

Census shows more black families making gains

WASHINGTON (AP) - More black families are headed by married couples and more are living in homes they own, the Census Bureau reported Friday.

The bureau's most detailed report on the nation's 8.8 million black families since the 2000 census showed blacks continue to make gains in several socio-economic and educational areas, but still trail whites by a wide margin in many categories.

The report showed a slow but steady increase in the number of black families headed by married couples - 47.9 percent in 2002, up from 47.8 in 2000 and 46.1 percent in 1996, the earliest year for which data is available. The six-year increase equals about 520,000 families.

Meanwhile, the portion of families headed by single

women continued to decline. It was 43 percent last year, 1 percentage point lower than 2000 and 4 points lower than in 1996.

The changes coincide with the massive welfare overhaul of 1996, which allowed states to impose tough new rules for recipients and helped lead to a huge reduction in public assistance rolls. The welfare plan is up for renewal in Congress this year and President Bush has proposed hundreds of millions of dollars to promote marriage and sexual abstinence.

Avis Jones-DeWeever of the Institute for Women's Policy Research said the surging economy of the late 1990s probably had more to do with the improvement for black families than welfare reform.

"We all know during this time period that we had a

huge economic boom, and people do better and have a better quality of life and are more likely to move to these life-changing life issues like marriage," she said.

Supporters of pro-marriage initiatives in welfare reform point to research showing that children who grow up with married parents are less likely to live in poverty.

About 48 percent of blacks owned their homes in 2002, up from 47 percent in 2000 and 42 percent in 1990.

The increase came though black income but has fallen recently. The bureau reported last year that the median income for blacks was more than \$29,000 in 2001, the latest data available, down from nearly \$31,000 the previous year, though still up from over \$24,000 in 1990.

"It is reflecting the consolidation of a stable kind of black middle class, which has grown because of the economy of the 1990s," said Roderick Harrison, a demographer with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, which studies issues of concern to minorities.

"It's not like there no poor married couples who are struggling, but it's pretty much that the chance of avoiding poverty and owning a home on the other end are considerably improved if you are married," he said.

Nationally, 76 percent of all families were headed by a married couple last year, down from 77 percent six years earlier, while the percentage of female-headed homes stayed unchanged at 18 percent.

About two-thirds of all

American families owned homes in 2002.

Previous Census Bureau reports found the percentage of blacks 25 and older with a bachelor's degree was at a record high of 17 percent in 2002, up from just under 14 percent in 1996. Black women are slightly more likely than black men to have graduated from college, 18 percent to 16 percent.

Nearly 10 percent of blacks worked in executive or managerial jobs in 2002, down slightly from 10.5 percent the previous year, but still nearly twice as high as during the early 1980s. Among all U.S. residents, 15.2 percent are in management, up slightly from 15.1 percent.

Black managers tend to be in low- to midlevel positions that might be more likely

to be cut if a company's budget is in crisis, Harrison said.

Bill Spriggs, director of research and public policy for the National Urban League in Washington, said he's concerned that the struggling economy could roll back some of the socio-economic gains by blacks. If incomes fall, more black families may not be able to afford to send their kids to college or buy a home.

Census director Louis Kincannon released the latest data at a meeting Friday in Houston of the Conference of Black Mayors.

The mayors group will use the information to lobby for better transportation, educational opportunities and housing in black communities, said conference president Marilyn Murrell, mayor of Arcadia, Okla.

Miss. marks enslaved prince's freedom from bondage

NATCHEZ, Miss. (AP) - Artemus Gaye was a teenager fleeing civil war in Liberia when he first heard the story of how his ancestor, an African warrior prince, was sold into slavery on a Mississippi plantation.

Gaye's 92-year-old great-great-grandmother used the tale of Abd al-Rahman Ibrahim as a diversion when fighting forced the family to abandon their home in 1990. It stuck with the 13-year-old.

"It changed my world view," said Gaye, now 26. "Slavery was always a distant thing. Then when I heard it, it put it right in my face."

Gaye escaped to Sierra Leone, later moved to Zimbabwe and finally arrived in the United States in 1999, all the while the story of Ibrahim in the back of his mind.

After years of locating documents and descendants to piece together the rest of the story, Gaye organized a "freedom festival" to mark the 175th anniversary of Ibrahim's release and return to Africa.

Descendants of the slave prince and slave master Thomas Foster, academicians, and Ibrahim's liberators gathered in the Mississippi River town of Natchez to re-enact the tale.

"There aren't too many stories equal to it," said Allan Austin, author of the book "African Muslims in Antebellum America."

Ibrahim was born in 1762 as a prince in Futa Jallon, today part of Guinea in western Africa. He was captured in battle by enemies, sold into

slavery and shipped to America. Foster, who owned a plantation near Natchez, bought him in 1789.

Natchez, today a town of about 18,500 and dotted with sprawling antebellum homes, was at the end of the Natchez Trace and a key stopping off place for pilgrims headed west. It had a burgeoning slave trade and was once considered the most rowdy town on the Mississippi.

In 1807, John Cox, a doctor who had fallen ill in Africa in 1781 and was cared for by Ibrahim's family, traveled to Mississippi and happened to meet Ibrahim at a market north of Natchez.

Cox recognized Ibrahim as the son of the king who had saved his life. Cox tried to buy Ibrahim's freedom, but Foster refused and kept Ibrahim as a slave for 20 more years.

Ibrahim's story reached Andrew Marschalk, editor of the Mississippi State Gazette in Natchez. Marschalk pleaded Ibrahim's case to Henry Clay, who was then secretary of state.

In 1828, Foster relented. Ibrahim, 66, was able to buy his and his wife's freedom with the aid of the community and the American Colonization Society, an organization that sent free blacks in America to Africa. His fame spread across the country.

"He was a man who became very famous for his dignity, for his courage and for his strength," Austin said.

Ibrahim sailed for Liberia in 1829. He died from malaria two months after arriving.

In early April, descendants of Ibrahim, Foster and Marschalk gathered under a marker at the site of Marschalk's Natchez home, now a cracked and bumpy parking lot. They read the proclamation freeing Ibrahim, then walked to the nearby Mississippi River. Using a moored riverboat casino, they re-enacted Ibrahim's departure from Natchez.

It was the culmination of an idea developed during Gaye's annual trips to Mississippi over the past three years. Gaye, an African studies researcher at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary near Chicago, would come to Natchez to sift through old records, consult with historians and contact descendants.

Betty McGehee, a 72-year-old descendant of Thomas Foster, participated in the re-enactment. When she first learned of her family connection to the story about 40 years ago, she was a little ashamed.

"I was embarrassed that Thomas Foster held on for so long and didn't free him for so many years," she said.

McGehee said she felt none of that today. The festival allowed her to create a connection with other descendants and genealogists, she said.

Natchez is using the story of Ibrahim to boost its attractiveness as an African-American heritage tourism market, said Connie Taunton, marketing director for the Natchez Convention and Visitors Bureau. A portrait of the slave prince is on the

cover of a brochure promoting heritage tourism.

"All of our visitors are interested in what part blacks play in telling our story," Taunton said.

Barry Boubacan, Guinea native and visiting professor

of African Studies at New York University, said the story of Ibrahim, while not well known in Guinea, strengthened the connection between American slavery and African history.

"It's always been consid-

ered a separate history. It's one history," Boubacan said.

Artemus Gaye said he planned to make the festival an annual event.

"I know this is just the beginning of the awareness," he said.

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