on my street," said Eaton, who has served as president of the Greater West Side Council of Block Clubs for 28 years. "People don't have jobs."

The latest statistics from the Census Bureau show Eaton is right.

The recession triggered by the housing crash and financial crisis has hurt most people. But, in Akron, African-Americans have been hit harder.

Much harder.

Their median household income — the midpoint, with half making more and half less — was estimated at \$17,892, a 42 percent drop compared to 1999.

Incomes for white households in Akron also were down, but not nearly as much: 13 percent.

Researchers quickly point to disappearing manufacturing jobs as a big reason blacks are faring worse than whites. They say African-Americans are more vulnerable to the loss of unionized factory jobs, which paid high wages even to those with only a high school diploma or less education.

But leaders in Akron's black community say two more factors are driving the dismal census numbers:

- The accelerating flight of middle-class African-American families to the suburbs, in search of better schools or safer neighborhoods, leaving behind those with lower incomes.
- The relentless increase in the number of black men with criminal records and the mounting barriers they face finding jobs.

Black community leaders say what makes these trends so disturbing is that they feed each other: If black men with criminal records can't get jobs, they are more likely to commit more crimes that fuel black flight from the city.

"Nobody will hire them," Eaton said. "So they're walking around getting into trouble. They're robbing and stealing because they can't make it.

"Crime is definitely worse in the last couple years."

Again, government statistics support Eaton's view.

According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, Akron's rate of violent crimes — murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault — is up for four consecutive years.

That trend goes counter to the national rate, which went down in each of the past three years.

While Akron's overall rate last year of 92 violent crimes per 10,000 residents remains lower than most of the state's other large cities, it's slipping in ranking.

Akron lost the title of Ohio's safest city to Columbus in 2008. Last year, it slipped to third, with Canton ranked second safest.

The average number of robberies in the past four years is about 20 percent higher than in the previous four years, according to the FBI reports. The average number of aggravated assaults is up much more: nearly 80 percent.

A look at the city's police department annual reports indicates crime takes a bigger toll from the city's black community.

Akron is divided into 12 police patrol districts. Last year's report found the two that cover the predominantly black neighborhoods of West Akron, Lane-Wooster and Summit Lake accounted for more than one-fifth of all reported robberies, burglaries, car thefts and arson, and a quarter of aggravated assaults and drug crimes.

Income fuels mobility

At-large Councilman Michael D. Williams said residents don't need the numbers to know crime is a growing problem in the black community.

"It's a major issue," he said. "There are some areas we should be issuing helmets and flak jackets."

Williams said fear of crime is the reason many middle-class blacks have left the city.

"Those who have the income can move, and many of them have moved to the suburbs," he said. "That's not just in Akron; that's a trend across the country."

Williams said Ward 4, which borders Copley Township and is where Earline Eaton lives, has been especially affected by blacks' decision to leave the city, ironically because it had more black households with middle-class incomes.

"It was one of the first areas that would sell homes to African-Americans," said Williams, who represented Ward 4 for 10 years before being elected at-large in 1997.

Census figures track the growing movement of blacks to the suburbs.

Since 2000, the African-American population of the city has stayed at about 61,000, according to 2009 Census Bureau estimates.

During the same period, the number of blacks living in Summit County outside of Akron increased by about half, to more than 15,000. That contrasts with an increase of only about 3,200 in the decade of the 1990s.

The loss of higher-income blacks — coupled with lack of jobs — has put many Akron neighborhoods in a downward spiral, Williams said.

"Less income means less ability to take care of a house," he said.

The result is seen in the large number of homes abandoned in the city.

A study by the Summit County Fiscal Office found 2,175 abandoned properties in Akron — about one in 36 of the single-family structures and duplexes in the city.

As with crime, the problem is more prevalent in the black communities. More than half of the city's abandoned homes were found in wards 3, 4 and 5, which include the West Akron, Lane-Wooster and Summit Lake neighborhoods.

"Most are absolutely worthless. They've been stripped," said Williams, who also is deputy executive director of Alpha Phi Alpha Homes, a local nonprofit agency that manages rental properties and sells rehabilitated homes in the black community.

"Economically, you can't justify fixing those homes," he said. "You can't sell them for what you'd have to put into them."

Neighborhood in decline

Concern about crime and deteriorating housing are two reasons Jamie L. Patterson is planning to leave Akron.

"You can drive down any street in the inner city and you see more vacant homes," he said. "Whenever you live in an area with a greater potential for crime, it's a concern."

A life resident of Akron, Patterson felt comfortable raising a family in the city.

"I know how to conduct myself," he said. "I've taught my children. They understand the good and the bad of the city. A lot of great people have come from the inner city."

But now it's time to leave Akron, he said.

"I'm 43 years old; I want to get around some peace and quiet," he said. "At a certain point in time, you don't want to walk outside and see certain things."

If Patterson goes, the city will lose a success story.

The Beacon Journal first interviewed Patterson in 1993, as part of *A Question of Color*, the newspaper's yearlong examination of the state of the black community.

At that time, Patterson had been unemployed for six months, after losing the last of a string of dead-end jobs.

His wife, Margaret, was the sole support of the family of four, making \$14,000 a year as a housekeeper at Children's Hospital.

Four years later, when Jamie Patterson was interviewed again, prospects for the family were looking up.

Armed with an associate's degree in business management, Patterson had landed a job as an insurance agent in late 1993. A year later, he began selling "pre-need" burial plots and mausoleums at Rose Hill Cemetery.

Enjoying two incomes once again, the Pattersons bought a home in West Akron in 1996, and his wife started a day-care business.

Jamie Patterson voiced optimism for the future. He said he planned to pursue a career in insurance and family financial planning.

In the years since that interview, Patterson largely accomplished his goals.

"I went into the insurance industry, and from there, I went into banking, where I've been for the past 10 years," he said.

Since 2002, he has been with FirstMerit, where he is a senior documentation specialist.

"I've been able to invest in real estate, and that has gone well," he said.

In his personal life, Patterson also found success — and tragedy. His wife died last year after battling cancer.

She saw her two children grow up.

"Our son is in his first year at Kent State, majoring in education. He wants to be a primary school teacher," Patterson said. "Our daughter — she's 24 — has completed her bachelor's at Ohio State in African-American studies.

"It's not that I have a ton of money. My kids have always understood that as long as I gave them a household that did not involve partying, foul language — just a bad atmosphere in general — they had the responsibility to learn, to go to school every day and position themselves to take advantage of scholarship money."

Patterson said his daughter won a full scholarship to OSU.

"She's working on her master's," he said.

As an African-American living in Akron, Patterson wasn't alone in his climb up the economic ladder to the middle class. He had plenty of company in the 1990s.

In fact, black households in Akron typically did better than the city's white households in that decade.

Between 1989 and 1999, median income for Akron's black households went up 15.3 percent, compared to 12.5 percent for whites.

That trend was reversed in the next decade, when black households saw their median income plunge. The 42 percent drop between 1999 and last year was three times the rate of white households.

A closer look at the latest census report provides more evidence of the financial impact of the flight of middle-class blacks to the suburbs.

Unlike blacks in Akron, African-Americans in Summit County's other communities continued to do better than their white counterparts during the tough economy of the past decade.

Between 1999 and last year, median household income of Summit County's suburban blacks declined less than 10 percent, compared to a nearly 14 percent drop for white households, according to a Beacon Journal analysis of the data.

Suburbs beckon

Akron City Council President Marco S. Sommerville said he understands the attraction of the suburbs for middle-class blacks.

In addition to less crime and better housing, they also offer better-rated public schools.

Sommerville said many of Akron's more affluent black parents are paying thousands in tuition to send their children to private schools.

That's what he did.

One of his two daughters attended Our Lady of the Elms elementary school before switching to public schools. His son went to St. Vincent-St. Mary and now attends private Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Sommerville, who owns a funeral home, said, "I'm blessed I can afford to send all my kids to college."

But he knows many African-Americans in Akron can't afford the cost of attending a state university in Ohio.

Higher education is critical, Sommerville argued, because the good-paying blue-collar jobs that don't require more than a high school diploma are gone forever.

Two of every five manufacturing jobs in Summit County have disappeared since 1999, according the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"I don't see those jobs coming back," Sommerville said. "If they do, they're not coming back in great numbers."

Sommerville said that an increasing number of black men face a nearly insurmountable barrier to getting a job because they have criminal records.

That's the situation in which Robert Fuqua finds himself.

Fuqua, 39, has been out of work since early 2009, when he lost his job as a machine operator at an aluminum wheel plant in Cuyahoga Falls that closed.

Since then, he estimates he has applied for more than 100 jobs, mostly in manufacturing.

Fuqua thinks his criminal record is hurting his chances — especially when so many people are looking for work.

In 2008, he pleaded a marijuana trafficking charge down to misdemeanor drug abuse and received a suspended jail sentence and nine months of probation. Last year, he was convicted of disturbing the peace, also a misdemeanor.

Fuqua said it doesn't matter that he doesn't have a felony record.

"They want you to put everything down — a felony, a DUI or whatever," he said. "If you have 200 people and they are all applying for the same five positions and you have a misdemeanor or a felony, the application may be pushed to the side."

If Fuqua had a felony record, he'd be much worse off. That's because Ohio law bars convicted felons from many occupations and places many other restrictions on them.

Many of the prohibitions, such as keeping violent offenders from working with children or the elderly, make obvious sense, said Stephen A. JohnsonGrove, an attorney with the nonprofit Ohio Justice and Policy Center in Cincinnati.

But many others don't.

"There are a lot that aren't sensible," he said. "You've got some really ham-fisted, almost ridiculous barriers."

JohnsonGrove cited the example of the construction trades.

"You can't be an independent, licensed, bonded handyman if you have a felony record," he said. "That's any construction trade — electrician, plumber, carpenter."

JohnsonGrove is a member of the state Ex-offender Reentry Coalition, established by the Ohio legislature in 2008 to recommend ways to lower legal bars to employment and limit other "collateral consequences" of criminal convictions, including denying felons public housing and educational loans.

"We can sensibly roll some of this back in a way that still protects the public but opens the door to people who have turned their lives around," he said.

Limited opportunities

Laws and business practices that make it difficult or impossible for people with criminal records to find work especially hurt urban black communities. That's because African-Americans — especially men — are much more likely to run afoul of the law.

Black men make up only about 12 percent of Ohio's population of men, but fill nearly half of the bunks in the state's bulging prisons.

According to January's census of Ohio's prisons, 1,386 of a total 24,257 black male inmates were sentenced in Summit County courts.

Most of those inmates eventually will be released, joining the ever-growing ranks of black males with felony records.

The state doesn't keep count, but a Beacon Journal analysis of inmates who served time in Ohio's prisons in the 1990s identified 56,073 black men born between 1956 and 1975. Of that number, 3,522 were from Summit County, representing more than a third of all the county's black men of that generation.

Sommerville said the difficulty black men with criminal pasts face getting jobs contributes to the rising poverty rate in Akron's African-American community — especially among women and children.

More than 60 percent of black single moms are living below the poverty income line, according to census data.

"In the old days, people with felonies who had paid their debt to society could get work," Sommerville said. "Not today."

"They can't provide for their families."

There is work to be done, said Amy Hanauer, executive director of Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit think tank specializing in economic research and government.

"We still very much need things rebuilt and newly built in this country," she said.

Hanauer argued the problem is lack of vision and commitment.

"These things are choices," she said. "We have all this wasted labor out there; we've got all these people who aren't working. We need a fundamental change in our system."